

Teilhard and Gurdjieff: A Conversation Waiting to Happen  
By Cynthia Bourgeault (DRAFT)

They overlapped briefly in Paris in the late 1940s. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, distinguished paleontologist, priest, and Christian mystic, arrived back on home soil on May 3, 1946, after twenty years of exile in China, the last seven spent stranded and virtually incommunicado in the turmoil of World II. He again took up residence in the sixth arrondissement near the Institut catholique, that great Jesuit citadel of higher learning where he had once served on the geology faculty. By his own admission those war years had “made him quite grey,” and he more than old, geology. stitut Catholique near the Luxembourg Gardens of the on quickly resumed his intellectual rounds, reconnecting with friends and colleagues against and the Jardin his place of honor in , lecturing, rebudding de Luxembourg, and again devoted himself to his scientific and spiritual writing.

G.I. Gurdjieff was by then already well ensconced in the city, having moved there full time by 1925, after a near-fatal automobile accident put an end to his dreams of a permanent institute in Fontainebleausome fifteen years earlier in favor of a fulltime writer’s life in the Parisian cafes. From his small apartment a 6 Rue des Colonels Rénard—just over the hill from the Arc de Triomphe and literally under the nose of the German occupying army—he had passed those same war years keeping his small band of followers alive in both body and soul through his fabled, storehouse of blackmarket goods and periodic Babette-like feasts, while contributing whatever else he could to the steering of the planet through those troubled years.

These two luminous beings would coincide in City of Light for three-and-a-half years—perched on their respective banks of the Seine, less than a mile away as the crow flies—until Gurdjieff's death on October 29, 1949 brought their brief window of physical proximity to its end.

I cannot imagine that the two of them actually ever personally met. Not in physical space/time, anyway. The circles they travelled in were simply too different. Back on native ground, Teilhard immediately resumed his connections with the intellectual elite of his time, deeply engaged with the founding of Unesco and still fighting his hopeless battle with the Vatican and his immediate Jesuit superiors in the hopes of ending their censorship of his works. Despite the joy of homecoming, however, it was a dark and ominous time for him, much of it spent sidelined by a major heart attack and abortive trips to New York and Rome. Worn down and literally brokenhearted, he was already intuiting that this time in Paris would be but another brief oasis before the final exile of his life, which would see him all too again on a steamship, this time bound for New York, a mere five years ahead. Gurdjieff, too, was rounding toward his end, finishing his days in a reputedly astonishing burst of teaching and banqueting whose real business, beneath all the revelry, turns out to have been an extraordinary transmission of cosmic love, the full story of which is only now beginning to unfold.

Nor can I really envision their meeting even on a spiritual plane, should some chance physical encounter have thrown them into each other's presence. I imagine that Gurdjieff would have gotten Teilhard far better than vice versa. With his keen eye for the inner being of a person, Gurdjieff would no doubt have picked up

Teilhard's crystalline sincerity, his holiness, the well-etched lines of a life consecrated, *de facto*, to the alchemy of "conscious labor and intentional suffering." That this man had Being is attested to by everyone who met him. Teilhard, by contrast, would most likely have found it more difficult to penetrate the surface of Gurdjieff's freewheeling persona and place a man who did not play by the rules of intellectual discourse, who regarded religion as merely another form of sleep, and who dismissed Teilhard's much vaunted "conscious man" as simply "a machine." In the words of that old Jewish proverb, "A bird may fall in love with a fish, but where will they build their nest?"

And yet, despite their obvious differences in temperament and lifestyle, in my own mind and heart I find them easy to reconcile—far easier than many other more wildly improbable spiritual combinations. Far easier, say, than Gurdjieff and Steiner, or Teilhard and the Traditionalists. What holds them together is far greater than what separates them, and while it may initially take a stretch of imagination to see it, I consider both to be basically on the same wavelength—that is to say, I see them as both on the same side of a metaphysical divide that still invisibly dominates the spirituality of our times. On the one side lies the venerable but crumbling edifice of first axial consciousness, rooted in its fundamental vision of an *individual* ascent to the realm of pure spirit, conceived of as immaterial, symmetrical, and unchanging. On the other side are the dawning glimmers of a second axial consciousness that sees reality as dynamic, energetically interwoven, collective, and implicitly asymmetrical in its underlying structural patterns.

