

Makhabbad Maltabarova

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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)

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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 – *Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, 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/Kitāb 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.

1. Introduction

George I. Gurdjieff (d. 1949) was a prominent thinker and teacher in the history of Western intellectual thought. He suggested and developed a complex of ideas and practices aimed at the growth of human individuality. The debates about his personality started during his lifetime, increased even further after his death, and have continued into the present. This enduring assessment can be explained by his contribution to the creation of a certain image of a “seeker of truth,” particularly in his early years, that was colorfully described in his works.¹ As a result, he has often been considered as a charlatan and merchant, a genius Western master of the East, a foregoer of New Age spirituality and secularized mysticism.² Along with numerous discussions on Gurdjieff’s personality, there are many speculations about the origin of the ideas and practices he taught. They have been associated with different teachings, including Jewish mysticism, Hermeticism and the hesychast Christian Orthodox traditions.³ His system has been interpreted as both

1 James Moore, *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth*, Shaftesbury and Rockport, MA: Element, 1991, 31–32.

2 Andrew Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions*, Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1997; Jacob Needleman, “G.I. Gurdjieff and His School,” in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, ed. Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman, New York: Crossroad, 1992; Harry T. Hunt, *Lives in Spirit: Precursors and Dilemmas of a Secular Western Mysticism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.

3 On Kabbalah and Hermeticism, see James Webb, *The Harmonious Circle: An Exploration of the Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky and Others*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1980, 499–542. See also George Baker and Walter Driscoll, “Gurdjieff in America: An Overview,” in *America’s Alternative Religions*, ed. Timothy Miller, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995,

entirely dependent, and independent of these groups, and as a purely eclectic product of its time. One of Gurdjieff's most cited explanations of the origin of his method includes three spiritual ways created by people. He speaks about the way of the fakir (Islam), the way of the monk (Christianity) and the way of the yogi (Hinduism), each of which is oriented towards the development of certain human faculties but overlooks the complex structure of human existence.⁴ There was a reluctance of Gurdjieff to explain in more detail the sources of his teachings: "[A]bout schools and where he had found the knowledge he undoubtedly possessed he spoke very little and always superficially. He mentioned Tibetan monasteries, the Chitral, Mount Athos; Sufi schools in Persia, in Bokhara, and eastern Turkestan; he mentioned dervishes of various orders; but all of them in a very indefinite way."⁵

The influence of Sufism has often been limited to, and identified in, several techniques and symbols, such as the Movements and the Enneagram, not mentioned in Gurdjieff's own texts directly. The first search for Sufism which grappled with Gurdjieff's works was made by Anna Challenger in her *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff's "Beelzebub": A Modern Sufi Odyssey*. By means of a philosophical approach and a literary analysis, she identifies *Beelzebub's Tales* as an example of Sufi literature. Challenger endeavors to convince the reader that the Sufi origin of Gurdjieff's work is unquestionable. She argues that "value of a tale lies in the struggle for understanding that it demands, and in the inner friction that struggle creates, rather than in the storyline itself, or in the themes

261–263; Robin Amis, *A Different Christianity: Early Christian Esotericism and Modern Thought*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1995, 141–169.

4 Piotr D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*, San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt, 2001 [1949], 44–47. Ouspensky calls Gurdjieff's teaching the Fourth Way, describing it as "more exact and perfect" in comparison with other ways (Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 50).

5 Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 36.

or messages conveyed.”⁶ Challenger’s work provides a clear panorama of *Beelzebub’s Tales* and successfully places Gurdjieff’s ideas into a broader philosophical and cultural frame. However, Challenger’s understanding of Sufism is based on the arguments of Gurdjieff’s students and on the idea of a tradition of “seeking truth,” which exists in all religions. Such discussion, reduced to descriptions of a universalist version of Sufism, is more problematic than insightful in providing a more accurate comprehension of Sufi content. Michael Pittman’s *Classical Spirituality in Contemporary America: The Confluence and Contribution of G. I. Gurdjieff and Sufism* is a more recent study. Pittman endeavors to address the problem, again, through the lens of a literary analysis. He uses the works on semiotics by Mikhail Bakhtin (d. 1975) and applies Bakhtin’s dialogical mode of discourse to sort out Gurdjieff’s texts.⁷ He does not make drastic conclusions about Sufism but emphasizes the influence of Gurdjieff’s heritage on the development and spread of Sufism in the West, particularly in the United States. Pittman’s analysis covers a block of discourses initiated after Gurdjieff and shows the influence of his ideas on different personalities and activities at the end of the twentieth century. Given the growing interest in Gurdjieff and his heritage, the more detailed examination of the already known historical connections, such as Gurdjieff’s own, and rich material about his activity in America, are increasingly valuable. However, Pittman’s work is concerned with the analysis of some select passages, which address religion and Islam, avoiding a more systematic approach to Gurdjieff’s teaching. Another perspective on the problem is suggested by Mark Sedgwick. He focuses on Gurdjieff’s students and their interpretations of Sufism.

