

Gurdjieff and the Traditionalist/Perennialist Schools

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Abstract

G.I. Gurdjieff (1877-1949) taught a system of ideas and methods which comprise a current within “Western Esotericism;” a spirituality with an emphasis on the efforts of the individual, the microcosm, to achieve a more perfect correspondence with the macrocosm. The question sometimes arises whether Gurdjieff’s system can be considered “traditional;” which raises the further question, what is meant by “traditional” in this context. I suggest that Gurdjieff’s system was traditional in its aim (being a system of practical mysticism), but innovative in its methods. In particular, it has nothing in common with the Traditionalist/Perennialist stream which traces its origins to René Guénon and Fritjof Schuon.

Keywords: Western Esotericism, G. I. Gurdjieff, René Guénon, Traditionalism, Christianity

Introduction: Gurdjieff’s System - The Ancient and the Traditional

G.I. Gurdjieff (1877-1949) taught a system of ideas and methods which is often, on good grounds, considered to be a current within “Western Esotericism;” a spirituality with an emphasis on the efforts of the individual (the microcosm) to achieve a certain knowledge and to experience a correspondence with that immanent holistic and supernatural unity (the macrocosm) which manifests in the multiplicity of nature through correspondences.¹ It strikes me that Western Esotericism inclines more to pantheism than theism, although neither pantheism nor monotheism are monolithic concepts. Western Esotericism has been partly driven by a contest with Christianity. It often advanced “esoteric Christianity” as a means of restoring to Protestantism some of the sense of the supernatural which had once been supplied by Catholicism, and to Catholicism new ideas with an authority independent of the Church and its hierarchy (leading to inevitable tensions between authorities).

Like other Western Esoteric currents, Gurdjieff’s system brought a “reenchantment” of life, partly through the Central Asian aesthetics of his Movements and the Study House at the Prieuré, but more fundamentally, through his system, which aimed to teach how a higher and more vivid state of consciousness than is usual, might be realised

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¹ Definition adapted from Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 5.

without the use of drugs or hypnosis. So “enCHANTED” was Gurdjieff’s system that he spoke of some of his methods as “magic” and “conJURY.”²

Gurdjieff shared the ambivalent attitude to Christianity which is often found in Western Esotericism: on the one hand, he criticised Christian literalist anthropomorphic conceptions, e.g. of God, heaven, and hell;³ but then, he sometimes spoke highly of Christ and the apostles, advising one pupil to: “have the attitude of Thomas. He was a great apostle who contributed very much to the Christian religion.”⁴ These varying opinions can be reconciled; Gurdjieff declared that his teaching could be understood as “esoteric Christianity”⁵ and at his Institution in Fontainebleau emblazoned the adage that “We aspire to be able to be Christians.”⁶ He thus expressed in these sayings both his continuity with and departure from Christianity, implying that he knew deeper truths of which contemporary Christians were oblivious, allowing him to simultaneously affirm a respect for Christianity, at least in its putative original dispensation, while denying the authority of established hierarchies.⁷

More fully, Gurdjieff distinguished different types of Christianity, the basis of his taxonomy being the *person* who practised it rather than the doctrine:

Christianity number one, number two, and number three is simply external imitation. Only man number four strives to be a Christian and only man number five can actually be a Christian. For to be a Christian means to have the being of a Christian, that is, to live in accordance with Christ’s precepts.⁸

Briefly, what Gurdjieff called Man number 1, 2, and 3 were people whose psyche is dominated by their body, their emotions, and their mind respectively, while Man number 4 has balanced these faculties, and Man number 5 has a “crystallised” stability of these faculties, and has reached inner unity.⁹

To analyse Christianity by reference to the person who claims to be Christian, and not by any standard of orthodoxy or orthopraxy, is innovative. Although he challenged Christianity and common notions of God, I suggest that Gurdjieff was fundamentally a mystic, with an explicitly universalist bent, bringing a teaching about God, creation, human

² Kathryn C. Hulme, *Undiscovered Country* (Lexington: Natural Bridge, 1997), p. 218.

³ For example see G. I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson* (Aurora: Two Rivers Press, 1950), pp. 217-218.

⁴ G. I. Gurdjieff, *G.I. Gurdjieff: Paris Meetings, 1943* (Toronto: Dolmen Meadow, 2017), p. 32.

