



DARU'L-MASNAVI OF THE MEVLEVI ORDER

Why Gurdjieff's "Fourth Way" Teachings are not Compatible with the Mevlevi Sufi Way

by Ibrahim Gamar, 11/6/04, revised 12/3/03

The Present Confusion

The following article is intended to share information, based on the author's conclusions after studying this subject for many years. Though it may be controversial, the intent is to stimulate respectful discussion—not angry debate. And the aim is certainly not to blame or condemn individuals currently involved in practices based on Gurdjieff's teachings. After all, a number of contemporary Mevlevi in Western countries were themselves trained through such teachings to some extent, and report that it was quite helpful in preparing them for the Mevlevi dervish path.

There has been much confusion for decades about the so-called "sufi origins" of Gurdjieff's teachings, beliefs that Gurdjieff himself was a sufi (of the "blame-seeking" [silmâkatî] kind, as some have speculated) and assumptions that the spiritual training he gave to his students was "dervish training" and that the movement/exercises he taught were "dervish dance movements."

This confusion has been increased by some of Gurdjieff's disciples themselves, such as Ouspensky, who apparently believed that the Mevlevi tradition was the source of Gurdjieff's teachings¹ and J. G. Bennett, who believed that the Khwajagan sufi masters of Central Asia, the forerunners of the strictly Islamic Naqshbandi sufi tradition, were closely linked with the mysterious source of Gurdjieff's teachings—the "Sarmâr Brotherhood."²

Others have gone to authentic Muslim sufi teachers and added to the confusion by hoping to find the roots of Gurdjieff's teachings in the Islamic sufi tradition; as a result, such seekers have been disappointed by finding "merely religious" Islamic mystical teachings. And some Muslim sufi teachers have been confused by such seekers (who sometimes have an impressive level of karmic-like self-development) but who have very little interest in Islamic praying and are actually hoping to find "esoteric teachings" or "secret Masters" with paranormal powers.

In addition, there are Western sufi teachers, who continue to encourage their followers to combine sufi training with Gurdjieff teachings and spiritual practices, including some affiliated with the Mevlevi tradition. There is also at least one "Fourth Way" group in which members, after being trained to do the complicated Gurdjieff movement/exercises, are then taught to do the whirling practice of Mevlevi dervishes as well as the Mevlevi Whirling Prayer Ceremony (Sama').

Idries Shah, who wrote numerous books on sufism was another author who contributed to this confusion, by suggesting in many of his books that Gurdjieff's teachings (as well as most of the esoteric/occult teachings in Europe involving alchemy, numerology, Tarot cards, etc.) had its origins in sufi teachings. Like most Occultists³ Shah maintained that esoteric wisdom is independent of "mere religion" and often disguised in an "exoteric religious" form. As a result, he taught that sufism is independent of Islam.

Oscar Ichazo, a Bolivian and founder of the Arica school of esoteric training (which included teachings based on the Enneagram, an esoteric symbol first taught publicly by Gurdjieff), originally claimed to be a "Sufi Master" when he began to teach in Chile in the late 1960's. Ichazo claimed that his teachers were fellow initiates of the same secret tradition contacted by Gurdjieff, which Ichazo also claimed was centered in Afghanistan. Subsequently, however, he stated that his teaching was closely related to the alchemists, the Knights Templar, Martinists, and the Theosophical teachings of Madame Blavatsky⁴ as well as to the mysterious source of Gurdjieff's teachings.

Numerous other authors have contributed to the belief that the origins of sufism are to be found in "esoteric/occult" traditions. For example, the former leader of the "International Sufi Order," Pir Vilayat Khan claimed that sufism originated in the ancient Greek Mystery Schools.⁵

Another source of confusion is the existence of semi-secret religions in the Middle East whose origins are non-Islamic or incompatible with Islam that are sometimes claimed to be "sufi" or whose members are sometimes called "dervishes." Some of these are the Mandaeans, Druze, Ismailis, Alevis, Nasarayi, Yazidis, Bektašis, and Ahl-i Haqq. Some of these same secret religions were also named by Theosophists more than a hundred years ago as related the source of Theosophical teachings and its "secret Masters."

