

G. I. Gurdjieff, Trinitarian Master

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Abstract:

From its beginnings the Gurdjieff teaching has been presented through a heavily secular lens—“spiritual but not religious”—most frequently as an early run-up on what we would nowadays call Mindfulness Training. While this secular emphasis is by no means misplaced, it tends to deflect attention away from what is surely its opposite but equal truth: that Gurdjieff’s grasp of the Christian Mystery unfolds at a remarkably high level of theological subtlety and devotional depth that catches both mainstream scholars and Gurdjieffians themselves largely unaware. Nowhere is this more evident than in Gurdjieff’s bold and comprehensive treatment of the Holy Trinity. His unique, metaphysically based understanding of the Trinity as inextricably linked to the Law of Three (a.k.a. “The Law of World Creation”) repositions it as a cosmogonic template rather than a mystical speculation on the inner ontology of God, thereby “giving it legs” for both personal inner transformation and conscious action in the world. This article will develop this thesis through a close examination of Gurdjieff’s Trinitarian metaphysics as presented in his extended discourse in *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson*, followed by a preliminary exploration of several as yet unpublished “Trinitarian Exercises” contained within the Vera Daumal collection of Gurdjieffian material at the Bibliotheque Jacques Doucet in Paris.

Keywords: Gurdjieff, Trinitarian Exercises, Daumal Exercises, The Law of Three, The Ray of Creation, *djartklom*, Orthodox Spirituality, Trisagion Prayer, Lord Have Mercy, Jacob Boehme, Beatrice Bruteau, Karl Rahner, Raimon Panikkar, Catherine LaCugna.

Introduction

From its very beginnings the Gurdjieff teaching has intentionally been presented through a heavily secular lens—“spiritual but not religious” as we’d call it nowadays: most frequently as an early forerunner of what is now known as “mindfulness training.” The overtly religious aspects of his teaching are nearly always played down, concealed within the more neutral categories of “conscious evolution” or “the harmonious development of man.” While this secular emphasis is by no means misplaced, it tends to deflect attention away from what is surely its opposite but equal truth: that Gurdjieff’s grasp of the Christian Mystery unfolds at a remarkable level of subtlety and

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devotional depth that has been largely missed not only by mainstream Christian theologians but by Gurdjieffians themselves.

Nowhere is this profundity more evident than in Gurdjieff's bold and comprehensive treatment of the Holy Trinity. It has long been my contention that Gurdjieff the finest Trinitarian theologian Christianity has ever produced. His unique, metaphysically based understanding of the Trinity as inescapably linked to the Law of Three (a.k.a. "The Law of World Creation") repositions it as a cosmogonic template rather than a mystical speculation on the inner ontology of God, thereby "giving it legs" for personal inner transformation and conscious action in this world. At the same time, his sweeping extension of this fundamental cosmogonic template across the entire Ray of Creation in a continuous dance of mutual bootstrapping creates both the scale and the dynamism needed to resolve most of the notorious impasses in Trinitarian theology and to reclaim this vastly enhanced cosmogonic principle as the true driveshaft of Christian devotion and praxis.

I first advanced this thesis in *The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three*.¹ In the subsequent decade the appearance of additional resources materials—in particular, the increasing public accessibility of Gurdjieff's "Trinitarian" exercises contained among the Vera Daumal collection of his Paris wartime exercises—reveals both the subtlety of his understanding of the Trinity as a cosmogonic principle and the depth of his own Christian devotion to the Trinity, particularly as framed within those classic liturgical prayers of his native Greek and Armenian Orthodox tradition, the Trisagion prayer and the Lord Have Mercy.

This present article proposes to open an initial exploration of this rich new spiritual terrain, in accordance with what I take to be one of the major aims of the landmark Harvard Gurdjieff Conference in December 2024: to bring the insights and nomenclature of the Gurdjieffian teaching into a more direct and fruitful conversation with the classic assumptions and methodologies of the mainstream Western Christian theological tradition. In almost no other area of potential interface than in his trinitarian teaching is the ground still so unexplored and so potentially fertile.

