

Catharine Christof. *Rethinking Religion in the Theatre of Grotowski*. London: Routledge, 2017. ix + 237 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-29226-0. Hardback. AU\$252.00.

This is a serious and well-researched study of the work of the renowned Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999) that places him in the context of twentieth-century reformulations of the nature of religion and, perhaps, portrays him as a modern form of spiritual guide, connected with other such figures as Martin Buber and George Ivanovich Gurdjieff. Christof addresses the emergence of New Age thinking and attitudes; in particular, she highlights the treatment of the human physical body as an essential element of the sacred. As orthodox religion declined in its hold on the hearts and minds of people, adherence to dogma and ritual had to give way to a more experiential approach. This marked a shift in practice away from the forms prescribed in churches to experiential means of participation in which the theatre was a prime example. Christof could well have written a parallel book to this, delineating equally well the spiritual revolution enacted in the evolution of dance in the twentieth century from the Delsarte System to Butoh. Her views on religion take seriously Manuel A. Vasquez’s suggestion that “the focus [instead] should fall on the myriad of discourses, practices, environments, and institutions that accompany our experience of this-worldly transcendence, that is, our responses to the insoluble complexity and relative indeterminacy of our existential condition” (138).

Christof specifically draws attention to connections and or parallels between Grotowski and Gurdjieff. Both were practitioners rather than theorists. Grotowski spoke and wrote appreciatively of Gurdjieff but insisted his own approach was independent. Her 2017 article “Gurdjieff in the Theatre: The Fourth Way of Jerzy Grotowski” portrayed Grotowski as a Fourth Way teacher, though she added that this was not to say that he copied Gurdjieff in any obvious way.<sup>1</sup> Looking at the

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1. Catharine Christof, “Gurdjieff in the Theatre: The Fourth Way of Jerzy Grotowski,” *Religion and the Arts* 21 (2017): 209–35.

history she describes and discusses from a Gurdjieffian perspective, we can find similarities with, for example, Wim van Dullemen's account of the movements or sacred dances created by Gurdjieff. Dullemen is at pains to situate Gurdjieff's creativity within the context of Western explorations of dance. He and Christof are invested in the belief that people such as Grotowski and Gurdjieff, highly unique and creative individuals, were nevertheless very much part of a generic *Zeitgeist* of changing beliefs and methods in the twentieth century. Also, both Christof and Dullemen are in agreement in considering what is usually called art can be a modern expression of spirituality.

In some respects, art has taken the place of religion. Perhaps this has been the inevitable outcome of a millennium or more of change from outward forms and rites of communities to inner experiencings and actions of individuals. An obvious feature of this transition has been the modern tendency to evade questions of belief by calling on "personal experience." This does not excuse the fact that expressions of such experience must still of course be in the context of collective culture. While there has been emphasis on personal experience there has also been a recognition of value in ancient ritual and historical forms of dance. In tracing the development of Grotowski's work, Christof brings out the significance of the gradual change from the actor performing for audiences to performance for the sake of the actors themselves—as part of what Gurdjieff would have called "work on themselves." One of the features of the New Age, which is also to be found in most so-called esoteric ideas, is that there is a hidden unity behind the various religions that, outwardly, are at variance with each other. It is striking, then, that Grotowski looked to all kinds of ritual, dance, song, and so on to find, as it were, the universal elements of meaning in them. These became the *actions* Grotowski researched towards the end of his life which are now carried on by his successors Mario Biagini and Thomas Richards. The term "actions" brings us very close to the practice of Gurdjieff's movements and the very idea of work on oneself.

Christof brings out exciting and important detail. She describes how the Grotowski school eschewed self-observation in its Gurdjieffian sense and centred itself in the relationship between actor and director. This has enormous bearing on our understanding of what is required, in the spiritual sense, of the state of the actor. Strangely, she does not speak of what Gurdjieff himself wrote about acting in his major book *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (1950). In the chapter "Art" he describes Saturday in events in ancient Babylon organised by an elite group researching methods of carrying information to future generations through theatre. He describes improvisations (that later followers of Gurdjieff attempted with various results to emulate) and, most importantly, a particular state required for performing them. He called this *darthelbustnian contemplation*: "Well, then, two of the participants would always come upon these 'reflectors-of-reality' or stages, first; and then usually one of them stood for a while and, as it were, listened to his own what is called 'Darthelhlustnian' state, or as it is sometimes otherwise said, to the state of his own inner 'associative-general-psychic-experiencings'."<sup>2</sup>

