

Fasting in Christianity and Gurdjieff

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Abstract

The use of fasting by the Greek-Armenian mystic G.I. Gurdjieff (c. 1866–1949) has never been studied. Although it was not as important in Gurdjieff's system as his better known methods (e.g. self-observation and the sacred dances), fasting nonetheless numbered among the techniques he employed for 'self-remembering'. Over a period of about twenty-five years, Gurdjieff variously stated that fasting could be used for developing the will, altering the tempo of one's metabolism, curing disease and cleansing the body and for self-study. Gurdjieff also had unique, if unscientific, ideas on how to fast. This article gathers the relevant material, some of which has never been published, and offers a preliminary assessment and evaluation of the significance of Gurdjieff's ideas about fasting. It is fair to say that, for Gurdjieff, fasting is important because eating is important in his system and was used as a means for development of consciousness or 'self-remembering'. Then, according to Gurdjieff, the development of consciousness will, by a sort of providence, produce 'higher hydrogens' available for the trogoautoegocratic process.

Keywords

Gurdjieff, fasting, self-remembering.

Introduction

The use of fasting by the Greek-Armenian mystic G.I. Gurdjieff (c. 1866–1949) has never been studied. Although it was not as important in Gurdjieff's system as his better known methods (for example, self-observation and the sacred dances), fasting nonetheless numbered among the techniques he employed for 'self-remembering'. Over a period of about twenty-five years, Gurdjieff variously stated that fasting could be used for

developing the will, altering the tempo of one's metabolism, curing disease and cleansing the body and for self-study. Gurdjieff also had unique, if unscientific, ideas on how to fast. This article gathers the relevant primary material, some of which has never, or has only recently been published, and offers a preliminary assessment and evaluation of the significance of Gurdjieff's ideas about fasting.¹

It is noticeable that certain aspects of Gurdjieff's legacy have overshadowed others. His outsize personality looms large in the literature, as do the puzzles attending his early life and the origins of his system. Gurdjieff's apparent reticence to discuss these matters has only fuelled the interest. His enigmatic allusions to strange journeys in the East and stays in secrecy-shrouded monasteries were probably deliberately designed to obfuscate, possibly in order to weed out the romantics from those who were not interested solely in the practical application of his ideas and methods.² Yet, at the same time, as I have suggested elsewhere, he also used the 'mystic East' in order to surround himself and his teaching with an attractive allure (Azize 2012: 304-305). However, it is ironic that there has been considerable interest in the life and theory of a man who decried the pursuit of theory without practice (Gurdjieff 1950: 415-20).³ A book has been written on Gurdjieff's philosophy, but so far none on his practical methods (Taylor 2007).⁴

It is fair to say that, for Gurdjieff, fasting is important because eating is important in his system. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that the process of eating is central to Gurdjieff's cosmology and esoteric physiology.⁵ The entire universe, for Gurdjieff, is an organism which feeds on itself. Humans, one part of that holistic feeding entity, consume other parts of it, and themselves are consumed by other beings in the universe. This forms what Gurdjieff called the 'trogoautoegocratic process', or the

1. Perhaps at a later date, a comparative study can be made of Gurdjieff's ideas of fasting and asceticism, relating them to other schools of asceticism. On the desirability of such research, see Wimbush and Valantasis, 'Introduction' to Wimbush and Valantasis (1995: xix-xxv).

2. De Salzmann (1985) is, in parts, scathing of those who naively accept the exotic travelogue found in Gurdjieff (1963). See, for example, de Salzmann (1985: xxiv), where he describes one work as 'an incredibly feeble production' for just this reason.

3. For a more systematic critique of theory without practice, see Ouspensky (1949: 64-69), where, at the age of sixty-five, in explaining why 'knowledge' and 'being' must develop together to yield 'understanding', he satirically observes: 'It seems to be considered here that a professor must always forget his umbrella everywhere'.

4. The author is preparing a monograph in Gurdjieff's methods, especially contemplation.

5. Apart from Bennett (1973: 182-93), no studies of the role of eating and digestion in Gurdjieff's system are known to me. Waldberg (1981: 118-24) simply restates Ouspensky (1950: 180-98).

'Reciprocal-feeding of everything that exists' (Gurdjieff 1950: 136-37).⁶ Thus, in the 'Diagram of Everything Living', Gurdjieff defines each class of living creature by what it eats and what eats it (Ouspensky 1949: 322-24).