In their own very different ways, Teilhard and Gurdjieff are both heralds of this second axial dawn. That is fundamentally why their work remains so misunderstood and unassimilated within the traditional structures of academic and spiritual discourse, which are still steeped in the premises of first axial *sophia perennis*. They are building on new kind of metaphysical consciousness whose contours are still barely coming into view.

More important to me, however, is that I see them both as my teachers, so much so that I would find it hard to know what I know or teach as I teach without the steady influence of both of their beings on my own. And it is not just in the their respective teachings alone, but in the dialogue between them that the full visionary wingspan is revealed. Both Gurdjieff and Teilhard in their own ways writhed at what G called “the bon-ton literary language,” the intellectual fashion and academic fashion of his time (and still, even more so, unto our own) which keeps knowledge piecemealed in smaller and smaller duckponds, unable to engage or cross-pollinate lest the spectre of “dilettantism” rear its head. But men were boldly synthetic thinkers; they took no truck with artificial boundaries. They realized that the line between science and religion, anthropology, ethics, were as arbitrary and dangerous as those maps designating countries on the sphere of the world. If we survive at all, something far better than that is needed. And this is what they keep pointing toward, and what space must be opened to accommodate. For the sake of out one world.

It is this conversation that my book proposes to engage.

(Some ideas to be fleshed out as chapters: much rougher in my mind at this point):

First of all, both men begin their metaphysics by eschewing the phony dichotomy between matter and spirit that has dominated perennial metaphysics for two millennia. And they collapse it on the side of matter. For Gurdjieff, *everything* is material; it is simply a question of finer and finer energies as one ascends the ray of creation. For Teilhard, matter and spirit are *phases* of a single trajectory of evolution, with increasing concentration and complexification yielding greater manifest capacities of spirit. Emphatically, spirituality is not found by turning away from matter, but rather, from plunging into it, liberating and transforming. Here is as real as any other point in the pleroma. We must begin where we are.

True, Gurdjieffian cosmology makes use of a “great chain of being,” a mainstay of perennial philosophy metaphysics: an implicit “ascent” to the holiest realms. But note carefully: unlike traditionalist maps, where these realms are regarded as moving from material to spiritual (earth, imaginal, angelic, logocic, and glory seat on traditionalist; gross, subtle, causal, nondual), in Gurdjieff, the ray is indeed a ray of *creation*; the orders are within the solar system: God undifferentiated, all solar systems, our solar system, the sun, the planets, the earth, the moon. In such a way, the map gives space to address the complaint of cosmologists Joel Primack and Nancy Abrahms, that we do not need to be constructing our cosmic maps at a 90 degree angle from our known universe; they do not veer off into some “spiritual” plane superstructured above our physical earth; it is all somehow right here, to be explored within the infinite dimensionality of is-ness itself.

Second, both men have a profound sense for this system as dynamic, moving somewhere in time and space. It is not, as according to old maps, simply an “exitus” and “reditus,” or a “fall” into form and temporality to be remediated by an return into a eternal changelessness; the very fabric of the structure involves a dynamism. For Teilhard, this principle is contained in evolution, and arrow governing and drawing, so that God is not in “the above,” so much as in the “ahead.” The dynamism is not simply a perturbation in a field whose essential and highest nature is stasis. It is part of the stuff of the universe itself. It is asymmetry, convergence, directionality, driving things to authentic new manifestations. The creation is a work in process and where it winds up is not merely or ever the same as where it started out. The very nature of the journey itself forever changes and stamps the outcome.

Of course, the thermodynamics of the dynamic universe, as we know it, is contained in Gurdjieff’s brilliant renditions of the Law of three and Law of seven. The law of three suggests of course that all new creation, all function, is the result of three independent strands, known as “affirming,” “denying,” and “reconciling.” And whose interweaving is an authentic new creation. Once in place, the law of seven describes its journey through process, and the intersection of these laws, encrypted in the enneagram for those who can read its inner lines, gives the protocol for resonant new creation touched off in many simultaneous octaves. The law depicts the how

and the why of a universe constantly moving ahead in new combinations and conscious directionality.

