

G. I. Gurdjieff and the Work: Transformations of an Esoteric Teaching

Carole M. Cusack

carole.cusack@sydney.edu.au

Introduction

G. I. Gurdjieff (c. 1866–1949) taught a highly original esoteric “system” which combined a complex cosmology with literary and artistic endeavours (including the Movements or sacred dances, the music composed with Thomas de Hartmann, and Gurdjieff’s spiritual writings).¹ Gurdjieff’s “Work” or “Fourth Way” was lived out in quasi-communal settings where intentional labour and inner exercises were combined with dancing and readings of the master’s texts.² In Gurdjieff’s lifetime he was not associated with esotericism or religion; the terms applied to him by outsiders, for example journalists, were “magician” and “charlatan.”³ When Gurdjieff died he had a relatively small number of followers, and had published only *The Herald of Coming Good* (1933), a short prospectus which he had recalled shortly after distribution.⁴ His posthumous Three Series *All and Everything* established him as a major force in twentieth-century esotericism, and one of the three putative sources of the “New Age,” with Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and his near-contemporary Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925).⁵

The academic study of Gurdjieff developed slowly, and his significance for the study of esotericism has emerged only recently. This special issue of

1. Azize, “Gurdjieff’s Sacred Dances and Movements,” 297–330.

2. Cusack, “Intentional Communities in the Gurdjieff Teaching,” 159–78.

3. Landau, *God is My Adventure*, 233–264. This attitude still persists. See Storr, *Feet of Clay*, 21–44.

4. Gurdjieff, *The Herald of Coming Good* (1933).

5. Sutcliffe, “Gurdjieff as a *Bricoleur*,” 117–18.

Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism is the second to focus on esoteric, secret, and hidden aspects of the Work.⁶ The premier book on the esoteric, or mystical, aspects of the Fourth Way is Joseph Azize’s *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises* (2020).⁷ Other useful work includes: chapters by Harry T. Hunt in his monograph on Western secular mystics (2003) and Glenn Alexander Magee in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism* (2016); and, entries by Jacob Needleman and James Moore in the Brill *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (2006).⁸ The present collection of articles covers a range of topics relevant to esotericism and the Fourth Way, from aspects of Gurdjieff’s biography, through references to Christianity in his masterpiece *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (1950).

New Directions in the Study of Gurdjieff and Esotericism

The first article, Joseph Azize’s “Esotericism, Occultism and Magic: The Case of Gurdjieff and Crowley,” examines meetings between Gurdjieff and Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) and contextualises the two through a historical examination of three key phenomena: esotericism, occultism, and magic. Azize takes Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society as the starting point for a consideration of the esoteric and the occult in the twentieth century, and he links Blavatsky’s theoretical approach to that of Gurdjieff’s most influential pupil, Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky (1878–1947). Two scholars, Frances Yates (1899–1981) and James Webb (1946–1980), are located at the head of a sympathetic approach to the occult, one which flowered with the establishment of the academic study of esotericism by Antoine Faivre (b. 1934) and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (b. 1961).

6. Cusack edited a special issue of *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* that was published in 2020. This featured articles by Azize, Cusack, David Seamon, Christian Giudice, and John Willmet.

7. Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises*, passim.

8. See Hunt, “George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: A Near Eastern Inner-Worldly Mysticism in the Modern West”; Magee, “G. I. Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way”; Needleman, “Gurdjieff Tradition”; and Moore, “Gurdjieff, George Ivanovitch.”

In his treatment of Gurdjieff's interactions with Crowley, Azize tackles issues attendant upon scholarly or quasi-scholarly treatments of the "gnostic" or "magical" aspects of Gurdjieff's teachings, including those of Constance Jones and P. T. Mistlberger.⁹ The core of his article addresses the possible commonalities between Gurdjieff and Crowley: Were they engaged in the same quest? Were Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man and Crowley's Abbey of Thelema intentional communities in similar ways? Crowley visited the Prieuré des Basses Loges in Fontainebleau-Avon on 10 February 1924 when Gurdjieff was absent, and again in mid-1926. Edith Taylor, Fritz Peters and Ethel Merston recorded the visit of the "Great Beast" to the Prieuré: he attended lunch, and likely stayed a few days at Gurdjieff's Institute, before departing without any "contest" between himself and his host eventuating.¹⁰ Azize's examination of these events provides strong critique of Tobias Churton's recent book on Gurdjieff; the second meeting between the two, noted by Crowley's biographer Gerald Suster, is accepted by Azize. The conclusion reached is that the differences between the two "magi" are much greater than their similarities.