The Endemic Conundrum

It is perhaps an overstatement to claim that for most of its theological existence the Trinity has been a doctrine "more honored in the breach than in the observance." It *is*, however, a fair assessment to say that almost since its inception, it has remained something of an acquired theological taste, largely failing to capture the popular imagination. Formally, it is a mystical speculation (or *revelation*, for those more inclined in that direction), majestic in its boldness and its cosmic ordering power. But it lacks the flesh-and-blood immediacy of a baby born in manger, a martyr's death on the cross, a guru to adore or a teaching to lay down one's life for. In and of itself, it carries no moral charge and imposes no moral precepts; in fact, as most widely interpreted, it presents as a profound mystical reflection on the *autopoësis* of God, the complete divine self-sufficiency in and of itself, with no intrinsic need for either a created order or further human participation. Abstract and intellectually intricate, the Trinity *cum doctrine* offers few natural

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Holy Trinity and The Law of Three* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2013).

handholds for either devotional or ethical engagement. And the fact that it made its full appearance only in the fourth century, well beyond that first peak period of Christian identity formation and lacking any direct historical grounding in the teachings of Jesus himself, has been a further deterrent to full engagement with its alleged pride of place as the practical foundation of Christian life.

While theologians have been understandably reluctant to acknowledge this conundrum directly, the question was finally called by Karl Rahner in 1970 in his infamous assertion if the doctrine of the Trinity were to be quietly disappear off Christian roadmap, never to be spoken of again, the major part of its religious teaching would remain completely unchanged.² That brought the room to full attention and elicited a spirited response—thankfully, not just the predictable defensiveness, but some real soul-searching about how this disconnect could have happened, together with some lively attempts at reframing. The cumulative results of this revisioning are definitely trending in a more Gurdjieff-hospitable direction, collectively building a steppingstone bridge from traditional theological reference points to the more expansive possibilities that his own paradigm will open up.

Catherine LaCugna

The first out the gate toward a fundamental revisioning was Catherine LaCugna in *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (1991).³ In this groundbreaking study she managed virtually singlehandedly to rescue the Trinity from the theological margins to which it had been increasingly relegated and restore it to active duty as a primary symbol of Christian life.

In the first part of her book, LaCugna rigorously traces the “defeat” of the doctrine of the Trinity over a thousand years of theological development as it moves from its starting point as a participative vision of God’s redemptive love at work in all creation to an increasingly abstract speculation on the inner life of God. As early as the fourth century, it had already become an established theological habit to divide the field of operations into an “economic” Trinity (in Greek, *oikonomia*) governing God’s actions in the visible world, and an “immanent” Trinity concerned with relations within the Godhead itself. Once this fundamental rupture had occurred, the drift continued to widen—in the Christian East through and exaggerated differentiation between the “essence” and “energies” of God, and in the post-Augustinian West through an increasing fixation on the nature and psychology of the divine persons. Following in the footsteps of her spiritual mentor Karl Rahner, LaCugna issues a passionate call for a return to that original undivided field of divine experience in which the inner life of God and the outer life of salvation are one and the same reality. Echoing Rahner’s famous battle cry, “The economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity,” she boldly unbends those two separate circles and refashions them as a single parabolic curve of divine reality arching across all worlds, all times. “There is neither an economic nor an immanent Trinity,” she writes; “there is only the *Oikonomia* that is the concrete realization of the mystery of

² Karl Rahner, S.J., *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 11.

³ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.)

theologica in time, space, history, and personality; the subject matter of the Christian theology of God is the one dynamic movement of God *a patre ad patrem*. There is no reason to stop at any one point along the curve, no reason to single out one point as if it could be fixed or frozen in time.”⁴

From a Gurdjieffian perspective, what is most intriguing about her insight here is that in both its dynamism and its parabolic sweep it clearly anticipates Gurdjieff’s Ray of Creation, which may in the end be the most valuable tool Gurdjieff places in the hands of contemporary Trinitarian revisioning efforts, furnishing the scale at which the Trinity’s magisterial cosmogonic vision finally comes to full internal coherence. LaCugna is intuitively heading in the right direction, and with some minor readjustments her “points” begin to re-emerge as what Gurdjieff would call “worlds,” nexuses of reciprocal energetic exchange supporting the ongoing dynamism of that very *Oikonomia* she is describing. Her insight is real. But from within the available toolkit of mainstream Western theology, she is unable to access its fuller cosmogonic implications.

Raimon Panikkar and Beatrice Bruteau

Space allows me only a brief mention of Raimon Panikkar (1917-2010), one of the most penetrating and inclusive theological minds of our times. Between his *The Holy Trinity* (1973) and his magnificent *Christophany* (2004) lie more than thirty years of increasingly subtle scholarship as he, like LaCugna, comes to see the Trinity as a dynamic mandala, entrusted to Christianity in a particular way, but universal in scope, illuminating “the dynamism of the real.”