One might think that a good way to control how one eats is to be able to refrain, for a period, from eating at all (Bartholomew 2008: 82). As we shall see, this idea was not foreign to Gurdjieff, but it was not his immediate concern—it was to use fasting as a means for development of consciousness, or to 'remember oneself' (defined below). Then, according to Gurdjieff, the development of consciousness will, by a sort of providence, produce 'higher hydrogens' available for the trogoautoegocratic process. As Gurdjieff's pupil A.R. Orage put it, using the Russian spelling of Gurdjieff's word, we can 'use the trogoaftoegocratic machine for the development of consciousness' (Orage, in Orage, Morris and Manchester 2013: 132). Indeed, Gurdjieff stated that for human beings (as they should be) 'the fundamental aim and sense of the existence of these beings is that there must proceed through them the transmutation of cosmic substances' (Gurdjieff 1950: 130). In Gurdjieff's scheme, eating and digestion both take place on all manner of different scales throughout the universe (for example, on individual, planetary and universal scales). But to set out, analyse and explain all of this must be the subject of another study. Our concern here is specifically with Gurdjieff's ideas on fasting.

Definitions

One can distinguish fasting from abstinence, although they are related concepts and intertwined in practice. The *Macquarie Dictionary* (5th edition) defines 'fasting' as:

the practice of abstaining from food, for reasons of either health or religion.

It defines 'abstinence' as:

1. forbearance from any indulgence of appetite, especially from the drinking of alcohol... 2. self-restraint, forbearance. 3. the refraining from certain kinds of food for certain periods or on certain days, as from meat on Fridays.

6. The many other references to this process can be located by using Anonymous (2003), which is an index to Gurdjieff (1950). The process is studied at a technical level in the pioneering Buzzell (2006: 222-31), but not in a manner pertinent to this article. The word 'trogoautoegocrat' means 'I eat, self, I, hold' (Orage, in Orage, Morris and Manchester 2013: 115, 119, 336-37, 358). Perhaps the sense is: 'I hold myself together by feeding' (Bennett 1977: 75).

'Fasting' is refusing to take, for a stated period, any food and drink. The stated period in question can be a matter of days or of hours (for example, from midnight to noon, or during the hours of daylight). Even when 'fasting' by omitting one or more meals in the day, it is permitted, in some religions and systems, to have very small portions of food, called 'collations', in place of the meal which is foregone. As one cannot indefinitely do without food altogether, fasting is therefore best defined as 'an intentional restriction of one's intake of food and drink for a period'. This also serves to distinguish fasting from starvation: fasting, according to this definition, is always intentional, whereas no part of the dictionary definition of 'starve' and 'starvation' suggests anything but that it is an involuntary inability to obtain sufficient food.

'Abstinence' is excluding from one's diet nominated categories of food or drink which one would otherwise eat. Typically, but not always, abstinence in the Christian traditions excludes the flesh of mammals and sweet foods and drinks. As Gurdjieff commented almost exclusively upon the Christian traditions of fasting and abstinence, we shall consider them in more detail below.

Medically, the situation is rather different. In his study 'Metabolic Consequences of Starvation', John Hoffer states:

...starvation refers to prolonged inadequate intake of protein, energy, or both. A *fast* or a *total fast* is exclusion of all food energy. However, for other authors, starvation refers to complete deprivation of dietary energy (i.e. a fast), and *semistarvation* to the commoner condition of merely insufficient energy and protein provision. Yet other authors consider any diet restricted to only a few nutrients to be a fast... The term *fast* is also commonly applied to the normal condition of any person after the overnight sleep (1999: 645).

Apart from the evident difference in usage, the most important distinction between starvation and religious and spiritual fasting is not taken into account: the intention of the person fasting. Further, Gurdjieff did not consistently distinguish fasting and abstinence. Thus, in expounding a rather fanciful 'history' of fasting in Christianity, he wrote of 'the custom of periodic fasting, that is, of abstaining at certain times of the year from the consumption of certain edible products' (1950: 1011). Therefore, except insofar as we shall distinguish abstinence from fasting, the *Macquarie Dictionary* definition of 'fasting' is adequate for our purposes and equivalent to what Richard Weindrich and Roy Walford call 'dietary restriction', which can be achieved either by reducing the quantity of food available to the test subjects, or allowing free access for a limited time (1988: 42). We should now define certain other terms from Gurdjieff's system.