Sufism is Islamic Mysticism

First, it needs to be clarified that sufism is the mystical dimension of Islam. To use the word "sufism" to mean a universal spirituality that pre-dates Islam is to rob the term of its meaning and to make it equivalent to the word "mysticism." Mysticism can be defined as experiential or intuitive understanding of spiritual realities beyond intellectual understanding. Therefore, mysticism can take religious forms (spiritual experiences of feeling close to God) or non-religious forms (such as spiritual experiences involving nature). In this sense, the mysticism of the Islamic tradition is not to be confused with that of "asceticism" in Arabic and a Muslim who practices it is not necessarily a "sufi." Islamic mysticism was first called "sufism" in Latin, then "sufism" in English. Traditional sufi orders that are well-known in the West are the Mevlevi, Chisti, Naqshbandi, Qadri, Rifa'i, Khalwati, and Shadhili traditions—all of which are Islamic religious-mystical paths.

Although Western academics (called Orientalists) of the past were reluctant (for more than a hundred years) to allow Islam to have its own mystical dimension, and usually claimed that sufism was "borrowed" from other traditions (such as Neoplatonism, Yoga, etc.), most Western scholars of Islam today have been acknowledging that authentic sufism is deeply Islamic and inspired by Qur'anic verse and the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be peace).

While few Westerners would accept the idea that the mystical teachings of a Hasidic teacher could be independent of Judaism and the Bible, yet many readily accept the idea that the mystical teachings of a "sufi teacher" can be independent of Islam and the Qur'an.⁶ This is because of the negative attitudes about Islam, the Qur'an, and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that have existed in the West since the Crusades. Westerners prefer to believe that the beautiful, profound, and inspiring teachings of sufism are not dependent upon the religion of Islam.

As a result, many people who are involved with Westernized sufi groups affiliated with more "tolerant" Islam (such as the Sufi Order of the Americas, or the International Sufi Order, which is called the "Ishraqi Order") teach that the Sufi Movement and the Sufi Ruhaniyat Society and the Mevlevi sufi tradition of Turkey and the former Ottoman Empire, tend to have little interest in what they view as the "exoteric trapings" of sufism (meaning Islamic beliefs and practices) and are inclined to believe that the mysticism they are studying is something universal that transcends particular religions, and something that pre-dates the Islamic revelation. They tend to view "universal sufi teachings" as not conflicting with ancient esoteric/occult teachings that have been reformulated in recent centuries such as alchemy, Rosicrucianism, Tarot, Theosophy, Gurdjieffism, etc.

At the same time, a number of sufi masters (shaykhs) of these same traditions in India, Pakistan, and Turkey have long been masters and praying and praying that the Western followers of their sufi traditions will eventually become pious muslims. This has led to major misunderstandings and disappointment.

Gnosticism

In order to understand how the Occult tradition of mysticism is radically different than the Abrahamic religious traditions of mysticism (such as Islamic sufism, Catholic/Orthodox Christian mysticism, Jewish Hasidic mysticism) it is necessary to understand that most teachings of occultism are based on a secret theology involving Gnosticism.⁷ This term refers to a very old, secretive, and revolutionary spiritual movement whose theology is so contrary to orthodox religion that it has usually been disguised in different forms.⁸ For example, Gurdjieff claimed that his teaching was "esoteric Christianity."⁹

The neutral terms "gnosis" and "gnostic" that have generic meanings of "intuitive spiritual knowledge" and "intuitive spiritual knower" and are equivalent to the Arabic sufi terms for "mystical knowledge" [ma'rif] and "mystic knower" [ârif] should not be confused with the historical term "Gnosticism." Readers of this article should be aware that they might not comprehend the nature of Gnosticism and the seriousness of its challenge to the Abrahamic religions without studying more about it in encyclopedia articles and books on the subject.