⁵ P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. 41, 102. For more details of Gurdjieff’s ambivalent relationship with Christianity see, Joseph Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 73-74.

⁶ G. I. Gurdjieff, *Views from the Real World* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1973), p. 281. The aphorism is also in G.I. Gurdjieff, *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks* (London: Book Studio, 2014), p. 429.

⁷ Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson*. Compare pp. 1001-1002 with pp. 703, 1001 and 1232 on the errors of “elders” and Fathers of the Church; and p. 704 on elders of Islam.

⁸ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 73.

⁹ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 71-72.

possibilities, and the achievement of a more direct relation with God.¹⁰ Since I wrote the book in which those contentions appear, more transcripts of meetings with Gurdjieff have been published; further, some unpublished notes from the last decade of his life, have come into my possession. The notes strengthen my argument in unambiguous terms:

Represent the three forces. Feel them well. Imagine them, represent them to yourself; this is the best thing: the three forces are God. To make contact with God is our goal, but not now (unpublished notes).

This means, I suggest, that contact with God is made through the forces of creation; a doctrine redolent of the Greek Orthodox tradition which I have earlier argued probably stimulated and gave shape to Gurdjieff's Transformed-Contemplation.¹¹ Of the many pertinent comments in the transcripts, the most significant are those of 18 and 19 November 1944, when Gurdjieff said:

For your work, for a true work, you must work with the true God, and not with fantastic ideas and representations. God is omnipresent. God is everywhere, that is why if one concentrates on a (single) point, while thinking "God is here," He will be there more for us. God consists in three forces. These three forces created all the world. Force plus – force minus – force of equilibrium. Holy Affirmation – Holy Denying – Holy Reconciling. God the Father – God the Son – God the Holy Spirit. The Son is born of the Father, returns to the Father, and their relation is the Holy Spirit.

"Lord have mercy upon me." When you pronounce the word "Lord," represent to yourselves, then, a point where the three forces converge. Ask them to help you, have the sensation that you draw force from this point where the three forces converge.¹²

Then, on Sunday 19 November 1944, a transcript reports Gurdjieff saying:

"Lord have mercy on me." When you say "Lord," what do you represent to yourselves? Christ, or forces without a face? God is not Christ. Christ is a man. He has only one face. God has three faces. These are the Three Forces:

¹⁰ Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises*, *passim*. For a clear statement of universalism, see Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*, pp. 1001-1002.

¹¹ Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises*. The doctrine that we can know God not in his essence but only through his energies (*energeiai*) can be traced as far back as Letter 234 of Basil the Great, and was likewise taught up by his brother Gregory of Nyssa (*Sixth Homily on the Beatitudes*); Cyril of Alexandria (*Thesaurus* 18); and Maximus the Confessor (*To Thalassius* 22, where he relates the incarnation of God and the *theosis* of man to the *energeia* of God).

¹² G. I. Gurdjieff, *Groupes de Paris: Tome II, 1944* (Bastia, France: Éditions Éoliennes, 2020), pp. 315-316, translation my own.

Affirmation	Father	Active
Negation	Son	Passive
Conciliation	Holy Spirit	Neutralising

All which exists is made of these Three Forces. God is the source of these Three Forces. He projects them outside Himself so that they may return to Him. The Passive Force which goes out from Him, which continues always to descend automatically: The Father creates the Son. Then the Son returns to the Father. Three Forces: the “reason” (logique) – which is opposed to the body – and the will, the conciliating force which unites them. All comes from Wish (Désir). To represent to oneself God, it is necessary to represent these Three Forces: there where these Three Forces are united, God is.¹³

When these passages are considered together with the references in the 1944 transcripts to humans being made in the image of God,¹⁴ they support my thesis that Gurdjieff’s mysticism purported to indicate how to consciously unite inside oneself the three creative forces. Although at the moment we are “non-entities” (again, an innovative starting point), yet we have the potential to produce real “I,” and each to actualise, for oneself, the presence of God. That is, the forces of creation manifest God when they are united, especially when their union takes place within and through us, or at least they are God for us, since Gurdjieff had said that “God is the source” of the three. For Gurdjieff, I would suggest, God emanates the three forces to perform a work on earth and return to him, having sown and harvested a crop, so to speak.¹⁵