“Cosmotheandric” is the word Panikkar invents to describe this dynamic relational ground. The word itself is a fusion of *cosmos* (world), *theos* (God), and *andros* (man) and suggests a continuous intercirculation among these three distinct planes of existence (a.k.a., “worlds”) in a single motion of self-communicating love. His vision is of a dynamic, interabiding oneness contribution, whose “substance” is inseparable from the motion itself. Panikkar is emphatic that “being is a verb, not a substance,”⁵ and the Trinity is the indivisible expression of this mode of beingness. All speculation on the “substance” of the individual divine persons (as has dominated Western metaphysics for more than fifteen hundred years) thus starts off from a fundamental misperception that will inevitably wind up in a *cul de sac*; for, as integral thinker Panikkar sees it, “the Trinity is pure relationality.”⁶

While Panikkar displays no formal awareness of the Law of Three, his metaphysics are definitely prototernary, and in a couple of instances he comes right to the threshold of an explicitly ternary understanding. He intuitively recognizes—and at one point explicitly states—that the Spirit functions as a “place holder” so that the trajectory of divine love does not collapse back into itself: “It is not an *amor curvus*, as the Middle Ages would say, a love that folds back in on itself, but a Trinitarian love.”⁷ He is clearly thinking spatially here, envisioning that triadic model in which three points are necessary to keep an action open and flowing; and with that same spatial

⁴ LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 84

⁵ Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 129.

⁶ Panikkar, *Christophany*, p. 175.

⁷ Panikkar, *Christophany*, p. 25.

intuitiveness he begins to push back gently against Augustine of Hippo's venerable dictum, unchallenged in the West for fifteen hundred years, that "the Spirit is the love between the Father and the Son." While not quite directly challenging that formulation, he seems to be aware of the *amor curvus* subliminally at work here and states unequivocally: "This relationship, in which the whole universe is involved, does not result in a final monism; it is not closed because the spirit keeps it open."⁸ Transposed to Gurdjieff's explicitly ternary paradigm, everything that Panikkar is intuiting here would find its clear and obvious validation.

Perhaps the most striking recent contribution to the evolution of Trinitarian thought, from a Gurdjieffian perspective, is Beatrice Bruteau's *God's Ecstasy: The Creation of a Self-Creating World* (1997).⁹ Other than Gurdjieff, she is the first major Western thinker to explicitly grasp the intrinsic connection between threefoldness and cosmogenesis, depicting the Trinity along almost identical lines as Gurdjieff: as a necessarily threefold embodiment of the fundamental cosmic law of World Creation.

For Bruteau the Trinity is first and foremost an image of *symbiotic unity*—in fact, it is "the original symbiotic Unity." The three "God-Persons in Community," as she sees it, comprise the prototype and the prerequisite for the expression of agape love, the constituent energy of the godhead. In her second chapter she builds a detailed philosophical case for why threefoldness is a necessary precondition for agape love. She then goes on to demonstrate that threefoldness is by nature "ecstatic," or in other words, self-projective. By its very threefoldness it "breaks symmetry" (the symmetry of the intradivine equilibrium) and projects the agape field outward, calling new forms of being into existence, each of which bears the imprint of the original symbiotic unity out of which it was created. "It is the presence of the Trinity as a pattern repeated at every scale of the cosmic order," she feels, "that makes the universe the manifestation of God and itself sacred and holy."¹⁰ While she ultimately defaults to theological rather than metaphysical thinking, sourcing this threefoldness in her three "God-Persons in Community," in all other respects she has intuitively "downloaded" most of the fundamental operational principles of Gurdjieff's Law of Three. There is very little in her presentation here that he would disagree with.

The Gurdjieffian Version

That final step, of course, is the one that that brings us into the full Gurdjieffian terrain. For Gurdjieff, it is manifestly impossible to derive a metaphysical law from a theological dogma; the flow can only be in the other direction. The Trinity can never be derived from an *a priori* theological stipulation (the three "God-Persons in Community"); rather, those "persons" are the first fruits, so to speak, of the deeper metaphysical principle from which they arise: the Law of Three.

⁸ Panikkar, *Christophany*, p. 113.

⁹ Beatrice Bruteau, *God's Ecstasy: The Creation of a Self-Creating World* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

¹⁰ Bruteau, *God's Ecstasy*, p. 14.