Gnosticism today is the continuation of an ancient "underground" movement that has usually taken the form of Dualism. Followers of Gnosticism who understand its teachings have typically viewed the Creator of the material universe with contempt.¹⁰ This contempt was expressed in the dualistic doctrines of Manicheism and "Christian Gnosticism" which taught that the God of the material world was evil and inferior ("moon god") called the "Demurge" [na'audhu bi illâh]—let us take refuge in Allah and seek His forgiveness for being so explicit about this), and that the true goal of the spiritual seeker is to find a way to escape the "prison of matter" and the "sub-lunar" world and reach salvation in the "Realm of Light" (the Pleroma). Saviours were periodically sent down from the "Realm of Light" to offer the knowledge of salvation, or "gnosis," to seekers who had the potential to escape the material world. However, only a tiny minority called "pneumatics" had souls which could survive death and return to the Realm of Light. Some, called "psychics" had the potential to develop such a soul. The great majority of humanity were called "hypocrites," and had no hope of survival after death.

In 1875 Madame Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society in America and taught esoteric teachings supposedly inspired by "secret masters" who lived in Tibet. Among the teachings of Theosophy is the assertion that God as worshipped in the Hebrew Bible is an inferior "moon god" [na'audhu bi illâh]. Theosophists were instructed to cover themselves from the "harmful rays" of moonlight while sleeping. This antipathy toward Judaism was a revival of the attempts by "Christian Gnostics" during the early part of the Christian era to eliminate the Hebrew scriptures from the "Christian Bible." In many ways, Theosophy is a modern form of Gnosticism (but in a monistic, not dualistic, manner). It is known that the teachings of Theosophy were influential in major Russian cities during Gurdjieff's life there and that Theosophical ideas are a major part of his teaching.⁹ Gurdjieff spoke about "secret Masters," except that he claimed they were in Afghanistan.¹⁰

Gnosticism and the Teachings of Gurdjieff

Among the strange teachings of Gurdjieff is the assertion that human beings do not have souls, but have to receive knowledge and training by being part of an "esoteric school" in order to "grow a soul" (or "astral body") that can then survive death for a period of time:

"You know what the expression 'astral body' means. But the systems with which you are acquainted may use this expression also. It is not the same as our 'astral body'—that is quite wrong. What may be called the 'astral body' is obtained by means of fusion, that is, by means of terribly hard inner work and struggle. Man is not born with it. And only very few men acquire an 'astral body.' If it is formed it may continue to live after the death of the physical body, and it may be born again in another physical body... Fusion, inner unity, obtained by means of 'friction,' by the struggle between 'yes' and 'no' in man."¹¹

Gurdjieff taught that most human beings are mere "slugs" with no souls and that following death their remaining psychic energy is "food for the Moon." This teaching can be understood as a reference to the doctrine in Gnosticism that the material world keeps human beings (but not all, just the few who possess "sparks of light") trapped in bodies so as to prevent escape. The realm of Darkness is depicted as not wanting to let off its captured light to escape back to the realm of Light. Such a follower of Gnosticism seeks to develop an astral body that can escape the "power of the Moon" and become free from the "sub-lunar" material world.¹² This explains another very strange teaching of Gurdjieff: "The way of the development of hidden possibilities is a way against nature, against God."¹³ This means that the seeker following the way of Gnosticism must gain secret knowledge and methods in order to escape the control of the "Demurge." What Gurdjieff called "the Work" is the goal of spiritual Alchemy, the "Great Work" (Magnum Opus); the separation of light from darkness—or in Manichean terms, the liberation of "sparks of light" from being trapped in the dense world of matter.

In Mithraism, an ancient form of Gnosticism, this gnosis involved knowing the "magical passwords" necessary for the soul to pass the planetary guardians ("archons") at each celestial level traveled through the heavens. During later centuries, followers of Gnosticism cultivated a rebellion toward the Christians as worshipped in the Hebrew Bible (such as the second century AD heretic known as Nag Hammadi, Egypt 1945) are full of such scorn, and their delight in what may be called "Gnostic reversal," such as by interpreting the serpent (Satan) in the Garden of Eden as the hero of the story in the Book of Genesis—the Giver of Light (Lucifer) who tries to give the gnosis of Salvation that would elevate humanity to "be as gods," meaning to surpasses the rank of the Jews, who is depicted as an oppressor [na'audhu bi illâh] who acts to prevent "liberation."¹⁴