I have cited some passages at length to rescue them from relative obscurity, as they are relevant to our discussion, showing both the continuity and discontinuity between Gurdjieff’s thought and previous systems. The combination of closeness to Christianity and the explicit mysticism is arguably sufficient to justify the title “esoteric Christianity” which Gurdjieff gave his system, without denying as I have earlier conjectured, that one could describe his teaching as “esoteric Buddhism” or “esoteric Islam,” and so on.¹⁶

Gurdjieff often said that he was teaching matter which belonged to the “ancient knowledge.”¹⁷ There he implicitly distinguished “Eastern teachings which have preserved traces of ancient knowledge,” from those which have not; opposing ancient knowledge to modern science concerning vibrations.¹⁸ This knowledge, he said, had been taught in centres of initiation such as India, Assyria, Egypt, and Greece, but “die out one after another

¹³ Gurdjieff, *Groupes de Paris: Tome II*, 1944, pp. 317-318, translation my own.

¹⁴ Gurdjieff, *Groupes de Paris: Tome II*, 1944, pp. 126, 229.

¹⁵ Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson*, pp. 162; 244-245; 264-265; 786-787.

¹⁶ Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises*, pp. 3; 74. It seems that Gurdjieff personally felt much closer to Christianity, or perhaps to Christ. His comments to Ouspensky and his inscription at Fontainebleau could be related to the fact that the people with him were, for the most part, from Christian backgrounds.

¹⁷ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 36-37; 61.

¹⁸ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 70; 82; 123.

and the ancient knowledge departs by underground channels into the deep, hiding from the eyes of seekers.”¹⁹

Ancient Knowledge, and Tradition

To be ancient is simply to be very old, and tradition is what has been passed on in a generational chain. Gurdjieff endorses not what is ancient *per se* but “ancient knowledge.” Gurdjieff often spoke approvingly of “ancient knowledge” and “ancient systems,” not “tradition.” He was no antiquarian; hoary authority counted for nothing with him. He often endorsed customary practices such as circumcision because he found value in them.²⁰ However, he explicitly stated that his system was of his own devising. In October 1922, he was asked whether his teaching was part of any other, or if any government had tried to put it into practice. He replied:

Tibet is an example where, ten years ago, all government was in the hands of the monks. But they couldn’t put my ideas into practice, because my teaching was not known to them. My teaching is my own. It combines all the evidence of ancient truth that I collected in my travels with all the knowledge that I have acquired through my own personal work.²¹

Here we have the main elements of Gurdjieff’s self-understanding: his teaching was a unique blend of the ancient knowledge of which he had satisfied himself, and his own research. In considering the lineage of Gurdjieff’s teaching, the opinion of P.D. Ouspensky (1878-1947) is of unique importance: first, because he recorded what Gurdjieff said to them when he was introducing his system to the world, and second, because Gurdjieff was especially forthcoming with Ouspensky, having agreed that Ouspensky would write the book which would introduce Gurdjieff’s system to a wider world.²² Gurdjieff specified that while there were similarities in other systems to what he taught, these invariably omitted the most important thing, e.g. that we do not remember ourselves, that we are not born with souls or “higher bodies,” and how to achieve these.²³

To take self-remembering first: Gurdjieff stressed the absence of unity in man, expressed as the idea that, as we are, we do not possess one real “I” with full will and individuality, but are subject to the domination of many “I’s.” Given this internal disunity, we may intellectually know something but not be able to make use of our knowledge,

¹⁹ Gurdjieff, *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks*, pp. 89-90; 94.

²⁰ Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson*, pp. 977-978.

²¹ Gurdjieff, *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks*, p. 172.

²² Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises*, pp. 29-31. I learnt sufficient Russian to study Ouspensky’s *Organum* in the Russian of its 1911 edition, and compare that with the translation of the 1916 revision. My study established that the 1916 edition included, without acknowledgement, some of Gurdjieff’s ideas: See Joseph Azize, ‘P. D. Ouspensky’s First Revision of *Tertium Organum*’, *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2023), pp. 47-67.