For those not familiar with the Law of Three, let me quickly review its most salient features by way of the short summary I created in my book *The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three*:

1. In every new arising there are three independent forces (or lines of action) involved: affirming, denying, and reconciling (or “first force,” “second force,” and “third force.”) This is universally true of every cosmic phenomenon, on whatever scale (from subatomic to cosmic) and in whatever domain (science, the social sciences, the arts, religion, etc.)
2. The interweaving of the three necessarily produces a fourth in a new dimension (the new arising).
3. Affirming, denying, and reconciling are not fixed identities or permanent essence attributes, but can and do shift and must be discerned situationally.
4. It is always at the reconciling point that a new triad arises.
5. Solutions to impasses usually come by learning how to spot and mediate third force, which is present in every situation but generally hidden.
6. The idea of third force is found in religion in the concept of the Trinity.

It is the last point, of course—a direct quotation from Gurdjieff—that concerns us most in this present exploration.¹¹

While Gurdjieff is clear that the Law is prior to the Persons, he proceeds immediately to firmly entwine the two. That in fact, appears to be the primary agenda in his extensive discourse on the Trinity, to be found about midpoint through *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, in his blockbuster metaphysical chapter “Holy Planet Purgatory.”¹² In the course of a lengthy exposition of the “Sacred Triamazikamno” (i.e., The Law of Three) he makes a succession of six iterations that cumulatively leave little doubt that as far as he is concerned, the two are joined at the hip. The discourse begins on p. 687:

As previously mentioned, this sacred Triamazikamno consists of three independent forces, which are called:

The first, ‘surp-otheos’

The second, ‘surp-skiros’

The third, ‘surp-athanatos’

Beneath these initially exotic-sounding neologisms, of course, it does not take much of a stretch to recognize the three invocations of the Trisagion Prayer, that pillar of the Orthodox liturgy which Gurdjieff would have known well, not only from his periodic sojourns with the monks of Mt Athos, but from his own early days as a schoolboy chorister:

Agios O Theos [O Holy God]

¹¹ Bourgeault, *Holy Trinity*, pp. 24-25. A more extensive commentary follows on pp. 25-27.

¹² G.I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (New York and London: Viking Arkana, 1992), pp. 687-9.

Agios Ischyros [Holy and Mighty]
Agios Athanatos [Holy Undying One]

In fact, Gurdjieff makes this connection explicit in his sixth iteration when he cites the full Trisagion prayer in its traditional, hauntingly beautiful translation:

Holy God
Holy the firm
Holy Immortal One
Have mercy on us

And then, alongside it, in his own equally haunting esoteric equivalent:

Holy Affirming,
Holy Denying
Holy Reconciling
Transubstantiate in me
For my being.

In his second of these six iterations he approaches the overlay from a scientific perspective:

Objective Science calls these three holy forces of the sacred Triamazikamno by the following names:

The first, the ‘affirming force’ or the ‘pushing force’ or simply the ‘force plus’
The second, the ‘denying force’ or the ‘resisting force,’ or simply the ‘force minus’
The third, the ‘reconciling force’ or the ‘equilibrating force’ or the ‘neutralizing force.’

and in the third, from a religious one:

The first, ‘God the Father’
The second, ‘God the Son’
The Third, ‘God the Holy Ghost’

Collating these various angles of approach, we arrive at the following composite:

First Force/Holy Affirming /God the Father/ “Holy God”
Second Force/Holy Denying/ God the Son/ “Holy the Firm”
Third Force/Holy Reconciling/God the Holy Ghost/ “Holy Immortal One”

It could not be more simple, direct, and explicit than that. The three “persons” of the Trinity are fundamentally the three lines of action of the Law of Three, identified consistently as father

(affirming), son (denying), spirit (reconciling). For Gurdjieff, these three “God-Persons in Community” are not theological postulates; they are the personalized instantiation of an even more primordial law, and it is this more primordial law that suffuses and harmonizes their “personhood,” even as their personhood illuminates and imbues that law with a heart and conscience—because, as Gurdjieff points out, in an authentic life of prayer, “*une Figure est nécessaire pour crystallizer, pour prendre appui.*”¹³

Gurdjieff’s Trinitarian Exercises

While the centrality of the Trinity to Gurdjieffian metaphysics can thus be considered well established, the extent of Gurdjieff’s practical reliance on it as a foundational tool for personal transformational becomes clear only in tandem his exercises. The most extensive collection of these, comprising eighty-eight exercises given by Gurdjieff during the period 1938-1945 and transcribed at his request by his student Vera Daumal, is contained in an unpublished manuscript housed at the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet in Paris. As a new spirit of transparency continues to gain ascendancy in Gurdjieffian circles and copies of this still little known manuscript begin to re-emerge and return to limited circulation within and beyond Fourth Way groups, Gurdjieffian scholars and practitioners alike find themselves in possession of an extraordinary resource that both extends and in some places significantly revises our overall appraisal of Gurdjieff’s Trinitarian spirituality.