Grotowski wanted to eliminate the influence of historical, ethnic and cultural factors in performance. This led to an emphasis on physical effort and to the embrace of pain and exhaustion. It must be noted that Christof makes no mention of traditions based on this, for example the Native American Sun dances, which can be described as inducing revelation by ordeal. Though there was physical demand in Gurdjieff's movements, the real challenge lay in their *internal complexity*, designed to separate and reorganise the centre at work in the students. In John Godolphin Bennett's terminology, it is *challenge* that evokes true consciousness and physical demand is the crudest form of it. It is common to come across the observation that exhaustion of efforts is a necessary prelude to creative insight. But this is a crude approach. Gurdjieff brought the possibility of a new kind of intention, in which the dichotomy of so-called conscious

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2. G. I. Gurdjieff, *All and Everything: "An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man" or, Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), 438.

effort and unconscious insight was superseded. Understanding is only possible through the independent but mutual operation of all three centres; thinking, feeling and moving. This cuts across the usual dichotomy between mind and body but also that between internal and external. The coalescence of the three centres is tantamount to a real autonomy. This might be called, as Christof does, “objective consciousness,” but these words are inadequate, despite Gurdjieff himself using such terms in his early teaching.

Christof follows the usual interpretation of Gurdjieff’s “super-efforts” and “intentional suffering” as much the same and consisting in *physical effort*, which I think misses the point. One of my teachers often used the phrase “making efforts to avoid efforts” to criticise how we would turn to making physical efforts to avoid intellectual and moral ones. This relates to important ideas about *temptation*. There is an idea that the devil is interested in people who work on themselves because those who do not have no soul worth having. Those who make efforts risk identifying with their efforts or resultant states. This is known in, for example, the Buddhist tradition, and its equation of *Māra* the evil one with the pleasure obtained in meditation. Temptation is crucial in Gurdjieff’s teaching and is sometimes presented as essential for our development of soul. Gurdjieff differentiated *intentional* suffering from *voluntary* suffering. Illustrating the latter, Gurdjieff talked about bandits sitting immobile in the blazing sun in order to attack people. For Bennett, intentional suffering is that incurred by someone in service of his neighbour. Sacrifice is at its core. Gurdjieff mocked “saintly” people who might meditate in caves in isolation for years.

Christof does an important job in describing *what* it is that is brought into manifestation through Grotowski-like work and speaks of “spirits” and “ancestors.” Practitioners of the Gurdjieff movements could do well to take note of this. Bennett spoke explicitly about the significance of the “spirit world” (called in Sufism the *‘ālam-i arwāḥ*) in such terms: “If you look at the movements in this way you may gain a different attitude towards them. The movements are not just

something that somebody invented in the past and put on a piece of paper to remind them what they were, or something like that. They are something that wants to come into being, wants to be flesh and blood, and when the movement is done by us then it wants to be done rightly. When it finds a body that is doing it rightly, the spirit becomes happy and you yourself feel happy.”<sup>3</sup>

Christof uses the idea of the New Age as “rethinking religion” as the unifying theme of her study. In her “Gurdjieff in the Theatre: The Fourth Way of Jerzy Grotowski” (noted above) she echoes Peter Brook’s impression on first encountering Grotowski, that he represented a lost branch or independent manifestation of the *Fourth Way*. I think the difference is important. In the *Fourth Way* the emphasis is on doing things intentionally with purpose, something often lacking or weak in most New Age movements. The idea of the New Age is nebulous, but nevertheless useful, as a catch-all phrase for a wide diversity of phenomena and beliefs. However, Christof’s wonderful survey, centring on the work of Grotowski, opens up a vista of the leitmotiv of “physical spirituality” that calls for an even wider perspective. There was a significant shift around 1900 from the last millennium and its manifestation of *devotion*. I’d go further, positing that before the devotional millennium there was an age of *intellect*, approximating the period from Plato to Aquinas. Gurdjieff’s *Fourth Way* integrates and supersedes the traditional ways of the Yogi (intellect), the Monk (devotion), and the Fakir (bodily discipline). It is important to realise that “embodiment” is only one leg of a tripod, and that Gurdjieff created haunting “religious” music and a complex set of writings in relation with his sacred dances. Christof’s study, firmly focused on Grotowski, is an interesting contribution to the study of body-based disciplines and esotericism.

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3. J. G. Bennett, *The Way to be Free* (Santa Fe: Bennett Books, 2006), 53.