Teilhard never heard of the Law of Three, and in fact stayed well clear of even the most obvious symbolic bridge to it in Christian dogma, the Trinity—understandably, because this doctrine, implicitly related to the Law of three in its esoteric essence, had become so overlaid in his own time with theological speculation on the inner life of God that it set him away from the very vibrancy of the world he was intuitively trying to discern. My sense, however, is that the Teilhardian synthesis is inherently ternary in its understanding (part of the reason his cosmology continues to be so vexing and threatening to old-school metaphysics is that these are based on dualistic principles and Teilhard's take is intuitively ternary.) I have laid this out in more detail in my article "Teilhard, the Trinity, and The Law of three," so here I need merely summarize that when the essentially ternary nature of the evolution Teilhard is describing is seen for what it is, the whole process comes into metaphysical wholeness. "A ternary swan in a binary duckpond" is how I have described him, chafing against the inherently dualistic and static symmetry of the old neoplatonic metaphysics on which so much of Christian theological thought came to be developed. Teilhard was inherently marching to a different drummer. Gurdjieff lets us hear its beat.

Third, both men intuit that this sprawling created dimension is still in some sense whole and one. Long before the term "self-specifying" system was coined, Teilhard himself realized—and led as his first point—that the universe is intrinsically whole, that all parts are related to all other, and that there is an inherent oneness and listening, and self-correction within the parts. Gurdjieff was hearing this same message in his understanding of "reciprocal feeding:" that each level of being feeds, receives, or contributes to a bringing forth and homeostasis of the whole. In fact, his whole teaching is based on the fact of the human being, having messed up the marching orders, now imperiling the whole cosmos

And because of this, both men, astonishingly, have a view of human purpose that is essentially collective. Unlike so much of axial metaphysics and spirituality, the ultimate goal is not the personal salvation of the monad so much as the harmony and building of the whole cosmos. For Teilhard, this is powerfully contained in the sense—the original mystical vision that occurred to him in the trenches in WWI of humanity as a single body, moving toward a higher collectivity, a new manifestation of the mystical body of Christ, or the whole earth imbued as that body. For Gurdjieff, the idea is most powerfully contained in his Five Obligations, where in particular, one becomes conscious to "ease the sorrow of his endlessness" . Or morem that one perfects oneself "so as to aid in the perfecting of another." Even for Gurdjieff, the evolution was for the building up of the entire planetary system, and specifically, the moon, that one could feed with conscious labor or by one's unconscious death. To the extent that the created universe is in some sense the soul of God laid bare, all parts and only in the all is that great emergent property of love that makes the whole thing touch and be the heart.

Nor did either man shrink from the collective. During World War II, as other teachers fled to less pressured conditions and insisted on peace and quiet as the conditions in which the work could happen, Gurdjieff stayed right there at the front in Paris. And Teilhard too, placed himself as a stretcher bearer, did his work in the grey of Peking, and did not evade the essential conditions for the voluntary transformation of love—which, as commentators observe, was virtually pouring out of each man at the end, in the sheer energy of the same thing, transfigured in the heart. Both left the planet as servants of that “amorization” which carried the heart of man to entirely new places. In their own way they insisted on a spirituality which moved away from private, personal individual attainment to a free flowing sense of love, the *hanbledzoin* of the work.

Both affirmed that the purpose of work on oneself was that a person might ultimately be able to call himself a Christian, not just in word but in deed as well.

II.

II Now I write about these men as essentially members of the same conscious circle, despite the obvious superficial differences in their approaches. I would say that this divides the waters, placing on one side the essentially the “perennial philosophy approach” as it is carried forward in Steiner, traditionalism, and levels of consciousness of the maps of Ken Wilber. On the other side is incarnation, dynamism, Boehme, and the collective. And it is in this sphere that I find them soul brothers and containing the path of *advaita* in motion, or dynamic unity.

The men are not still sitting down and learning from each other, of course. But if we take the metaphor seriously, with the work embodied in the students, these bodies have information that could enliven and inform each other.

From Gurdjieff, Teilhard could profitably learn:

- 1 The Law of Three, which would do so much to tie his metaphysics together.
2. The levels of consciousness, so that the attainment of self-reflexive consciousness is seen as merely a beginning, not an end, to a journey that leads to REAL consciousness, tied not to ego, personality, or habits (all the stuff that Teilhard is blind to)
3. Intersubjectivity
4. A more powerful and embodied approach to his formula for “harnessing the energy of love.”

From Teilhard, Gurdjieff might learn to draw more powerfully on devotion, from the sense of the universe as “thou” and from a trust that grace is not merely attained at the second shock, or God removed from the body of this world, but is rising up from the very materiality to meet us and carry us along. In the end, it was Gurdjieff’s fear of falling victim to the sentimental, unreflected and formative dimensions of religion that made him perhaps too afraid of reaching out from that place of faith to

a God, a love, who can come and manifest at any level to carry the planet along according to the holograph that is there, embedded in reality from the start...