Of the eighty-eight exercises in this Daumal collection, fourteen specifically invoke and work with the Trinity. The most concentrated presentation come in the first section of the manuscript (Exercises 1 through 19), where Trinitarian invocations comprise roughly half of the exercises (1, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13, 17, 18). The preferred format is the Trisagion Prayer, exactly as laid it out in *Beelzebub’s Tales*:¹⁴

*O Dieu Saint
Dieu saint et fort
Dieu saint et immortel
Transmuez vous en moi*

[Holy God
Holy and Mighty
Holy Immortal One
Transmute yourself in Me]

¹³ “A figure is necessary to crystallize something, in order to take the help.” G.I. Gurdjieff, Exercise 5 (“Exercise de La Foi”) in *88 Exercices Donnés Par Gurdjieff dans la Période 1938-1945* (unpublished manuscript, originally catalogued by and subsequently removed from the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet, Paris.) For further discussion, see ahead in my article, pp. 8-18.

¹⁴ Throughout these exercises Gurdjieff alternates between the full Trisagion Prayer and its abbreviated liturgical formula: “Au nom du Père, au nom du Fils, au nom du Saint-Esprit.”

From the very first exercise presented, Gurdjieff is out the gate and running as he introduces his fundamental transformational algorithm, inviting his students to “write” the Trinity in their own bodies by establishing a conscious connection between *Father*/head; *Son*/spinal column/and *Spirit* /solar plexus. Subsequent exercises (5, 9, 10) offer minor variations on this same operation as students learn to consciously invite the attention-directed intercirculation of energy among these three cardinal points to awaken the procreative force of the Law of Three within their own being.

Among this initial grouping, Exercise 3 (the “Bread Exercise”) stands out as the most metaphysically developed. In this striking and unusually powerful exercise Gurdjieff makes his cosmogonic algorithm even more pointed as he explicitly matches these three already-yoked centers (head/Father; spinal column/Son; solar plexus/Spirit) to the three forces of the Law of Three. He develops his idea through an extended bread-baking metaphor, in which head now takes on the role of water (affirming force), the spinal column of flour (denying force), the solar plexus of leaven (reconciling force). The exercise, Gurdjieff explains in his introductory comments, was practiced by certain adepts “in the monasteries” who were known in the community as “the abstainers:”¹⁵

Leur exercice: celui de OM sur la respiration sur les trois centres accompagné de la prière
Dieu Saint OM—Mêler l’air aux emanations de cerveau
Dieu saint et fort— Mêler l’air aux emanations de la moelle epiniere
Dieu Saint et immortel OM- Mêler l’air aux emanations du plexus solaire
Transmuez vous en mois OM—Mêler l’air avec l’emanation du sexe.

[Their Exercise: the OM on the respiration of the three centers accompanied by the prayer:
 Holy God OM—blend the air with the emanations of the brain
 Holy and Mighty OM—blend the air with the emanations of the spinal cord
 Holy Immortal One OM—blend the air with the emanations of the solar plexus
 Transubstantiate yourself in me OM—blend the air with the emanation of the sexual organs.]

In this compact and highly concentrated exercise Gurdjieff establishes an instantaneous three-way connection between the Trisagion prayer, the three persons of the Trinity as representatives of the three forces of the Law of Three, and the circulation of attention-directed energy, carried on the chanting of the OM. When one considers that a striking contemporary translation sometimes proposed for “Give us this day our daily bread” is “Give us this day our *transubstantial* bread,” you can begin to see the higher cosmogonic possibility Gurdjieff most likely has in mind here: that the bread being baked is not simply for the physical body, but for the “higher being bodies,” as he called then—literally soul food! He admits as much directly in the concluding lines of the exercise:

¹⁵ Almost certainly this is an allusion to Mt. Athos, where Gurdjieff was a frequent visitor and from which he may well have taken some of his core esoteric practices. For more on the “solar mysticism” of Mt Athos and its impact on Gurdjieffian metaphysics and practice, see Joseph Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, & Exercises* (London, Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 83-94.