The second contribution is Michael Pittman's "Deliteralizing Christianity: Gurdjieff and Almnoshinoo." Pittman discusses references to Christianity in Gurdjieff's First Series, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, with a focus on a sacred ceremony, Almnoshinoo, which is initially mentioned in the discussion on Tibetan Buddhism (or Lamaism, the doctrine founded by "Saint Lama").¹¹ Gurdjieff spoke of his teaching as "esoteric Christianity," and interpretations of the Work of some pupils, like Maurice Nicoll (1885-1953), have stressed the Christian elements.¹² Through the figure of Beelzebub, Gurdjieff criticised Christianity and accused it of having been neutralised by splitting into various sects, and presently having strayed far from the teachings of Jesus. The description

9. Jones, "Gnostic Sensibility in Gurdjieff's 'Work'," and Mistlberger, *Three Dangerous Magi*.

10. Webb, *The Harmonious Circle*, 314-15.

11. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, Chapter 38, "Religion," 694-743.

12. Wellbeloved, *Gurdjieff: The Key Concepts*, 237-38.

of the Almnoshinoo and the enlightened beings who conduct it (who all possess a *kesdjan* or higher-being-body or a soul) is focused on how the celebrants can feed the *kesdjan* body of the deceased for whom the rite is performed.¹³ While there are elements of Beelzebub's description that recall the *bardos* of Tibetan Buddhism and the three bodies of the Buddha, Pittman's analysis brings the Almnoshinoo into dialogue with the Christian Last Supper recorded in the New Testament.

Beelzebub assures Hasein his grandson that Jesus Christ had attained a planetary body and that his disciples were prepared for the Almnoshinoo ceremony by Jesus' esoteric teaching in ways that the Tibetans were not. The gospel story of Judas' betrayal is undermined (as Judas is Jesus' most faithful disciple and possessed of elevated reason), and it is asserted that the love and suffering of Jesus were similarly compromised. Gurdjieff critiques the interpretation of scripture throughout Christian history, and the doctrinal/ideological understanding of Jesus. Pittman examines this material via various lenses, including psychologist James Hillman's rejection of the literal mode of interpretation, which Hillman believes is a malady.¹⁴ The moving, feeling, and thinking centres must, in the Fourth Way, become aligned through "conscious labour and intentional suffering," to bring about spiritual advancement.¹⁵

Vrasidas Karalis, in "Gurdjieff and C. G. Jung: *Life Is Real Only Then, When I Am*" and the Question of Individuation," offers an interpretation of Gurdjieff's Third Series, a book of five talks and an additional chapter. For Karalis, the focus of the book is the *psyche*, and the question of whether humans possess such a thing. Gurdjieff's psychology has been studied rarely, and arguably was developed most clearly in Ouspensky's *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*.¹⁶ However, it is likely that Gurdjieff regarded psychology as part of modern culture that impeded people from doing and becoming a "real I"; the conversation

13. Wellbeloved, *Gurdjieff: The Key Concepts*, 27–29.

14. Hillman, "A Note on Story," 45.

15. Bennett, *Conscious Labour and Intentional Suffering*, passim.

16. Ouspensky, *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*, Lecture 1.

partner that Karalis provides is Gurdjieff's near-contemporary, the Swiss medical doctor and psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), who argued that the fundamental spiritual process that a human must engage in is individuation, which he also characterised as human beings becoming integrated and a true self. This idea has been compared to Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-1980) concept of authenticity.¹⁷

In fact, Gurdjieff's teaching that humans are born without a soul or immortal part, and must work to integrate their disparate centres in order to achieve a "real I" (which is inextricably connected to the "coating" of their physical bodies in order to develop a higher-being-body, of which there are three: astral, mental, and causal), is very far from that of Jung, Sartre, and most modern psychologists and philosophers.¹⁸ Gurdjieff's esotericism is materialist, not merely psychological or spiritual, and basically not individualist. He envisages the business of "growing a soul" as happening in community, where pupils have access to a teacher, one who "knows."¹⁹

Carole M. Cusack, in "The Fourth Way and the Internet: Esotericism, Secrecy, and Hiddenness in Plain Sight," considers the history of the Fourth Way since Gurdjieff's death in 1949. His nominated successor Jeanne de Salzmann (1889-1990) created the Gurdjieff Foundation, which from its centres in London, Paris, New York, and Caracas established affiliated branches in many countries.²⁰ Independent lineages developed, such as that led by the British scientist John Godolphin Bennett (1897-1974), and the publication of works by Gurdjieff and Ouspensky meant that what had been an initiatory teaching became, in certain ways, public. However, the internet, and in particular the World Wide Web interface developed by Tim Berners-Lee, caused far greater

