

Makhabbad Maltabarova

Volume 33

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Western Esotericism and Islamic Mysticism

*Rethinking the Place of Sufism
in the Work of George Gurdjieff*



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Edited by Bertram Schmitz

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To Saeed

Foreword

The life of George Gurdjieff, a spiritual teacher and writer of Greek origin born in the Caucasus, is difficult to research. There are many questions regarding his birthdate and the early years of his activity. The area of his intensive journeys and stays includes Alexandropol, Kars, Tiflis, Central Asia, Iran, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Istanbul, and finally Paris. Gurdjieff lived in a turbulent time of revolutions and wars. However, this period was also the time of fascination with the Orient, numerous pilgrimages in “exotic” lands, and the establishment of different institutions and organizations for spiritual development, including Gurdjieff’s own Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. His ideas did not initially produce great interest among scholars, though the situation has changed during the last twenty years. Such recent interest can probably be explained, among other factors, by the still growing and forming field of research in “Western Esotericism.” His system is located among such giants of modern esotericism as Helena Blavatsky, the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, and Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the Anthroposophical Society. This Russian-speaking emigrant from the Caucasus has thus become an important figure in the history of Western esotericism.

The present work allows us to see the topic of Gurdjieff and Sufism from a new perspective, though it is Gurdjieff who is placed at the center of the work. Makhabbad Maltabarova suggests that Gurdjieff’s case is useful and important in understanding the environment in which Sufism was perceived as an exotic tradition. The author supposes that there is a universalist version of Sufism in Gurdjieff that has abundantly been described by scholars, a version

that has not been properly questioned and has thus made the issue of the relation between Gurdjieff and Sufism more problematic. The author, however, deals with the issue in a new way, focusing on concept of the self and its development both in Gurdjieff and in the Sufi tradition. In doing so, Maltabarova touches an important problem within the Gurdjieff studies, namely a lack of literature analyzing his teaching as a complex system with focus on his own written works. One should also consider the peculiarities of Gurdjieff's language, not to mention the vast scale of his magnum opus and linguistic issues. How Maltabarova manages these challenges is impressive. It can clearly be noticed how comfortable she feels with Beelzebub despite Gurdjieff's "bulky" terminology and numerous neologisms. I have benefited much through many conversations with the author about Gurdjieff and his method.

Maltabarova also consistently discusses Sufism in its classical and modern manifestations, applying a high level of international scholarship. The author examines Sufi interpretations of the self and shows how crucial the topic of self-discipline in Islamic mysticism is. She describes the idea of *nafs* (soul, ego) and situates it within both the scriptural and mystical interpretations, referring to the Quran and medieval Sufi poets and philosophers. Focusing on the dominance of practice, she discusses general and specific Sufi practices. Illustrating how modern epistemologies of the self influenced both the perception of Sufism in the West and in the works of Gurdjieff, the author compares modern, Gurdjieff's and Sufi attitudes to the self and its development.

From a perspective of comparative religion, Gurdjieff's system is open for further interpretations. Moreover, his personality deserves a deeper study. This book is highly recommended not only to those with an interest in Gurdjieff but also to readers with an interest in modern spirituality, those who want to understand how intellectual and spiritual life intertwined in the early twentieth century – an environment in which both Western and Eastern

heritages coexisted. How to cope with the much richer religious environment today is an important question for many contemporaries interested in finding balance in life. Both Gurdjieff and Sufism offer noteworthy solutions in this regard.

Bertram Schmitz (Jena, 2022)

Acknowledgments

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Some abridged parts of the text have already been published in the article "The Concept of Human Self: George Gurdjieff's Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson" (*Correspondences* 7/2 [2019]: 441–464) and in "Reading Western Esotericism: George Gurdjieff and His 'Cunning' Esotericism" (*Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 11/2 [2020]: 179–196). I am thankful to these publishers for permitting me to use the updated materials published by them. Specifically, to Dr. Aren Roukema (University of British Columbia), who was a courteous correspondent during the publication process.

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Abbreviations

Q – The Quran, followed by the sura and verse number. All references to the Quran in the current work are from A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, first published in 1955.

Beelzebub – *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson: An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man*, first published in 1950.

M – *Mathnawí of Jalálu'ddín Rúmí*, ed. and trans. R. A. Nicholson, 8 vols., London: Luzac & Co., 1925–1940. First comes the book's number, after the verse number.

The Remembrance – *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife/Kitáb dhikr al-mawt wa – ma ba'dahu, Book XL of the Ihya' 'ulum al-din*. Translated by T.J. Winter. Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1989.

Ar. – Arabic

Gr. – Greek

Per. – Persian

Rus. – Russian

Notes on transliteration

Transliteration for Arabic and Persian words follows the system of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). Transliterations in the titles of works in Arabic and Persian published in Western languages as well as in cited references are preserved. For the purpose of being reader friendly, diacritics are not given to personal names, place names, nor names of organizations.