*But: Faire le moi
Beaucoup plus Tard, Âme*

[The Goal: To Make the “I”
Much later: the Soul]

Other exercises in this initial group offer further physical variations on these same basic operational instructions.. Exercise 13, called “the Medical Exercise,” offers the first run-up on how to consciously direct energy among these three cardinal points, then from there to a designated further point within the body. Collectively this initial series of exercises provides robust confirmation for Joseph Azize’s assertion that the essence of Gurdjieff’s method lies in developing in his students the capacity for “consciously directing the movement of subtle energies within the body.” The Trinitarian invocation is his first and primary tool for the accomplishment of this “transubstantiation.”¹⁶

Lest it seem, however, that this work is undertaken for personal self-aggrandizement or the acquisition of “supernatural” powers, Gurdjieff makes clear that this can never be the case. In Exercise 18, (unnamed, but which I have personally come to think of as the “Bodhisattva Exercise”), he brings this initial set of Trinitarian exercises to a conclusion with his firm insistence that the acquisition of higher spiritual agency must always be grounded within the firm moral guardrails of personal humility and a sincere desire to help others:

*Je veux etre. Je peux etre. J'ai le droit d'etre. J'ai le pouvoir d'etre.
Je me jure à moi-même que ce ne sera seulement pour mon profit personnel, mais pour aider les autres.
Je veux etre pour aider les autres.*

[I wish to be. I can be. I have the right to be. I have the power to be.
I swear to myself that this will not be solely for my personal profit, but in order to help others.
I wish to be in order to help others.]

“This exercise is at the same time a vow,” he concludes.

The Later Trinitarian Exercises in the Daumal collection

After these first eighteen exercises, the Trinitarian focus subsides—or more accurately, it melds into the larger transformational portfolio, intertwining with several other core kerdjan operational skills Gurdjieff has been simultaneously introducing. If the emphasis in the first series of Trinitarian exercises is on awakening awareness of the Trinity within one’s physical being and learning to follow and even direct its subtle currents, the later Trinitarian exercises are more

¹⁶ Azize, *Gurdjieff*, p. 94.

concerned with activating its full cosmogonic power by fusing its three constituent forces into a single whole within oneself.

Gurdjieff's presentation begins strongly in Exercise 43, in which he leads us beyond simply *invoking* the three Persons of the Trinity into actually recognizing and claiming them in oneself as the root dynamism of one's own "personal" being. The exercise calls for inscribing on oneself a "very compact" sign of the cross, following a specific breathing pattern and signing pattern, accompanied by this telling variation of the Trisagion prayer:

*Je suis ce Dieu fort,
Je suis ce Dieu saint
Je suis ce Dieu Immortel
Je suis, Ayez pitié de nous.*

[I am this strong God
I am this holy God
I am this immortal God.
I am; have pity on us.]

Lest the specter of "narcissism writ large" once again raise its head, a brief commentary on the metaphysical backdrop against which I believe Gurdjieff is presenting this teaching is perhaps in order. In *Beelzebub's Tales* he formally introduces his subsidiary metaphysical principle of *djartklom*¹⁷ which essentially states that in order to activate any form of cosmogenesis whatsoever—at any scale and in any realm along the Ray of Creation—the "omnipresent active element" must first separate into its three constituent strands (affirming, denying, and reconciling) in order to launch the manifesting process at any given point along the Ray. At first this may simply sound like the Law of Three in inversion, but in this corollary an important nuance comes to the forefront: that *djartklom*—i.e., the initial voluntary self-separation of what was formerly unified—is in fact the fundamental *involutionary* principle (involution here understood as bringing a lower form into manifestation out of a higher one)—or in other words, creating a visible manifest world out of a higher-energy, formless one. *Djartklom* thus furnishes the cosmogonic mechanism behind that resounding Biblical first command, "And God said, 'Let there be light'" —a metaphysical nuance that Jacob Boehme, virtually alone among the Christian mystics, seems also to have picked up on.¹⁸ For both Boehme (implicitly) and Gurdjieff (explicitly), The Trinity is the primordial exercise of *djartklom* and in its wake all else has unfolded. *Djartklom* governs the descending octave, the octave that leads to new worlds, new life, new arisings, diversity, complexity, and density.

¹⁷ Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales*, p. 132.

¹⁸ Boehme's brilliant intuitive recognition that before Creation can properly get underway the "Endless Unity" must first "bring itself into somethingness," which he elsewhere equates with bringing itself into "divisibility and perceptivity"—the metaphysical underpinning of both *djartklom* and the Law of Three. For more on Boehme's brilliant "prototernary" metaphysics, see Bourgeault, *The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three*, pp. 95-104.