17. Shelburne, "Existential Perspective in the Thought of Carl Jung," 59.

18. Hunt suggests a range of thinkers that have in common the pursuit of a "this-worldly mysticism." These include: Plotinus and the Gnostics, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ernst Troeltsch, Aleister Crowley, Gurdjieff, and A. H. Almaas. See Hunt, *Lives in Spirit: Precursors and Dilemma of a Secular Western Mysticism*.

19. Cusack, "Intentional Communities in the Gurdjieff Teaching," 162-65.

20. Petsche, "A Gurdjieff Genealogy: Tracing the Manifold Ways the Gurdjieff Teaching Has Travelled," 65-67.

exposure than Fourth Way members might have imagined, and had unexpected consequences.²¹ Cusack connects the revelation of the content of esotericism to that of religions that have secretive aspects, and the proliferation and commercialisation of the Work online to the broader religious scene of the West in the twenty-first century.

The inner exercises that Gurdjieff taught are examined as a case study of clearly esoteric practices and beliefs that are now discussed openly and featured online in various ways, much of it due to the scholarly research that Joseph Azize has published.²² These, along with the Movements, are of particular interest to scholars, in that they were originally intended to be transmitted directly from teacher to pupil in a real-world context, and were not to be sullied by written instructions, choreographies, and other means of “fixing” the information outside of the minds and hearts of Fourth Way adherents. The online environment shows signs of becoming as important for the Work in the future as the residential farms and large properties that were used as sites of communal living and intense instruction in the twentieth century.²³

This issue of *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* has a linked special feature, an essay by Anthony G. E. Blake, a pupil of John Bennett and an innovative and important Fourth Way teacher himself. “Understanding What is Esoteric” is a reflection on how the concept of a universal and timeless wisdom that is available to a select group of students, who receive it from an enlightened teacher such as Gurdjieff, can be transformative.²⁴ Blake is concerned with charting the hazards as well as the rewards of taking such a path; in two linked autobiographical articles, he has sketched his life from birth to the present, with the fourteen years that he spent with Bennett as the formative period.²⁵ Bennett,

21. Pecotic and Cusack, “The (World Wide) Work 2.0: The Gurdjieff Tradition Online,” 96–100.

22. Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises*. Azize published articles on a number of aspects of Gurdjieff’s inner exercises before the Oxford University Press book appeared in 2020.

23. Coates, “How Many Arks Does It Take?”

24. Blake, “Gurdjieff and the Legomonism of ‘Objective Reason,’” 239–40, 252, 263, and 265.

25. Blake, “The Fourth Way: A Hazardous Path,” and “The Fourth Way: A Hazardous Path (Part 2).”

a scientist and technologist, wanted to relate the Fourth Way to other bodies of knowledge, and developed Systematics in conjunction with young scientists, Blake among them, who were his pupils in the 1960s. The breadth of material that Bennett had mastery of, and the range of influences he acknowledged, still impress.

Blake's essay examines practices of learning, reading, and transmission in the context of the Gurdjieff tradition. He considers writers from the ancient world including Lucian of Samosata and Plato, as well as sacred texts, chiefly the Bible and Sufi works. He is aware of the multitudinous intersections of the sciences and the arts, and of the need to transmit knowledge of all kinds, not only the esoteric. In 1998, Blake and Karen Stefano founded DuVersity, an online institution with real-world seminars; Blake is convinced that DuVersity's model (where participants gather for brief periods of intense work with many teachers, attending workshops and reading groups) is the way of the future for the Work, rather than fixed groups with a permanent leader.²⁶

Conclusion

Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way emerged as a subject of academic study in the 1990s and has in the twenty-first century seen something of a flowering. This collection of articles is intended to extend the range of existing publications, which include works already referred to, such as Hunt's monograph, *Lives in Spirit: Precursors and Dilemmas of a Secular Western Mysticism* (2003), which brought Gurdjieff's life and work into dialogue with figures who generated fruitful comparisons. Johanna J. M. Petsche's notable *Gurdjieff and Music: The Gurdjieff/ de Hartmann Piano Music and its Esoteric Significance* (2015) also merits praise, as it addresses a larger range of topics relevant to Gurdjieff and esotericism than the title might indicate.²⁷ Reference has also been made to Joseph Azize's *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation,*