'Self-remembering', one of Gurdjieff's most unique contributions to esoteric lore, is the first term to define. It is a relative state, meaning that it is understood relative both to the first broad state of consciousness (sleep),

the second state of consciousness (waking) and the fourth (objective consciousness, in which one is aware of objective reality). One could summarise Gurdjieff's teaching, with some risk of oversimplification, by saying that in sleep one knows nothing but what comes in dreams. In ordinary waking we know the outside world or ourselves but not both simultaneously, and even then, with a compromised clarity. In the third possible state, self-remembering or 'self-consciousness', we know both the external and internal worlds. But in the fourth and highest state, that of objective consciousness, we know reality as it is, becoming entirely objective even to ourselves. The effort of self-remembering can be described as 'the effort to divide one's attention between oneself and one's actions, thoughts, sensations and feelings, so that one becomes conscious of a greater number of one's own psychic and organic functions and of their true nature' (Azize 2013: 192).

Gurdjieff theorised that each human being has seven 'centres'. According to his teachings, most accessible through the work of his student Piotr Ouspensky, the work of the human organism is carried out by seven interrelated brains. It is the higher emotional centre that becomes operative in the state of self-remembering and gives us immediate comprehension of our state, allowing us to feel ourselves, and not merely acquire data concerning ourselves (Ouspensky 1949: 55-56 and 1950: 23-39; Wellbeloved 2003: 33-35). These centres control the work of the entire human organism, which constitutes a sort of machine. In the first state of consciousness, we are at the mercy of the machine. In the waking state we have more control over the machine, but we do not really know it well enough to be able to direct it unless we are in the third state of consciousness. The type of awareness possible for us in this state is called 'higher' because it provides the possibility of controlling ourselves based on an immediate experience of how we are at that moment (Ouspensky 1949: 18-19). As Gurdjieff stated to Ouspensky: 'The "man-machine" is in the power of accident... A man who cannot control himself, or the course of things within himself, can control nothing' (1949: 133).

An empirical understanding of the functions of the centres is at the foundation of 'self-observation', which for Gurdjieff was an indispensable tool in coming to know oneself. Gurdjieff stated, in or around 1917 (quoted in Ouspensky 1949: 105):

Self-study is the work or the way which leads to self-knowledge. But in order to study oneself one must first learn *how to study*... The chief method of self-study is self-observation. Without properly applied self-observation a man will never understand the connection and the correlation between the various functions of his machine, will never understand how and why on each separate occasion everything in him 'happens'. But to learn the methods of self-observation and of right self-study requires a certain

understanding of the functions and the characteristics of the human machine. Thus in observing the functions of the human machine it is necessary to understand the correct divisions of the functions observed and to be able to define them exactly and at once; and the definition must not be a verbal but an inner definition; by taste, by sensation, in the same way as we define all inner experiences.

To state the matter as concisely as possible: 'self-observation' is an activity, but 'self-remembering' is a state. The two belong to different categories which can be brought into contact: that is, one can observe oneself while remembering oneself. Indeed, to really observe oneself one must be in the third state of consciousness, which is self-remembering (Gurdjieff 1973: 88-89). Having now briefly considered and defined the key concepts, we have the tools needed to understand Gurdjieff's teaching on fasting.

Gurdjieff on Fasting

Fasting, for Gurdjieff, served four purposes. First, it had health benefits for the physical body. Second, it could strengthen the will. Third, it provided unique conditions for self-observation. Fourth, fasting could help one in self-remembering, which follows from the third consideration. However, two important riders must be added. First, Gurdjieff never presented one systematic account of fasting. Rather, he gave out incomplete perspectives at various times. In addition, for Gurdjieff, how and why one fasted was critical. The results of any effort, according to Gurdjieff, depend upon knowledge and intention.

Oddly, as a general rule, the contemporary Gurdjieff groups do not use fasting as a technique, although they often enjoin being aware of oneself in the act of eating, that is, attempt to observe and even to remember oneself while eating. This is quite different from eating slowly, something which Gurdjieff abjured (Gurdjieff 1963: 184-87), but he also advised not to 'eat like an animal' (de Hartmann 1992: 46). The point of Gurdjieff's advice is not primarily to eat in a different manner, although this can be useful in breaking established habits (de Salzmann 2010: 242-43; Wellbeloved 2003: 235), but to be in a different state when eating. One does not aim to be more conscious of the food and drink, but rather of oneself, to sense the whole of oneself. Of course, self-consciousness will lead one to be more aware of what one is consuming. Orage, giving lectures on the typescript copy of Gurdjieff's *Beelezebub's Tales to his Grandson*, passed on Gurdjieff's oral teaching when he said:

We live by food. But it is not the quantity and quality of the food absorbed, but it is the quantity and quality assimilated that will determine the form, quantity and quality of energy we have. We don't care at all what food is

used. Eat any or all foods you like—but be sure you like it. If you are depressed, don't eat much for you won't be able to assimilate it. If you are elated, eat as much as you like—dine well (Orage, Morris and Manchester 2013: 297; see also Claustres 2005: 72-73).