²³ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 41.

because our *being* is insufficiently developed: hence the need to make efforts not only with the mind, but with the feeling, also – and for that to occur, one needs a foundational awareness of conscious sensation of the physical body.²⁴ This facilitates the state, or more accurately, the range of states, of “remembering oneself” (collecting together what has been fragmented) another original contribution, certainly in formulation and the conclusions Gurdjieff drew from it.²⁵

In this connection, Gurdjieff’s system is often known as “the Fourth Way,” a phrase he himself used.²⁶ In the 1930s, he said:

Man has tried three ways to find the soul. The first way is by living only in the dining room – develop the body ... This way is called Fakirism ... Another way via the drawing-room, or Monkism ... by the feeling centre and psychic experiences ... The best way of the three is the third room, the bedroom, or mental centre, via knowledge. ... This is called Yogism ... But there is a Fourth Way ... I am the representative of the Fourth Way. And I have no *concurrent*.²⁷

Gurdjieff’s meaning is that he is the only representative of the Fourth Way: the way of working on body, feeling, and knowledge simultaneously.²⁸

Secondly, the question of the soul is another distinctive point in Gurdjieff’s teaching. He said in 1924:

[If] our centres have to agree among themselves ... they have to submit to a common master ... There is no master in ordinary man. And if there is no master, there is no soul. A soul – this is the aim of all religions, all schools. It is only an aim, a possibility; it is not a fact ... A child is never born with a soul. A soul can be acquired only in the course of life ... But a soul cannot be born from nothing. Everything is material and so is the soul, only it consists of very fine matter. Consequently, in order to acquire a soul, it is first of all necessary to have the corresponding matter ... If the second body succeeds in becoming crystallised in a man before his death, it can continue to live after the death of the physical body. ... Everything that exists is subject to the same law, for “as above, so below.”²⁹

This last phrase, of course, comes from the Emerald Tablet. Gurdjieff goes on to say that, within the second body, a third can be formed, and within that, a fourth, and that: “Real will belongs to this body. It is the real “I,” the soul of man, the master.”³⁰ Thus, the ideas

²⁴ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 64-68.

²⁵ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 121.

²⁶ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p.p. 48-50.

²⁷ Anonymous, *Gurdjieff and the Women of the Rope* (London: Book Studio, 2012) pp. 20-21. These are anonymously edited notes from various writers.

²⁸ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 49-50.

²⁹ Gurdjieff, *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks*, pp. 315-317.

³⁰ Gurdjieff, *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks*, p. 318.

of the self-remembering and that of making a soul adhere: the attempt to remember oneself helps crystallize the soul, and as it is made more stable, it is the vehicle through which one can remember oneself more deeply and fully; and it was the results which mattered. In the system, real “I,” the fourth body, comes from a level above that of the earth, and its finer materiality is mixed with the coarser materiality of lower worlds.

I shall not deal now with the many other innovative aspects of Gurdjieff’s system such as the Ray of Creation and the Food Diagram, which are expounded in Ouspensky 1949; but we have seen enough to understand that a case can be made that while Gurdjieff’s system can be related to others, there are points of *practical* differentiation: Gurdjieff says that other systems miss the necessary foundation of all effective conscious advancement. Unless a person has control of their feelings, thoughts, and organic impulses, they cannot commit to following religious and spiritual counsel.

Gurdjieff and the Traditionalist/Perennialist Schools

The more one attempts to portray Gurdjieff as traditional, the harder it is to explain his iconoclasm and critiques of practically every religious and intellectual system. More than this, however, his explosive idiosyncrasy appears not just capricious but itself non-traditional. The idea of a “traditionalist maverick” is an anomaly, if not a contradiction in terms.

Today the term “traditionalist” is apt to be associated with the Traditionalist or Perennialist schools which sprang from René Guénon (1886-1951) and Fritjof Schuon (1907-1998). Hence, Jean Borella identifies Guénon with “Traditionalism” and Schuon with “Perennialism.”³¹ As Sedgwick has shown, the basic idea of reinstating a pristine traditional or “perennial” teaching had respectable ancestors, not least Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), and in the nineteenth century, was revived in a form influenced by Vedanta.³²

Some in Gurdjieff groups are also avowed devotees of Traditionalist writers. The magazine, *Parabola*, commenced by Dorothy Dooling of the New York Foundation, has often featured Traditionalist/Perennialist writings; and Jacob Needleman, who was until his recent decease one of the main figures in the San Francisco Gurdjieff Foundation, edited a book of their writings to which he contributed a laudatory preface, *The Sword of Gnosis*.³³ Members of the Foundation publicly note the high esteem in which the Foundation holds their work.³⁴ Roger Lipsey writes of “Schuon and the distinguished circle of scholars and

³¹ Jean Borella, ‘René Guénon and the Traditionalist School’, in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, eds Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (New York: SCM, 1992), pp. 337-352.

³² Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 15; 24. I have studied a good deal of the literature of this school, including also Nasr, Coomaraswamy, and Burckhardt; but shall restrict myself here to citing Sedgwick.

³³ Jacob Needleman, *The Sword of Gnosis* (London: Penguin Books, 1974.)

³⁴ For example, Kathleen Ferrick Rosenblatt, *René Daumal: The Life and Work of a Mystic Guide* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 139.

authors with whom he was associated – including ... Guénon ... the finely intellectual exponent,” In the context of Lipsey’s attack on Perry’s rejection of Gurdjieff, this strikes me ambivalent: condescending as much as laudatory.³⁵

In the Guénon dispensation, the central elements were “Vedanta-Perennialism” and the complementary concepts of “counter-initiation” and “inversion.”³⁶ It was soon seen by colleagues in France that, despite the Christian veneer he cultivated, he was attempting a “Hinduist restoration of ancient Gnosis,” hence his ingenious comparison of the Sacred Heart of Christ to the third eye of Shiva, probably not the sort of parallel which would forcibly suggest itself to a researcher who was not already in search of parallels.³⁷ Although he moved to Cairo and lived as a Muslim, Islam was never a feature in either his writing or his reading: Hinduism was far more important.³⁸ I would conclude from a wide reading of his work, that, as with the Sacred Heart, he projected it wherever his roving eye landed. Schuon proved to be even more eclectic than Guénon:

He was a Muslim with a Sufi initiation from the Alawiyya, appointed shaykh of a Sufi order in a vision, but he was also a universalist with a primordial initiation from the Sioux, appointed to a universal mission by the Virgin Mary in another vision. That primordial mission would from then on gradually replace Schuon’s original role as a Sufi shaykh.³⁹

This mix of religions with plentiful cross-faith analogies and parallels is a world removed from Gurdjieff’s self-contained system, which makes few references to any other philosophy or religion. The Traditionalist/Perennialist texts are thematically arranged anthologies of global materials which they appeal to as authorities. Gurdjieff barely refers to any other traditions, and when he does it is as often to say that the tradition is incomplete. Another difference between Gurdjieff and the Traditionalist/Perennialists is in practice: Gurdjieff brought a panoply of practices all centred around and related to that of self-remembering, while they say little about practice, advocating, rather, initiation into what they consider to be an orthodox tradition; even if Guénon rejected Catholicism and neo-Hinduism as valid initiatic systems, a position reversed by Schuon.⁴⁰

In January 1994, the late Jean Sulzberger of the New York Foundation, who had been urging me to read Traditionalist/Perennialist writers, told me that Jeanne de Salzmann had travelled to Cairo in 1950 to persuade Guénon to accept Gurdjieff (or perhaps his teaching) as being “traditional,” and later to some unspecified place to see Schuon, for the same purpose. Sulzberger told me that Guénon conceded this, but Schuon did not. In 1999,

³⁵ Roger Lipsey, *Gurdjieff Reconsidered* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), p. 278.

³⁶ Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, p. 24.

³⁷ Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, pp. 30-31.

³⁸ Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, p. 77.

³⁹ Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, p. 151.

⁴⁰ Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, pp. 79-80.

Rosenblatt published a study of René Daumal, a deceased pupil of Gurdjieff, which included this:

In the fourth issue of *Cahier Daumal* and in a recent personal letter, Jack Daumal described Jeanne de Salzmann's decision to meet with René Guénon in order to explain certain essential aspects of Gurdjieff's teaching, of which he was unaware. According to Jack Daumal, the result of their meeting was an acknowledgement on Guénon's part of the validity of the ideas and teaching of Gurdjieff. Yet, there exists a third party who prefers to remain anonymous, who was present at this meeting at the pyramids in Egypt, and who at first feigned to be Guénon so as to screen this foreign visitor. In a transatlantic telephone conversation in June 1997, he claimed that Guénon had still continued to hold serious reservations about Gurdjieff. This close associate of Guénon felt that "Gurdjieff did not make adequate accommodation for the performance of religious rituals and sacraments for purification and for setting the soul in order." It seems clear to me that Guénon could not accept the concept of what Gurdjieff called "the Fourth Way," a spiritual path in life, which did not in itself focus solely on liturgical and ritual forms but which could serve as crucial adjuncts to them." Notwithstanding, Guénon's work has been studied, translated, and held in great esteem by subsequent followers of Gurdjieff.⁴¹