26. Anthony Blake, personal communication; All and Everything Conference, Kendal (UK), 3-7 April 2019.

27. Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music: The Gurdjieff/ de Hartmann Piano Music and Its Esoteric Significance*, Chapter 8, "Three Purposes of the Piano Music in Light of Gurdjieff's Life Circumstances and Esoteric Teaching."

and Exercises (2020), which has especial importance for the study of Gurdjieff as an esoteric spiritual teacher and the Work as an esoteric tradition, and is the major academic study published to date. It is to be hoped that the Fourth Way tradition will continue to receive scholarly attention and become better-integrated into the broader study of modern esoteric spiritual thought.

Bibliography

- Azize, Joseph. "Gurdjieff's Sacred Dances and Movements." In *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, edited by Carole M. Cusack and Alex Norman, 297-330. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- . *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Bennett, John Godolphin. *Conscious Labour and Intentional Suffering*. Bovingdon, UK: Shantock Press, 1974.
- Blake, Anthony. "Gurdjieff and the Legomonism of 'Objective Reason.'" In *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, edited by Carole M. Cusack and Alex Norman, 237-70. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- . "The Fourth Way: A Hazardous Path." *Religion and the Arts* 21, no. 1-2 (2017): 11-39.
- . "The Fourth Way: A Hazardous Path (Part 2)." *Literature & Aesthetics* 28, no. 1 (2018): 101-56.
- . "Understanding What is Esoteric". <https://correspondencesjournal.com/19899-2/>
- Coates, Chris. "How Many Arks Does It Take?" In *Spiritual and Visionary Communities: Out to Save the World*, edited by Timothy Miller, 176-89. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013.
- Cusack, Carole M. "Intentional Communities in the Gurdjieff Teaching." *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 6, no. 2 (2013): 159-78.
- Cusack, Carole M., ed. "Special Issue on Gurdjieff." Special issue, *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 20, no. 1 (2020).

- Gurdjieff, George Ivanovitch. *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*. New York: Penguin Arkana, 1999 [1950].
- . *The Herald of Coming Good*. Edmonds, WA: Sure Fire Press, 2008 [1933].
- Hillman, James. "A Note on Story." *Parabola* 4, no. 4 (1979): 43-45.
- Hunt, Harry T. *Lives in Spirit: Precursors and Dilemmas of a Secular Western Mysticism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003.
- Jones, Constance A. "Gnostic Sensibility in Gurdjieff's 'Work'." In *The Gnostic World*, edited by Garry Trompf, Gunner B. Mikkelsen, and Jay Johnston, 516-26. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Landau, Rom. *God Is My Adventure: A Book on Modern Mystics, Masters, and Teachers*. London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson Ltd, 1935.
- Magee, Glenn Alexander. "G. I. Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, edited by Glenn Alexander Magee, 284-296. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Mistlberger, P. T. *The Three Dangerous Magi: Osho, Gurdjieff, Crowley*. Winchester, UK and Washington, US: O-Books, 2010.
- Moore, James. "Gurdjieff, George Ivanovitch." In *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al, 445-50. Leiden: Brill, 2006.
- Needleman, Jacob. "Gurdjieff Tradition." In *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al, 450-54. Leiden: Brill, 2006.
- Ouspensky, Pyotr Demianovich. *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.
- Pecotic, David and Carole M. Cusack. "The (World Wide) Work 2.0: The Gurdjieff Tradition Online." *Fieldwork in Religion* 11, no. 1 (2016): 91-103.
- Petsche, Johanna J. M. "A Gurdjieff Genealogy: Tracing the Manifold Ways the Gurdjieff Teaching Has Travelled." *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 4, no. 1 (2013): 49-79.
- . *Gurdjieff and Music: The Gurdjieff/de Hartmann Piano Music and Its Esoteric Significance*. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2015.

- Shelburne, Walter A. "Existential Perspective in the Thought of Carl Jung." *Journal of Religion and Health* 22, no. 1 (1983): 58-73.
- Storr, Anthony. *Feet of Clay: A Study of Gurus*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996.
- Sutcliffe, Steven J. "Gurdjieff as a Bricoleur: Understanding the 'Work' as Bricolage." *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 6, no. 2 (2015): 117-37.
- Webb, James. *The Harmonious Circle: An Exploration of the Lives and Work of G. I. Gurdjieff, P. D. Ouspensky and Others*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1980.
- Wellbeloved, Sophia. *Gurdjieff: The Key Concepts*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.