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PROFILE

G. I. Gurdjieff

By Douglas Groothuis, Ph.D.

Dates: Born January 13, 1866 in Alexandropol, Russia; Died October 29, 1949

Books: *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (autobiography – a movie was made by the same title); *Beelzebub's Tales for his Grandson: All and Everything; Life is Only Real When "I Am"*

Founded: Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in Fontainebleau

Unique Terms: The Fourth Way

INTRODUCTION

Is there an "esoteric Christianity," a teaching that orthodox (or exoteric) belief has missed or suppressed for two millennia, but which offers a deep account of reality and more profound possibilities for self-transformation? Enter the Russian, George Ivanovich (G. I.) Gurdjieff (ca. 1866-1949), proponent of esoteric Christianity, of mysticism, and who started a school of thought called The Fourth Way that still allures many. His follower, philosopher, J. G. Bennett, called him "a very great enigma," given a personality that combined wild living (he was neither a saint nor an ascetic) with a mystical allure that was hard to decipher.

The scholar of new religions, Robert Ellwood, claimed that Gurdjieff "probably influenced Western cults and esotericism more than any other modern figure except Madame Blavatsky [1831-1891],"[1] who was the founder of Theosophy[2] and who also claimed to possess esoteric knowledge of the spiritual realm. But who was Gurdjieff and what did he teach?

HISTORY

Gurdjieff was born in Alexandropol, Russia, to Greek parents. His interest in religion, mysticism, and the miraculous were evident early in his life as he sought out spiritual and religious leaders from various religions. He spent his early adult years traveling through Egypt and other parts of the Middle East, India, and especially Central Asia, learning about various spiritual traditions.[3] Gurdjieff presented himself as "a seeker of truth," who roamed the world in search of ancient wisdom. His autobiography is called *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, and was made into a film in 1979, which helped bring his recondite teachings and reclusive following to a broader public.[4] The story is likely a combination of fact and fiction and portrays the protagonist as a colorful character of many endeavors (sometimes scamming people), an entrepreneur, and, most importantly, a spiritual seeker who eventually became a savant. Gurdjieff was more of a magus figure than a guru, however, since he did not overtly make special metaphysical claims about himself or require devotion or worship, unlike a guru such as Meher Baba (1894-1969) or Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (1931-1990).

After plying his spiritual wares in Mother Russia for a time, Gurdjieff left at the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917. Eventually Gurdjieff settled in France and founded the auspiciously named Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in Fontainebleau in 1922 where he gathered and taught his disciples. Among his devotees were architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, author, P. T. Travers (of Mary Poppins fame), and author Katherine Mansfield, among others. The Russian philosopher and mathematician, P. D. Ouspensky, became a follower for a time and tried to state Gurdjieff's ideas systematically in his book, *In Search of the Miraculous*.[5] The jazz pianist, Keith Jarrett, seems to be a Gurdjieff follower and recorded an album called *Sacred Hymns* taken from Gurdjieff compositions. Other recordings of his compositions are easily available.

Gurdjieff had a strong and entrancing personality, which often alarmed, frightened, or captivated people. Colin Wilson claims he had psychic powers.[6] The editor, A. R. Orage, wrote,

> To meet him was always a test. In his presence every attitude seemed artificial. Whether too deferential, or on the contrary pretentious, from the first moment it was shattered; and nothing

> remained but a human creature stripped of his mask and reveal for an instant as he truly was. This was a merciless experience—and for some impossible to bear.[7]

TEACHINGS

Gurdjieff's influence was primarily achieved through his charisma and books written about him. His turgid and intentionally obscure three-volume work, *Beelzebub's Tales for his Grandson: All and Everything* did not appear until 1959, twelve years after his death. He relates the modest goal for this "first series" of books: "To destroy, mercilessly, without any compromises whatsoever, in the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs and views, by centuries rooted in him, about everything existing in the world."[8] *Meetings with Remarkable Men* was published in 1963 and *Life is Only Real When "I Am"* in 1975 in the United States.[9]

Gurdjieff's teaching was known as "the fourth way." Put roughly, the first three were (1) the way of the fakir (bodily discipline) (2) the way of the monk (prayer and meditation) and (3) the way of the yogi (expanding consciousness). Gurdjieff's "fourth way," is, not surprisingly hard to summarize, but was called, "the way of the cunning man." It required "work" on oneself to directly experience one's identity in the present moment. He thought that most people barely exist at all, since they are products of their environment and not self-aware as individuals. Margaret Croydon noted that

> Unlike other traditions, the Fourth Way requires no commitment to a guru, saint or idol, or adherence to rituals practiced in temple, ashram or commune. Practitioners need not give up home, job or, family or eat certain foods and abstain from others.[10]