Now, if it was meant that *all* "subsequent followers of Gurdjieff" hold that view of Guénon's work, then it is simply untrue. For example, George Adie (1901-1989) considered the entire Traditionalist/Perennialist school to be overly intellectual, and that reading them was likely to be counterproductive of any conscious advancement. So far as I am aware, neither Ouspensky, Maurice Nicoll (1884-1953), A.R. Orage (1873-1934), Jane Heap (1883-1964), Bennett nor A. L. Staveley (1906-1996) ever mentioned them. These people were, like Ouspensky, Nicoll, and Orage, formidable pupils of Gurdjieff who led Fourth Way groups. Next, the basis of Jack Daumal's assertion is nowhere given. Unless, like Sulzberger's, it is based on de Salzmann's say so, I cannot conjecture what it might have been. There is reason to believe that what de Salzmann said was incorrect, although I do not doubt her sincerity. My view is that, in 1950, she was diplomatically deceived, and that Guénon either connived in or was responsible for the trick. My reasons are, first, the inherent difference between the views of Gurdjieff and Guénon. I wrote to Mark Sedgwick, probably the leading scholar on Traditionalism and modern Western Sufi currents. He replied on 11 January 2024:

I agree that it would make no sense for Guénon to acknowledge that Gurdjieff was "traditional." His views on Gurdjieff were clear, and so were his views on what

⁴¹ Rosenblatt, *René Daumal: The Life and Work of a Mystic Guide*, pp. 139-139.

was and was not “traditional” and orthodox. I don't think there is any documentation of what happened during the visit.⁴²

Then, on 13 April 2024, Prof. Sedgwick wrote to me, concerning the passage from Rosenblatt which I had by then sent to him:

Martin Lings lived out of town somewhere near the pyramids and was young enough then to be still alive and making phone calls in 1997, so it was probably him. Otherwise the pyramids would be an odd place to meet someone. Lings could hardly have pretended to be Guénon, but might have turned up to meet someone who wanted to meet Guénon. And the quote sounds like him, and was probably a fair summary of Guénon's views.⁴³

Finally, and practically conclusively, on 6 February 2024, the late PierLuigi Zoccatelli wrote to me that he knew of evidence that Guénon had met Alexandre de Salzmann (deceased 1934, the husband of Jeanne):

Xavier Accart ... reproduces an autograph letter by Guénon, in which he specifies: “Salzmann, que j'ai bien connu autrefois” (*Guénon ou le renversement des clartés*, p. 49-50). I have almost all of Guénon's correspondence preserved in Cairo, but I cannot find this letter. Luckily, Xavier found it and published it. However, I keep the original letter from Jacques Masui to which Guénon responds. You can find it here attached, confidentially.

Given the essentially negative opinion that emerges from Guénon's words, (are) the rumors of a meeting in Cairo between Jeanne de Salzmann and René Guénon true? I only have the French edition of Whitall N. Perry's book: “peu de temps après la mort de son maître, dans l'espoir d'obtenir un conseil” (*Gurdjieff à la lumière de la Tradition*, p. 113). Accart himself specifies in note 88 on page 850 of his volume: “Nous en avons eu une confirmation par une personne dont la famille hébergea Jeanne de Salzmann lors de cette visite au Caire”. So did this meeting really happen too? I don't know Perry but I know Accart, and I'm inclined to trust his scrupulous research. The fact remains (which perhaps means nothing in itself) that I find no reference to this meeting in any of the hundreds of letters from Guénon to his closest correspondents that I have.

Perhaps we find a trace of the possible influence of the school of Schuon (rather than of Guénon) on the school of Jeanne de Salzmann (more precisely of Henriette Lannes) in the chapter “Spiritual Politics” of the James Moore's book, *Gurdjieffian Confession* (p. 177-192)?⁴⁴

⁴² Email communication from Prof. Sedgwick, 11 January 2024.