This is implicit in what is said about food in Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* (1949). Ouspensky recounts how Gurdjieff set out a diagram dealing with three types of 'food': what we ordinarily call food and drink, air, and impressions. Gurdjieff is quoted as saying that if one tried to remember oneself while receiving air and impressions, one could manufacture more and higher 'hydrogens' (active substances) than would otherwise be possible:

In ordinary conditions of life we do not *remember ourselves*...we do not feel ourselves, are not aware of ourselves at the moment of a perception, of an emotion, of a thought or of an action. If a man understands this and tries to remember himself, every impression he receives while remembering himself will, so to speak, be doubled (Ouspensky 1949: 188).

Gurdjieff went on to explain that this allows the human organism to produce more of the higher hydrogens. Consciously receiving impressions of oneself while eating would also 'double' impressions. In a group meeting of 7 December 1941, Gurdjieff made 'conscious work' a moral duty, and linked this to being grateful for the food we receive through nature:

You owe to nature. The food you eat which nourishes your life. You must pay for these cosmic substances. You have a debt, an obligation, to repay by conscious work. Do not eat like an animal but render to nature for what she has given you, nature, your mother. Work—a drop, a drop, a drop—accumulated during days, months, years, centuries, perhaps will give results (Gurdjieff 2009: 4).

Gurdjieff's ideas on eating are barely touched upon in the literature. Gurdjieff's use of fasting is noted but never analysed in the three main reference works: Webb's *The Harmonious Circle* (1980), Moore's *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth* (1991) and Taylor's *Gurdjieff: A New Life* (2008). However, there are sundry hints, such as the report that Gurdjieff reproved Nicoll for allowing his attention to wander from a meal to enjoy a panoramic view (Pogson 1961: 87). This brief comment, made in passing, could easily be either missed or unappreciated, unless one already knew that being conscious to the impression of oneself while drinking and eating was an important aspect of Gurdjieff's methods. We turn now to what Gurdjieff said about fasting, and how he used it.

In Search of the Miraculous

The earliest evidence we have for Gurdjieff's use of fasting is Ouspensky's account in *In Search of the Miraculous*, published in 1949, but referring to earlier periods. In 1919, in Essentuki, Gurdjieff and his pupils spent an intense period of about six weeks working on his methods. Among other things, Gurdjieff introduced a fast. Ouspensky states that:

The short fast...was also accompanied by special exercises... G. explained at the beginning of the fast that the difficulty in fasting consisted in not leaving unused the substances which are prepared in the organism for the digestion of food.

'These substances consist of very strong solutions', he said. 'And if they are left without attention they will poison the organism. They must be used up. But how can they be used up if the organism gets no food? Only by an increase of work, an increase of perspiration. People make a tremendous mistake when they try to "save their strength", make fewer movements, and so on, when fasting. On the contrary it is necessary to expend as much energy as possible. Then fasting can be beneficial.'

And when we began our fast we were not left in peace for a second. G. made us run in the heat, doing a round of two miles, or stand with extended arms, or mark time at the double, or carry out a whole series of curious gymnastic exercises which he showed us (1949: 358).

We shall return to this later on, for as we shall see, Gurdjieff is incorrect when he states that one needs to work harder during a fast to avoid poisoning.⁷ I will note, however, that de Hartmann also gives an account of this fast. His report has almost nothing of the theory of fasting, but states that at the commencement of the fast, the men and women had to live separately (on different floors of the house), and could speak to each other for but one hour a week. Those rules were abrogated in the course of the fast (de Hartmann 1992: 67-68).

'The Constantinople Notes of Mr Ferapontoff'

The 'Constantinople Notes of Mr Ferapontoff' is a privately distributed 17,530 word document. It was held by George Adie, a personal pupil of both Gurdjieff and Ouspensky (Adie and Azize 2007). Typical of the secrecy within the Gurdjieff groups, this document's provenance is uncertain. From the title, one would assume that the notes were made by Boris

7. Personal communications from Professor Ian Caterson, Boden Professor of Human Nutrition, Boden Institute of Obesity, Nutrition, Exercise and Eating Disorders, Sydney Medical School, University of Sydney; and from Professor Perminder Singh Sachdev, Scientia Professor of Neuropsychiatry at the University of New South Wales in July 2013. I could not find any direct statement to this effect in the literature.

