

Scriptures in the Study of G. I. Gurdjieff and the “Work”

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Introduction

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (c. 1866–1949) and the teaching he founded (the Work or the Fourth Way) are hailed as a major site of contemporary esotericism and the inspiration for aspects of “New Age” spiritualities (Wellbeloved 2005). Yet the academic study of Gurdjieff was slow to develop, and arguably still lags behind that of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Theosophy, or Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy (Petsche 2011). James Webb’s *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Work of G. I. Gurdjieff, P. D. Ouspensky and Their Followers* (Webb 1980) is an important precursor, and James Moore’s impressive *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth* (1991) is the finest “hagiographical” treatment authored by a Work insider. Since the publication of Andrew Rawlinson’s *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions* (1997), the academic approach to Gurdjieff has gained momentum. In the decade leading up to 2021 a body of scholarship has been established (Azize 2013; Pittman 2012; Pecotic and Cusack 2016; Seamon 2020), and in 2021 a group of international scholarly collaborators exists.¹

This issue of *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts, Cultural Histories, and Contemporary Contexts* features five articles focused on the place of texts in the Gurdjieff teaching. In an important sense it germinated at a symposium held at the University of Sydney on 3 December 2019, “Studying G.

1. The group consists of Joseph Azize, Carole M. Cusack, Johanna J. M. Petsche, Vrasidas Karalis and David J. Pecotic (University of Sydney), Steven J. Sutcliffe and John Willmetts (University of Edinburgh), Christian Giudice (University of Gothenburg), Anthony G. E. Blake (DuVernity), David G. Robertson (The Open University, UK), Michael Pittman (Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences), David Seamon (Kansas State University), Ricki O’Rawe (Queens University, Belfast), and Catharine Christof (Loyola Marymount University).

I. Gurdjieff: Scholars and Practitioners in Conversation,” featuring papers by Joseph Azize, Michael Pittman, Vrasidas Karalis, Jeremy Johnson, Steven J. Sutcliffe, David G. Robertson, and Carole M. Cusack. The purpose of this gathering was a more inclusive approach, including analyses of Gurdjieff’s sources and teaching techniques, key texts and contexts for communicating the “message,” and orthodox and heterodox continuations of the Work teaching after his death. The Movements and the music Gurdjieff composed with Thomas de Hartmann (1885–1956) featured (Petsche 2015), and practitioners made up the larger part of the audience.

The first article, Joseph Azize’s “Did Gurdjieff Write Scripture?,” asks if we can gain much from focusing on a category that Gurdjieff did *not* use—scripture—in the interpretation of his writings. Azize discusses the publication and revision processes of the First Series, *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (1999 [1950]) productively in terms of Gurdjieff’s ideas about Objective and Subjective Art.

Michael Pittman’s contribution, “‘Beelzebub in India and Tibet’: Continuing Conversations on the Soul in *All and Everything*,” focuses closely on the text as a guide for the pupil who seeks to acquire a soul through “deliberate suffering and conscious labor [sic]” (Gurdjieff 2008 [1933]). Pittman investigates Gurdjieff’s evaluation of Hinduism and Buddhism with reference to the soul and potential survival after bodily death.

The third article is Carole M. Cusack’s “Pupil Memoirs as Hagiography in the Gurdjieff Work.” This study examines texts by Gurdjieff pupils, including those by Margaret Anderson and Kathryn Hulme, in terms of how they explain the process of learning from Gurdjieff, and memorialise the Master for those who have not met him. The memoirs also provide a model of discipleship for later Work pupils to emulate.

The fourth article, Joseph Azize’s “Gurdjieff Theologos,” tackles major themes in the study of religion, including the nature of God, the soul, the meaning of human life, reincarnation, and divine justice. Azize’s focus here is suffering, and the role it can play in assisting God and transforming the creation, as well as providing a way for individuals to develop spiritually from sleep to wakefulness.

The final contribution to the special issue is David Seamon’s “Setting Forth a Canon of the Gurdjieff Work.” This essay considers what the term “canon” might mean, and how to apply it to the Fourth Way tradition. Seamon concludes that the Gurdjieff canon is an ensemble of texts, methods, and performative media that when, engaged with sincerely and persistently, might facilitate self-transformation psychologically and spiritually.

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