Gurdjieff taught that people are in a state of being "asleep." We function automatically and habitually, which keeps us from a truer and purer awareness of our being and the world. As Wilson puts it, "At its simplest level, Gurdjieff's 'work' is an attempt to gain control of one's own life than being a leaf tossed around by the wind."[11] As Ouspensky put it, we live in the basement instead of ascending to the higher stories of a building. The answer to this stupor is to learn to find the true "I" in all circumstances. To that end, Gurdjieff taught various "exercises" to awaken the self to itself. Some involved complex physical movements accompanied by mental concentration on the self. In this, he was likely influenced by the whirling dervishes of Sufism. These develop one's consciousness. Those who came to Gurdjieff for spiritual counsel at his Institute were often put to simple physical labor, which he thought could cause them to concentrate the mind properly on one thing. They were also subjected to various techniques to jar them from everyday sleep into supposed higher levels of consciousness.

For Gurdjieff, there are four levels of consciousness: (1) sleep, which is merely subjective (2) waking consciousness, which is mostly a kind of an awake slumber in which one does not truly know oneself (3) self-remembering in which we are aware of both ourselves and our environment in an intense manner, and (4) objective consciousness "a constant state in which the mind actually perceives objective reality all the time."[12]

Gurdjieff helped introduce the Enneagram[13] to the West through the exposition of Ouspensky. While its origins are murky, the Enneagram is a circular diagram "with an equilateral triangle and an irregular hexagram inside which touch the circle at nine points," which are numbered.[14] It is originally an occult divination device, but has come to be used for personality assessment, even by many errant Christians in recent decades.[15]

Colin Wilson (1931-2013), the British author, was a follower of Gurdjieff and predicted that his insights into the human condition would be found to be on a par with the genius of Freud, Darwin, and Newton.[16] The prediction remains unfilled, although Gurdjieff has his loyal followers even long after his death in 1949.

Gurdjieff's teaching is well-known for being hard to know. This is the appeal of esoteric teaching of a spiritual bent. While the masses are content with simple religion or have no spiritual interests, the cognoscenti press on into the higher mysteries. Esotericism thus embodies the Gnostic spirit of claiming special knowledge and the essence of Jesus' teaching withheld from most. Gnosticism[17] was a philosophical movement that developed at least a hundred years and fifty after the death and resurrection of Jesus. It claimed, without historical evidence or philosophical credence, to reveal the esoteric core of His teachings that is not recorded in the New Testament. That teaching is that salvation is found within, not through faith in Christ.

There is no mass appeal in Gurdjieff's teaching, and his writings cater to intellectuals who have the patience to read difficult, if not impenetrable, books, and to engage in odd "exercises" to reach

higher levels of consciousness. Those inclined may become students of Gurdjieff-Ouspensky (or G-O) schools.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Is there an esoteric Christianity, one buried beneath the surface of historic orthodoxy? Jesus sometimes taught in a way that confused people. He seemed to be keeping something from them. Was that some esoteric inner teaching? When asked by His disciples why He spoke in obscure parables, Jesus replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them" (Matthew 13:11). However, in verses 18-23, Jesus explains the meaning of the parable of the sower to His disciples. Therefore, anyone who reads Matthew, chapter 13, will understand the meaning; it is not hidden. Thus, while Jesus confused or befuddled some for a time, He did not ultimately withhold an esoteric meaning not found in the Scriptures themselves. So, we are in the same blessed category as Jesus' disciples.

> But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it (Matthew 13:16-17).

Jesus sometimes tells people not to speak of a miracle He has performed. This has been called "the Messianic secret" and is especially evident in the Gospel of Mark (see Mark 1:43-45). But again, the secret was only for a time, since He also did miracles publicly and appealed to them to ground his identity as the Messiah (Matthew 11:1-11). Moreover, one can read all about it in the four Gospels. Nothing is little. In fact, Jesus proclaimed, "'I have spoken openly to the world,' Jesus replied. 'I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret'" (John 18:20). That is, Jesus did not finally keep the gospel from anyone, although His method of teaching was sometimes indirect or allusive as this verse teaches: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (Matthew 4:23).

Gurdjieff's teaching utterly lacks the concept of grace or the idea of a loving and just God. His "esoteric Christianity" was *erroneous Christianity*, since it lacked both concepts. It was not Christianity at all, but a counterfeit. While Gurdjieff was right that most people are spiritually unaware of higher realities, he was wrong in thinking that people can extricate themselves from this stupor by their own efforts. Nor did he identify the fundamental problem of the human condition as sin against God (Isaiah 59:2). "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Authentic Christianity claims that we are not *spiritually asleep* but *spiritually dead* in our sins and, thereby, absolutely incapable of redeeming ourselves. The apostle Paul pulls no punches. In writing the church at Ephesus, he declares:

> As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3; see also Romans 3:9-20).