Gnostical doctrines may have developed in a Jewish form prior to the Christian era; some of these doctrines have continued in esoteric Jewish teachings called Qabbalah (for example, the doctrine about a cosmic disaster) (the "breaking of the vessels") that caused particles of light to be trapped in darkness, and the need to liberate "trapped light" associated with the school of Isaac Luria (beginning in the 16th century). The well-known psychiatrist, Carl Jung, was a modern believer in Gnosticism; he revealed his antipathy to Christian worship very frankly.¹⁵

J. G. Bennett, a follower of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, wrote extensively about the "Demurge." He also taught the strange doctrine (also found in some teachings of Qabbalah) that God needs the help of human beings in order to liberate light from matter and to defeat the power of evil [na'audhu bi illâh]. He wrote:

"The very high intelligence I am postulating is neither human nor divine. It is neither perfect nor infallible, but it vision and its powers far transcend those of the wisest of mankind. I shall call it the 'Demurge.' By keeping the word Demurge for the postulated spirit of the earth, we can put aside, as beyond our grasp, the idea of a deity that created and rules the entire universe. In doing this, we should breathe a sigh of relief... The truth is that the omnipotence of God is a silly idea thought up by men with narrow, logical minds. It must be obvious to anyone whose feelings have not atrophied that love and omnipotence can never be united."¹⁶

He also wrote, following the viewpoint of ancient "Christian Gnosticism": "We might even venture to say that the God of the Old Testament was the Demurge, whereas Jesus looked beyond to the source of Divine Love."¹⁷

A student of J. G. Bennett, A. M. Hodgeon, wrote:

"The Demurge has only an indirect connection to the Source, since it is concerned with long term evolution, not with the state of 'jivanmukti' or liberation within one lifetime.... In fact, spirituality is of two distinct kinds which we call 'liberation' and 'Demurgic.' Teachings which point out this do exist on the planet. They are placed there by conscious sources but generally they are restricted and suppressed by the Demurgic Intelligences because their implications are too upsetting to the status quo."¹⁸

Another student of J. G. Bennett was Pierre Elliot, formerly the Director of Studies of the Gurdjieffian training center called the Claymont Society in West Virginia. In the late 1970's, Suleyman Hayat Loras Dede, an important Mevlevi shaykh from Konya, Turkey, visited Claymont. He was told that Pierre Elliot had claimed to be a "secret master" and to have a "Mevlevi" and "Sufi" teacher. Dede asked him if he demonstrated Gurdjieff's movements/exercises there and probably assumed that it was kind of "hypnotic" training.¹⁹ In October 1979, Suleyman Dede wrote a letter to Mr. Elliot stating, "...because at the same time my brother Sheikh Pierre Elliot is bringing the way of Mevlevi together with the path of Mr. Gurdjieff and Mr. Bennett. Allah wishes that these paths should always be together, and I hope that it will be so."²⁰

An associate of Idries Shah wrote: "Gurdjieff had taught 'movements', a stylized technique which requires extended energies of attention. The association of the G movements and the Mevlevi whirling was perhaps unavoidable, but we shall find reason to suspect presently that the 'movements' have a different source, although G. dressed his disciples in Mevlevi outfits, perhaps for 'misdirection' purposes."²¹ Another associate of Idries Shah wrote a book which mocked the beliefs of Gurdjieff about Mevlevi origins by claiming that an ancient "Babylonian" mannikin with moveable arms and legs used to teach "ancient temple dances" that Gurdjieff claimed to have seen at a "Sarmoung monastery" in Afghanistan.²² It was hidden in a secret underground room of the Mevlevi lodge where Mevlevi Jalaluddin Rumi is buried in Konya, Turkey.

A major exercise taught by Gurdjieff is called "self-remembering." This exercise has been alleged to derive from the sufi practice of "remembering" [zîr]. But there is a major difference between Gurdjieff's method of self-development and self-remembering via the "remembrance of God" (which is not the same as "remembering" in the sense of "remembering" the name of God). The difference is that Gurdjieff's "self-remembering" is a practice of self-enquiry, whereas the sufi "remembrance of God" is a practice of self-forgetting.

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