But mark well: there is also self-sacrifice here, a voluntary “creation through self-limitation” which extends even to the cosmogonic heart of God, a nuance which Eastern Orthodox spirituality has picked up on in a way that Western theology (apart from Boehme) has never fully grasped. The crucifixion does not begin on the cross; it begins in the Trinity, that primordial *djartklom*, as the ineffable unity of divine knowledge and purpose willingly submits to its own drawing and quartering in order that anything at all can come into being. Gurdjieff has a deep feeling for the cosmogonic suffering involved here, which powerfully undergirds a good deal of his teaching, most succinctly and poignantly captured in his Fourth Obligolnian striving:

The striving, from the beginning of one’s existence, to pay as quickly as possible for one’s arising and individuality in order afterward to be free to lighten the sorrow of our Common Father.¹⁹

If *djartklom* is thus the basic involutory (i.e., incarnational) principle, then the unification of the three into one is the basic *evolutionary* mechanism. It is how we rise, how we pay the cost of our arising, how we lighten the sorrow of our common Father. I mention this at the outset, because apart from its collective and obligatory context the evolutionary impulse will inevitably be understood as *personal* self-realization: the route that virtually all Western interpretations of Gurdjieff’s deeply Orthodox mysticism have taken. Gurdjieff certainly demands of his students a good measure of personal self-realization, but the goal is ultimately not for our personal glorification, but to repay a cosmogonic debt, offering our own pixel of realized consciousness into the healing of the divine sorrow.

The Three Faces of God

In closely following exercises (47, 48) the emphasis grows still stronger that the three forces are in fact “the three faces of God,” and that to reunite them in oneself is essentially to recapitulate in oneself the fundamental cosmogonic gesture of the evolutionary (ascending) octave. Gurdjieff makes this assertion pointblank in Exercise 47. As one performs the outer actions of this exercise, he instructs:

vous vous représentez Dieu (c’est à dire les 3 Forces) d’affirmation, de negation, de conciliation unies, et vous leur demandz aide, c’est à dire, que cela puisse se faire en vous, que ces 3 Forces s’unissent en vous, pour se recréer a l’Image de Dieu: 3 Faces.

[you represent to yourself God (that is to say, the three Forces) of affirmation, of negation, and of reconciliation reunited, and you ask them for their assistance, that the same thing may come to pass in you: these three Forces unify themselves within you in order to re-create in you the Image of True God: three Forces.]

¹⁹ Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales*, p. 352.

This notion may ring a bell for some Gurdjieffian students because of Jeanne de Salzmann's obvious referencing of it among the exercises included in the anthology of her writings, *The Reality of Being*:

Everything that exists is constituted of three forces. They can be represented as the Father, the active force; the Son, the passive Force, and the Holy Spirit, the neutralizing force. The Father creates the Son. The Son returns to the Father. The force that descends is one which wishes to return, to go back up.

In man the mind is opposed to the body. The neutralizing force is the wish that unites them, connects them. Everything comes from the wish, the will. To represent God, it is necessary to represent these three forces. Where the three forces are reunited, God is. Where our attention is, God is. When two forces are opposed and a third unites them, God is here. We can say, 'Lord have mercy on me.' We can ask for help *to come to this in ourselves*. The only help is this. Our aim is this, to contain, to unite these three forces in us...to *Be*.

De Salzmann's recapitulation accurately captures the gist of Gurdjieff's teaching and moves it swiftly toward its practical applications. But in so doing, she loses most of the cosmic sweep and overpowering sense of *mysterium tremendum* that suffuses Gurdjieff's own rendition in Exercise 48. In this deeply poetic and demanding visualization exercise (not so much an exercise as an extended mystical reflection on the "root of the root" of the arising of somethingness out of nothing) he leads his students on a powerful imaginal journey along the Ray of Creation, all the way back to that primordial "big bang" —which implicitly still reverberates in each moment of our own conscious awakening. Thus, while in other respects similar, the two exercises move in opposite directions: de Salzmann's toward the interior and psychological, Gurdjieff's toward the universal and cosmogonic. And while his version clearly rides the creative tension between the macro and the micro, nowhere in his rendition of this exercise does he move quite so baldly to the conclusion that "where our attention is, God is," equating our own microcosmic efforts to bring third force to our inner work with the cosmogonic reunification of God. The two are not at the same scale; they literally belong to different worlds, different stations along the Ray of Creation. He brings the exercise to its conclusion with this emphatic and humbling disclaimer:

*Faire contact avec Dieu, c'est notre but—pas maintenant.
Maintenant pensez que même dans cette pièce, dans cette chambre, ces 3 forces
sont là, puisque qu'elles sont partout, et que peut-être votre prière pourra se
joindre à la Force qui remonte pour retourner à sa source, et qu'aussi la Force
qui descend pourra vous transmettre quelque chose, comme télépathie.*

[To make contact with God—that is our goal, but not now.
For now, think that even in this apartment, in this room, these three forces are there,
because they are everywhere, and that perhaps your prayer may be able to join
itself to the ascending force in order to return to its source, and that also the
descending Force might be able to transmit something to you, as if by telepathy.]