⁴³ Email communication from Prof. Sedgwick, 13 April 2024.

⁴⁴ Email communication from Prof. Zoccatelli, 6 February 2024.

With that email, he attached for me, in confidence, a letter from Jacques Masui. Although Prof. Zoccatelli has unfortunately departed, I am reluctant to publish the letter, however, I have provided a copy to Prof. Carole Cusack, who was a friend of the professor's, and had recommended I ask him about any meeting between Guénon and Jeanne de Salzmann. Suffice to say, Masui states that he had once considered Gurdjieff to be a charlatan, but he now believed him to be "traditional," combining Indian and Sufi sources with features like the Table of Hydrogens and the musical scale, perhaps of his own invention, which Masui found troubling. He asked for Guénon's opinion. As Prof. Zoccatelli states, Guénon's response was simply that he had known Alexandre well.

In sum, it seems that in 1950, shortly after Gurdjieff's death in 1949 but before Guénon's own in 1951, at least one correspondent of Guénon's had come around to viewing Gurdjieff as "traditional." Jeanne de Salzmann wished to persuade Guénon of this view, to the extent that she travelled to Cairo, where she was received, but probably not by the reclusive Guénon himself. She was possibly led to believe, by Martin Lings or someone else, that Gurdjieff could be considered traditional. But while some in Guénon's circle may have entertained this notion, there is no reason to think Guénon accepted what he would see as a mixing of traditions by Gurdjieff any more than he accepted it in Theosophy, which he excoriated in *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion* (1928), although he seems to have acquiesced in the situation: perhaps it was simply not important to him.

It is a different matter with Schuon and the Perennialists. Despite their being more open to Christianity than Guénon, there was no doubt whatever but that they considered Gurdjieff to be non-traditional. Given that their attitude to Catholicism and Neo-Hinduism was more open than Guénon's it would be an unexpected situation if they were less open than he to Gurdjieff. The most powerful demonstration of this disapproval of Gurdjieff is the attack which Perry wrote at the apparent instigation and with the approval of Schuon.⁴⁵ Whitall N. Perry was described by Schuon's third wife as being Schuon's "doorkeeper,"⁴⁶ and was also the editor of *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* in 1971. He wrote:

In order to situate Gurdjieff and his movement, the one and only question the seeker has to resolve is whether or not God is Omnipotent. If the answer is in the affirmative, then Gurdjieff and his hosts are doomed.⁴⁷

It is hardly convincing to argue, as some do, that Gurdjieff's teaching is traditional, when *both* Gurdjieff himself and the Traditionalists say otherwise.⁴⁸ While the term "traditional" is broader than "Traditionalist," the Traditionalist/Perennialist argument is that Gurdjieff

⁴⁵ Whitall N. Perry, *Gurdjieff in the Light of Tradition* (Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1978).

⁴⁶ Maude Murray, *Third Wife of the Muslim Shaykh Frithjof Schuon* (Oldham: Beacon Books and Media, 2021), p. 48.

⁴⁷ Perry, *Gurdjieff in the Light of Tradition*, p. 93.

⁴⁸ Lipsey, *Gurdjieff Reconsidered*, pp. 278-283.

was not traditional in the wider sense, not that Gurdjieff was not one of their number: that has never been proposed. I have argued this above, and in that respect, I would say that to allow him his due merit, Perry was correct, even if his language was histrionic.

Conclusion

To summarise, from Gurdjieff's perspective, the mainstream traditions of Christianity and other religions were less effective than his own. It was simpler, and depended more upon interior dispositions than external actions. Gurdjieff said that the religions had degenerated into philosophies, as practitioners had misinterpreted or lost much of the ancient knowledge. One might contend that some of what Gurdjieff taught is "traditional," but such arguments depend upon a trick of the eye, that is, upon the breadth of "tradition" being such as to accommodate anything for which one argues a parallel anywhere in history. It can be urged that the very mystic path belongs to tradition, and that Gurdjieff's system had the same final aim as, for example, the major world religions. But can it be said that Gurdjieff's aim, the making of a soul, is the final aim of Buddhism, or of Judaism or Islam, as Gurdjieff asserted all religions and schools sought? One can say that the salvation of the soul is the same as the making of a soul, but this is plainly a forced pleading. To bring Gurdjieff's ideas into accord with these faiths, one has to interpret them from Gurdjieff's angle, that is, to project Gurdjieff's teaching onto them. After all, if the faiths are so similar to Gurdjieff's teaching, why had it not emerged until the early twentieth century?