Ferapontoff, a pupil in whom Gurdjieff evidently had some confidence.⁸ At least some of the notes appear to be Ferapontoff's notes of the lectures which Ouspensky commenced giving in Constantinople in 1920 (Ouspensky 1949: 382). However, they are clearly not verbatim records, and it is impossible to judge whether all of these notes were inspired by Ouspensky, in whole or in part. In respect of fasting, these notes contain some material which, as we shall see, is consistent with, but expands what Ouspensky wrote of Gurdjieff's ideas. The strikethrough found below represents deletions in the original manuscript, while italics following deletions represent insertions by the anonymous editor. Italics not following strikethrough reproduce original manuscript italics. The manuscript reads:

Fasting. It cleans off the rust. The machine works at a greater speed. At times it produces unhealthy excitations, visions, voices. Some kinds of ecstasy pass through strange forms. If as a rule a man uses a great deal of food, then while fasting he must work still more. He should sow *[sic]* wood for about five hours a day for ~~about~~ *as long as* a week. Eating nothing will do no harm if it is possible to work, otherwise one would be poisoned. An outlet should be found for the substances which are secreted for the digestion of food. *If a starving man is alone, he will die.*

Under the influence [of] fasting secret sides of a man may be aroused. What he had dreamt about. Another cannot take this into account.

Fasting is used as an experiment, for self-study, ~~as~~ *for* hygiene. To learn not to use superfluous energy for digestion. But neither fast nor starvation change the habits of the stomach. The momentum is still greater. It is only in the beginning that the organism may appear to have learnt something (n.d.: 31-33).

The meaning of the first sentence, 'it cleans off the rust', is unclear, but may mean that a period of fasting improves the functioning of the physical body, considered simply as an organism. However, 'rust' might refer instead, or as well, to habits. In that case, Gurdjieff would be saying that changing one's intake of food and drink will upset existing habits (Bushell 1995: 554-68). For Gurdjieff, this would be advantageous, as disrupting habits was, for him, an indispensable means for conducting self-observation (Ouspensky 1949: 111-13). However, if Gurdjieff intends to say that fasting can be healthy, modern research bears this out. For example, Weindruch and Walford argue that the effects of dietary restriction on animals (which include such benefits as life-span extension, retarding aging and preventing disease) can be applied with 'a very high order of probability' to humans for similar advantages (for example, 1988: 13, 24-31, 67, 232, 300-306, 326-28). On the contrary, Gurdjieff's ideas about the need to exert oneself more thoroughly while fasting are incorrect, as is

8. Little is known about Ferapontoff except that he was named as one of the assistant instructors and did in fact take Movements. See de Hartmann (1992: 177, 210).

his idea of 'not using superfluous energy for digestion'.⁹ The last point to note here is that it is stated that fasting can help self-study by arousing sides of a person which do not otherwise appear. Placing people in unusual, unfavourable or unexpected situations was one of Gurdjieff's signature techniques (for example, Ouspensky 1949: 240; de Hartmann 1992: 8, 48-49). This is related to his method of intentionally disrupting habit, which we have mentioned above.

Prieuré Talks

Although Gurdjieff used fasting, as we shall see he did not systematically deal with it in any of his books. However, there is some material, plausibly stated to be transcripts of talks by him, which have been circulated among Gurdjieff groups. They have now been published in Gurdjieff (2014), with an introductory essay by the writer. The earliest of these pieces, 'Fasting, Breathing' is dated 27 January 1923, and bears the by-line 'Prieuré'. It relevantly reads:

Fasting, Breathing

If anyone is in the second group of those who are fasting finds it difficult, he may end his fast. But he must say so, for he must not start eating everything at once. A diet is necessary.

Two purposes are attained by fasting: cure of disease and development of will. Everyone should realise that the effect of fasting is only psychological and not organic, for some may be afraid that it will do them harm. Experience of many years with fasting proved that fasting undertaken voluntarily can do no harm. Very long fast is necessary for harm to come. For instance, there are people here who have not eaten for three days. In ordinary life, if one were to shut up a man and give him no food for three days he would die of hunger. There are many cases even, where a man died after one day. But in cases of voluntary fasting up to three weeks, no mishaps were recorded. After three weeks there may be organic harm.

You must realize that without taking measures to clean yourselves out even a voluntary fast is useless, because we have so much food in us that if we stop introducing new food, old food in us would last for ten or twelve days. Profit gained from fasting begins only after twelve days. If we fast without taking these measures, we can never get any profit from it. But if we manage from the first day to clean ourselves out thoroughly, then that work of the organism for which fast is intended begins from the first day.