For Gurdjieff, the thought that we might, through our own personal exercise of attention, make direct contact with God—fully recreate the image of God within ourselves—would be beyond hubris. What we *can* do is to ride those deeper ascending and descending currents through the vehicle of prayer, consciously placing it on the upward force that returns to the source, while “telepathically” drawing from the downward force the help and sustenance needed for our earthly journey. It requires an attitude of complete humility, knowing the small part that is indeed ours to play in a vast tapestry of mutual bootstrapping beyond our reckoning—and thankfully beyond our appropriation.

Conclusion

The first step in the reappraisal of Gurdjieff that must surely follow from the additional evidence provided by this treasure trove of newly accessible exercises is to simply pause and drink in the depth and breadth of Gurdjieff’s mystical Christian heart, here unabashedly revealed. This is not to claim that his teaching is *exclusively* Christian; equal cases have also been made for his indebtedness to both Naqshbandi Sufism and Tibetan Buddhism. It *is* to say, however—as I stated at the very outset—that his understanding of Christianity unfolds at a remarkable level of theological subtlety and devotional depth that has been almost entirely missed, not only by mainstream Christian theologians but by Gurdjieffians themselves. Almost from the start, there seems to have been a concerted effort to cloak the Work in entirely secular vestments—surely the case in Ouspensky’s and Orage’s original highly intellectualized versions, and even to some degree in the “transpersonalized” version of the work which emerged under Jeanne de Salzmann’s guiding hand following his death.

More than likely, Gurdjieff himself initially encouraged this presentational mode, recognizing the need to speak to his new “mission field,” the secularized West, in a language recognizable to them. As his years progressed, he seems to have increasingly abandoned this façade. Perhaps, as Joseph Azize speculates Gurdjieff grew increasingly more religious; perhaps he simply grew increasingly more unguarded, spurred in part by the desperate need of his times, in part by his own growing spiritual transparency.²⁰ However he arrived where he arrived by the end of his life, in the mirror of these late Daumal exercises, the depth of Gurdjieff’s own personal religiosity shines through, as well as the full extent of its Orthodox spiritual foundation. Unlike Azize, I believe this formation predates his visits to Mt Athos and is in fact anchored in the liturgical training in his schoolboy years as a chorister at the Orthodox cathedral at Kars, where the daily liturgical recitation of the great Trisagion prayer became the bedrock of his own Christian mystical spirituality. Certainly it is the bedrock of these eighty-eight exercises. The trove of Trinitarian material emerging in this newly available collection both confirms and substantially builds the case for Gurdjieff’s reliance on the Trinity both as his cosmological linchpin and as his fundamental tie-rod between theory and practice.

²⁰ Azize, *Gurdjieff*, passim.

In his explicit linking of the Trinity to the Law of Three, Gurdjieff hands Christians the tool that has been sorely missing from their Trinitarian toolkit from the start: the praxis. In his definitive response to Rahner's challenge, he indeed "gives the Trinity legs," showing how it is fundamentally spiritually generative in nature— fundamentally concerned with bringing new worlds, new possibilities into existence. Taking up where Beatrice Bruteau leaves off— with her fundamental assertion that "it is the presence of the Trinity as a pattern repeated at every scale of the cosmic order that makes the universe the manifestation of God and itself sacred and holy"— Gurdjieff shows us chapter-and-verse why this is so, how it works, and how to activate this template in one's own life in order to participate in this dynamic flow of reciprocal exchange upon which the cosmic equilibrium depends.

In so doing, he adds the final steppingstone to the pathway already being laid out from the mainstream Christian side by expansive theologians such as Rahner, LaCugna, Panikkar, and Bruteau and takes the inquiry to a whole new level. By uniting mainstream theological approaches to the Trinity with the metaphysical implications of threeness long guarded in esoteric exegesis, he opens to a wider Christian audience the more than nine decades of on-the-ground research already logged in Work circles on how to apply this Law strategically to all aspects of practical life, not simply for personal growth but for strategic social change. In the Trinity thus reimagined and re-energized, he consciously reveals Christianity own hidden Rosetta stone, clearing the pathway toward conscious agency and skillful action in the outer world—perhaps even, in Teilhard de Chardin's celebrated words, toward "harnessing the energy of love."