In a sentence, Gurdjieff's *pursuit* (mysticism) was traditional, yet the path by which he taught it was innovative, and even more, the theoretical teaching he brought was positively revolutionary. Like practically all religious teachers until modern times, Gurdjieff taught that life begins from above the level of the earth.⁴⁹ However, Gurdjieff practically inverts the traditional position on what we might call "spiritual anthropology," i.e. the survival of the soul, and concerning "higher forces and capacities in man."⁵⁰ He adds here another idea which so far as I know is original in this form, although it can be related to the ancient concept of feeding the gods: that while life descends from above, the purpose of humanity is to "help God," by nourishing higher levels through our own self-perfection.⁵¹ It would require a large study in itself, but following my own suggestions of parallels with Iamblichus and Neoplatonism, it seems to me that if the Greek Hermetic material was understood as Wouter J. Hanegraaff has recently proposed, then that would be the system to which Gurdjieff's stood closest in theory but certainly not in practice. I have in mind especially the use of incense and herbal concoctions with narcotic properties in conjunction with the use of lighting effects, fasting, stones, herbs, eye ointments which

⁴⁹ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 139.

⁵⁰ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 31-33; 194.

⁵¹ Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*, pp. 192; 409; 762; 795.

were to be ingested, incantations and breathing exercises related to “luminous epiphanies.”⁵²

The idea of the “Fourth Way” situates Gurdjieff’s system as an *alternative* to traditional ways rather than as *another instance* of them: which means that they have the same destination. Gurdjieff said that every real religion taught both what to do and how to do it, but while the first aspect becomes well known, the harder and equally essential part, how to actually do what is enjoined, is “preserved in secret in special schools.”⁵³ Thus his system showed how to fulfil what religions taught. In a complementary way of putting this, he said that his system was needed now because there had been a change in the state of mankind. Thus, Nicoll recalled that he said we were born to be able to “remember ourselves,” and that we still possess the potential, but we have lost the facility under the influence of those around us who do not remember themselves:

[Gurdjieff] often ... said that esoteric teaching at one time used to be only necessary in regard to the Second Conscious Shock, for Man is not born with the possibility of giving himself this shock and cannot give it to himself unless he is taught how to do it, but that now owing to the fact that Man has fallen so much asleep he has to be taught how to give himself the shock of Self-Remembering before anything can be done to transform him. G. used to talk a great deal about how Man has lost this state given to him at birth.⁵⁴

In lecture notes about Gurdjieff’s system dated 13 April 1933, Jane Heap wrote: “Christ appealed to love. It didn’t exist strongly enough. It exists less strongly now.”⁵⁵ This pithy remark seems to have been derived from Gurdjieff, even if it is Heap’s formulation. In *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, he enjoined “any of my sons, whether by blood or in spirit” to find his father’s grave and to set up this inscription:

I AM THOU,
THOU ART I,
HE IS OURS,
WE ARE BOTH HIS.
SO MAY ALL BE
FOR OUR NEIGHBOUR.⁵⁶

Although the position Gurdjieff has arrived it could find its place in any of the major religious and spiritual traditions, the route by which he proceeds is quite individual.

⁵² Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 31-38.

⁵³ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 304.

⁵⁴ Maurice Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky*. vol. 3 (London: Vincent Stuart Weiser Books, 1996 [1952]), pp. 786-787.

⁵⁵ Jane Heap, YCAL MSS Box 1553 f.67 (1933).

⁵⁶ G. I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 49.

Irrespective of whether one accepts his own classification or not, if one focusses on the continuity between Gurdjieff's ways and the others, and concludes that Gurdjieff's system was traditional, the question arises why Gurdjieff brought any distinctive teaching at all, and did not simply work within an established tradition, mystical or otherwise.

Yet, to overstate the discontinuity is to miss Gurdjieff's intent to relate his system to others as suitable for people in the modern world who cannot or do not wish to retire to a monastery or ashram, but also as a faster more direct way to "making a soul."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 48-49.