A long fast gives rise to many curious phenomena. On the first day we observe considerable loss of weight. After three or four days the weight increases—this depends on how thoroughly the organism was cleaned out in the beginning. Then the weight becomes static—almost the same as the original. This lasts for thirty to forty days. Maintenance of the same weight beyond this period has not been recorded. The longest period recorded after which loss of weight begins is forty days... (Gurdjieff 2014: 212)

9. Personal communications by Professor Sachdev. See n. 7 above.

Interestingly, almost the entire contents of the second, third and fourth paragraphs here are incorrect, as we shall see below. It may be that Gurdjieff knew this, but the more likely explanation is surely that he was mistaken.

The second talk, recently published, is titled 'Palm Sunday', dated 19 March to 1 April 1923, and relevantly reads:

Learn by heart the following words:

1) Fast. 2) Prayer. 3) Passion. 4) Repentance. 5) Confession. 6) Communion. 7) Forgiveness. 8) Suffering. 9) Tranquillity. 10) Death. 11) Life.

Fast. By itself fast has no meaning. Fasting is used as a means of altering our metabolism and, consequently of altering the tempo of life and movement in us. Fasting is not for the sake of somebody, not in honour of any saint. Fasting is without exception for oneself. It is necessary to fast with an aim and intention. Nowadays fasts are usually undertaken in various religions as customs, without meaning, without consciousness; they just fast because they have fasted before, but as to why and wherefore practically no one has thought. Such fasting is of no use and to fast in this way one must be a fool. It is said that fasting is cleansing. But one word is left out. It should be said: Fasting is a means of cleansing. The action of fasting is cleansing. But someone has to cleanse, not some saint. Fasting can be a means of cleansing, if during the fast conscious measures are taken...

Real Christians fasted and fast in Lent in the following way: For the first three days they eat nothing. These three days are called after the founder of the Christian Pre-Easter Lent. It was St Theodore who was the founder. During these three days they eat absolutely nothing, but woe to him who begins directly with the fast of St Theodore. In actual fact Lent begins a week before this day. Thus it lasts not fifty but fifty seven days. For a week before the fast of St Theodore, Christians stop eating anything which may stick in the teeth. It is a meatless week.

When Lent is observed properly, for the fifty days no living thing is eaten, either of the air, of the earth or under the earth. Fish also may not be eaten. Fish may be eaten only twice throughout the whole of Lent. Of Orthodox Christians, only the Russians eat fish in Lent. No Christians eat fish during Lent (Gurdjieff 2014: 253-55).

Several matters here require comment. First, there are extant two other similar lists made by pupils of Gurdjieff at the Prieuré. Each of them includes 'fasting' in a religious context. For example, C.S. Nott's version of the list omits 'Passion', 'Communion', 'Forgiveness', 'Suffering' and 'Tranquillity'. Nott also adds 'Sin', 'Supplication', 'Atonement', 'Submission' and 'Resurrection' which are not in the 'Palm Sunday' list (Nott 1961: 72). Tchechovitch's list opens with 'La vie' (life) and closes with 'LA VIE'. The second word is 'Le jeûne' (fasting), and there follow words similar to the 'Palm Sunday' list, but not identical in ways which need not concern us (Tchechovitch 2003: 272).

These three lists show an affinity between Gurdjieff's teaching and the traditional Christianity of the monastic and eremitic mystics, and that

gives credibility to the statement attributed to Gurdjieff that Christianity was foundational to his system (Webb 1980: 520). It is intriguing that one modern Gurdjieff society, based in Toronto, which translated portions of Tchechovitch's book into English, altered his reference to a fast which ended at Easter (that is the Lenten fast), 'pour Pâques lorsque se termina notre exercice de jeûne', to the vaguer 'the end of certain periods of fasting'.¹⁰ I will desist from speculating on the motives for this, except to say that the tendency is to distance Gurdjieff from Christianity. Yet, the evidence clearly shows Gurdjieff did associate Easter with fasting. In notes of a meeting in Paris on 21 March 1937, Kathryn Hulme mentions to Gurdjieff that a particular day will be Palm Sunday. Gurdjieff immediately states that he was in Nice at the beginning of Easter, and that must have been forty days ago as the Easter fast has fifty days (Hulme and Solano 2012: 134).