Because of our sinfulness, we are captivated by a spirit that is disobedient to God, and we are worthy of God's holy wrath. Paul identified this as Satan (2 Corinthians 4:4). Men and women are estranged from God by their sin and under the dominion of the devil. No amount of "work on oneself" can overcome this twin predicament. Gurdjieff notwithstanding, there are fundamentally two kinds of consciousness— (1) a consciousness deceived by sin and Satan and (2) a consciousness redeemed through Jesus Christ. The prophet Jeremiah explains the dichotomy. My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jeremiah 2:13).[18]

If we forsake God, then we are thrown back on our own inadequate resources, "broken cisterns that cannot hold water." This is a deceived consciousness. Although we are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26), the self is sullied by sin. Therefore, Jesus said that

> What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person (Mark 7:20-23).

A redeemed consciousness is the one that comes to Christ by faith, having repented of one's sins and desire to live apart from Christ's lordship. In Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul affirms the gospel:

> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus…For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:4-10; see also Titus 3:5-6).

Neither good works or nor heightened level of consciousness are the basis of salvation. That is found only in the grace of God shown through Christ and received by faith in what Christ has done for us. In one sense, Christianity is easy, as Francis Schaeffer observed

> We must realize that Christianity is the easiest religion in the world, because it is the only religion in which God the Father and Christ and the Holy Spirit do everything. God is the Creator; we have nothing to do with our existence or the existence of other things. We can shape other things, but we cannot change the fact of existence. We do nothing for our salvation because Christ did it all. We do not have to do anything.[19]

In another sense, being a Christian is difficult and demanding. This is because just as we realize we cannot save ourselves; we realize that as creatures and as sinners, we are not meant to live autonomously of God. We must follow and submit to him alone. As Jesus asked, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? (Luke 6:46). Schaeffer notes that one is faced with a decision.

> When the person comes to see that there are good and sufficient reasons [for Christianity], then he or she is faced with a problem; either they bow before those good and sufficient reasons, and bow to the Person behind the reasons, or they refuse to bow.[20]

Gurdjieff never bowed.

Gurdjieff had a remarkable personality that left a strong impression on acquaintances and students, but he is hardly remarkable compared to Jesus Christ. Jesus, the God-Man, began his preaching career with a call to personal change, "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). He and his apostles called for *metanoia*, a Greek word for a total change of mind, a turning from self to God's salvation through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. Unlike Gurdjieff, Jesus preached that the answer to spiritual bondage was not within oneself, but outside oneself.

> Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Notes

1 Robert Ellwood, Jr. *Religious and Spiritual Groups in America* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1973), 159.
2 Viola Larson, "Theosophy," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2001). A complete collection of Profiles (almost 600 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at: https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/theosophyprofile.pdf
3 Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 25 Oct. 2021, https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Ivanovitch-Gurdjieff. Accessed 12 July 2022.
4 I wrote a tract that several friends of mine and I distributed at the showing of the film in Eugene, Oregon, in about 1980. The text is in Douglas Groothuis, "Gurdjieff," *Christianity that Counts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995).
5 P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949). See also, P. D. Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way* (New York: Vintage, 1971).
6 Colin Wilson, *The Occult: A History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 395-400.
7 Quoted in William J. Pederson, *Those Curious New Cults* (New Haven, CN: Keats Publishing, 1973), 198.
8 Gurdjieff, G. I. *Life Is Real Only Then, When "I Am"* (p. 3). Rare Treasure Editions. Kindle Edition.
9 The Kindle version claims that *Life is Only Real, When "I Am*," was first published in 1934, but I cannot verify this as an English edition.
10 Margaret Croydon, "Getting in Touch with Gurdjieff," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1979, https://www.nytimes.com/1979/07/29/archives/getting-in-touch-with-gurdjieff.html. This is an excellent introduction to Gurdjieff and his movement.
11 Wilson, *The Occult,* 403.
12 Ibid., 397.
13 Marcia Montenegro, "Enneagram," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2020). A complete collection of Profiles (over 600 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at: https://www.watchman.org/Enneagram.pdf.
14 Don and Joy Veinot, Marcia Montengro, *Richard Rohr and the Enneagram Secret* (Wonder Lake, IL: MCOI Publishing, 2020), 21.
15 For a thorough explanation and critique, see Veinot and Montengro, *Richard Rohr and the Enneagram Secret*.
16 Wilson, *The Occult*, 410.
17 Douglas Groothuis, "Gnosticism," *Profile Notebook*. This Profile is available at: https://www.watchman.org/files/ProfileGnosticism.pdf
18 Christian counselor, Larry Crabb, wrote an insightful book on this dynamic called *Inside Out*, updated edition (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2013).
19 Schaeffer, Francis A. *The God Who Is There* (The IVP Signature Collection) (p. 203). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.
20 Ibid., 203-204.

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