The second point to note is Gurdjieff's statement that fasting can alter our 'tempo of life and movement'. The paper 'Fasting. Breathing' had referred to a change of tempo in breathing, but had said nothing significant about this. Critical information about this is provided in *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*, and so this point will be discussed below. The third point is that his account of the origin of Lent and how it is kept are, on the whole, correct. The Greek Orthodox do in fact abstain from meat and fish during Lent. There is a week before the Great Lent when meat is not eaten but cheese and dairy may be. After that week, they are excluded (Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware 1978: 35). The first Saturday of Great Lent is named after St Theodore the Recruit, but to say that he initiated the fast exceeds what is known to history (Bradshaw and Johnson 2011: 89-113). To be precise, the Orthodox fast extends over three periods: a week of partial fasting ending with the Sunday of Forgiveness, the forty days of the Great Fast which commence at Sunday Vespers, and Holy and Great Week, which is preceded by the Saturday of Lazarus and Palm Sunday (Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware 1978: 29).

Practices at the Prieuré

That was the theory as Gurdjieff had expounded it up to the time of his Institute at the Prieuré. He also implemented fasts for the pupils (Bennett 1962: 89). The most significant account of those experiments with fasting

10. Compare Tchechovitch (2003: 232) to Tchechovitch (2006: 168). The inside notes state that the English translation was made 'under the direction of Michel de Salzmann', who was Gurdjieff's natural son, and until his death, head of the Institut Gurdjieff in Paris. This is not the only place where the French text was altered in translation to disguise connections to Christianity: the ten-word list which closes the 2003 French edition, and is replete with the Christian tradition, is entirely omitted from the 'non-denominational' 2006 version.

are the notes of Dr Mary C. Bell, who was present for one fast. Participation in the fast was voluntary and those fasting first took enemas. Bell states: 'I am sure that that accounted for the fact that most of us suffered very little from hunger or desire for food' (1949: n.p.). For the first two days, according to Bell, they were allowed water, but on the third day, no water at all. Then, on day four, they were allowed the juice of one orange and on the fifth the juice of two oranges. Some people were taken off the fast at the end of a week, while others continued for as long as three weeks. Dr Bell was required to weigh everyone and to take their pulse twice or even thrice a day. Throughout the fast, physical work and exercises in the Study House continued as usual. People generally, she said, lost a kilo a day for the first four days, then remained stationary, with some even putting on a small amount of weight. When the fast was completed, 'the intake of food during the first twenty-four hours was carefully restricted'. Also, she noted, people's complexions 'vastly improved' (1949). Bennett's account agrees with Bell's in many details. Bennett reports that Gurdjieff said the fast must be undertaken voluntarily and 'without fear'. It was intended to effect a change of metabolism (Bennett 1973: 146). Further, the fast was personalised, each person being given individual instructions (Bennett 1962: 89; 1973: 146). The question arises as to why Gurdjieff availed himself of Dr Bell's services. Doubtless, he will have wanted to know if participants were becoming unwell. I also wonder if he may have hoped that Bell would be able to conduct fasts in the future. However, a paucity of evidence concerning Bell's subsequent activities renders all of this speculative.

Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson

In the chapter 'Beelzebub in America', Gurdjieff states that while Christianity once possessed good customs 'for the preservation of health and for the maintenance of the foundations of morality necessary for a happy life', now nothing remains of these but the 'custom of periodic fasting, that is, of abstaining at certain times of the year from the consumption of certain edible products' (Gurdjieff 1950: 1010-11). However, even this custom is disappearing, and even where it is maintained, its observance is so changed that 'no shock is obtained from it for the fasters', although the shock is the reason for its institution (1950: 1011). More than five pages are then devoted to a satire of the Russian Orthodox attitude to fasting, presented as being simply an occasion to make one's diet more enjoyable by eating interesting fish dinners. Gurdjieff does not say more about the desired shock, but it might be a question of disrupting established habits (a desideratum for Gurdjieff, as mentioned previously).

Gurdjieff initially gives the impression that the fast was instituted by Jesus, but then, adding 'secret history' to his satire, he outlines how fasting began in the Christian religion, basing his account on the contents of an 'ancient Judaic-Essenian manuscript' (1950: 1016). The story commences in the year 214, at the 'secret Kelnuanian Council', where the virtues of vegetarianism were discussed. The result, however, of this Council was that it was decided to institute abstinence from meat at certain times of the year (1950: 1016-22). The secret Council is said to have been held at 'Kelnuk, lying on the shores of the Dead Sea', and to have featured 'the great Hertoonano...the representative of all the followers of the teaching of Jesus Christ settled on the shores of the Red Sea' and 'the philosopher Veggendiadi...the representative of all the then followers of that teaching in Greece' (1950: 1016-17). No such council, place or people are yet known to history and it is difficult to avoid the feeling that Gurdjieff has passed from one satirical account (of fasting) to another (of Church history). Neither is Gurdjieff's story consistent with what had gone before. Initially, Gurdjieff said that fasting was intended to provide the faithful with 'shocks' (1950: 1016), but the secret Council institutes the practice to cut down the amount of 'Eknokh' Christians ate (1950: 1019). Eknokh, found in flesh of all kinds, including the flesh of fish, is said to be a substance 'very harmful for their health and particularly for their psyche' (1950: 1022) although of what those noxious qualities consist, Gurdjieff does not ever say, except to warn that 'the "character" of man, gradually changes in regard to positiveness and morality for the worse, beyond all recognition' (1950: 1019).

There is one other matter, dealt with in *Beelzebub*, which is germane to this topic, although, in this book, Gurdjieff does not relate it to fasting, and that is the question of 'tempo'. As we saw, in 'Fasting. Breathing' and 'Palm Sunday', Gurdjieff stated that fasting can change the tempo of one's breathing and can alter the tempo of the 'metabolism and, consequently...[alter] the tempo of life and movement in us'. According to Gurdjieff in *Beelzebub*, the tempo of the metabolism is a key to the production of more and higher hydrogens (Gurdjieff 1950: 564-65). Changing the tempo of the circulation of the blood, he states, can change the nature of one's consciousness, and *vice versa* (1950: 565). That is, by upsetting the established coordination of intellectual, emotional and organic instincts, what he calls the 'Zoostat' (1950: 559), 'real notions' can pass to the subconscious, which should be more active in us (1950: 24-25, 579). The human conscience is embedded in the subconscious, and it would be beneficial for us if 'the functioning of that being-factor still surviving in their common-presences were to participate in the general

functioning of that consciousness of theirs in which they pass their daily...“waking-existence” (1950: 359). Gurdjieff’s exposition is not systematic, but it is consistent in this respect.

Paris in the 1940s

The only record known to me of Gurdjieff’s use of fasting in the 1940s is Solange Claustres’s *Becoming Conscious with G. I. Gurdjieff*. She states that a small group who were working intensively on inner exercises with Gurdjieff were given ‘some phases of fasting’ (Claustres 2005: 71). The fasts were said to take different forms for different people. In her case, she had to leave half of her food uneaten on her plate. This is not a ‘fast’ as we have defined it, but perhaps a ‘diet’. One evening with Gurdjieff, fatigued and troubled, and not having eaten during the day, she ate everything on her plate, her ‘fast’ quite forgotten. Gurdjieff ordered her to cease her fasting (2005: 71-72).

Conclusion

Gurdjieff’s use of fasting has been under-appreciated, in terms of its importance to him as a practical method, and of its place in his theoretical system. I can find no evidence that other esoteric groups used it as he did, or devised theories of it. Gurdjieff employed it throughout his career. The only period for which I can find no evidence of his use of fasting is when he had no pupils working closely with him: that is, from the closure of the Prieuré in 1924 to the revival of his groups in the 1940s. Eating and the digestion of food are central to Gurdjieff’s system; fasting is a complementary concept. Perhaps surprisingly, so far as I can find, none of his pupils spoke of the effect of this fasting upon them.

That Gurdjieff said that fasting could improve one’s health is hardly surprising. Nor is it unexpected that he believed that fasting could develop the will. Gurdjieff’s teaching that fasting can be used to disrupt one’s habitual way of eating and living, and to allow hidden sides of a person to manifest, is noteworthy. The integrity and internal coherence of Gurdjieff’s system is shown by his employment of fasting to produce novel and effective conditions for self-observation and self-remembering. It is also to be observed that Gurdjieff’s ideas in this respect were related to Christianity, and this in itself may say something about the origin of Gurdjieff’s system and even its ultimate nature.

Although Gurdjieff’s more idiosyncratic ideas about fasting do not bear medical scrutiny, the notion that fasting alters the tempo of the body and that this makes possible a development of consciousness warrants further

research, some of which can be conducted by comparative research. Such research would have to commence with Christianity. For example, St Thalassios the Libyan said that ‘moderate fasting, vigils and psalmody are natural means for achieving a balance in the body’s temperament’ (1999: 321).¹¹ Now that asceticism is attracting wider, and less antipathetic comment, such a comparative study might well show how Gurdjieff has developed, in his own unique manner, pre-existing traditions. It was enough for this study simply to gather all the evidence relating to Gurdjieff and fasting, some of which has never been published. A future study will include evaluation and contextualisation.

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