6 Anna Challenger, *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff’s Beelzebub: A Modern Sufi Odyssey*, New York: Rodopi, 2002, 29–30.

7 Michael Pittman, *Classical Spirituality in Contemporary America: The Confluence and Contribution of G. I. Gurdjieff and Sufism*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, 71.

He considers foremost the origin of the P.D. Ouspensky (d. 1947) perspective on Gurdjieff's system, that is often referred to as the most influential interpretation. Among the sources that influenced Ouspensky, according to Sedgwick, are the Theosophical Society of Helena Blavatsky and William James's pre-Freudian elaborations on consciousness. By this, Sedgwick highlights and distinguishes different layers of Sufism in Gurdjieff. In his analysis, Sufism is interpreted as a source of legitimacy and inspiration for early Gurdjieff, including particularly the adaptation of Sufi practical elements.⁸ However, Gurdjieff's own texts remain excluded from Sedgwick's examination. As for Gurdjieff's biographers (for example, James Webb, James Moore, and Paul Taylor), they minimize the influence of Sufism on the life and personality of Gurdjieff, although mentioning the topic as a significant one.⁹

The main task of the study at hand is neither to identify Gurdjieff's sources nor to justify their Sufi origin. It seeks to rethink the topic by focusing on the concept of the self. During the last centuries, the self was perceived as an autonomous principle of modern society.¹⁰ Modern interpretations of the self, concerned mainly with subjectivity and rationality, have been complemented

8 Mark Sedgwick, "Sufism and the Gurdjieff Movement: Multiple Itineraries of Interaction," in *Sufism East and West: Mystical Islam and Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Modern World*, ed. Jamal Malik and Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019, 132.

9 James Moore, *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth*, Shaftesbury and Rockport, MA: Element, 1991; James Webb, *The Harmonious Circle: An Exploration of the Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky and Others*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1980. Among recent biographical studies, see Paul Beekman Taylor, *G.I. Gurdjieff: A New Life*, Utrecht: Eureka Editions, 2008.

10 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1995; Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989; Webb Keane, "Sincerity, 'Modernity,' and the Protestants," *Cultural Anthropology* 17 / 1 (2002): 65–92; Malina Stefanovska and David Warren Sabean, eds. *Space and Self in Early Modern European Cultures*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012.

by discourses on spiritual development, not necessarily obligated to a rational or theological frame.¹¹ In so called self-spirituality, the focus was shifted to a praise of the inner self. Gurdjieff's teachings comprise various ideas and practices, yet there is one theme that is fundamental – constant self-work. Because of his contribution to the topic of self-development, very popular in North America, Gurdjieff is often mentioned as one of the influential figures in the history of American cultural developments in the twentieth century.¹² According to Paul Taylor, Gurdjieff's interpretation of the self was a product of his time, embodying the problem of cognition and anticipating Foucauldian unity of the subject and object of knowledge.¹³ Gurdjieff emphasized the self as an authentic unity able to build itself by means of an individual's effort and work, including the practice of abandoning everyday habits and indifference to distractions, as well as controlling reactions to them.¹⁴ Focusing on the importance of an individual and the practical character of self-development, the recent studies have also described Sufism as completely compatible with modern epistemologies of the self. For example, it has been argued that Sufi traditions encourage individualistic ways of divine human encounter¹⁵ or that a Sufi vocabulary of spiritual growth can be reformulated to correspond with modern articulations of human

11 Thomas Luckmann, "The New and the Old in Religion," in *Social Theory for a Changing Society*, ed. Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman, San Francisco: Westview, 1991.

12 Paul Beekman Taylor, *Gurdjieff's America: Mediating the Miraculous*, England: Lighthouse Editions, 2004, 9–14.

13 Taylor, *Gurdjieff's America: Mediating the Miraculous*, 20–21.

14 Taylor, *Gurdjieff's America: Mediating the Miraculous*, 22.

15 Rachida Chih, "What is a Sufi Order? Revisiting the Concept Through a Case Study of the Khalwatiyya in Contemporary Egypt," in *Sufism and the "Modern" in Islam*, ed. Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007, 21–38.

individuality.¹⁶ The emphasis was made on individual dimensions of Sufism, while, ironically enough, the notion of the self and its perfection – a core of Sufi teachings – has not received due attention. Nevertheless, the element of self-work is strongly emphasized in Sufism. In the Arabic language, a term for Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) implies an action, a “process of becoming a Sufi,” opposite to the English term, which emphasizes a theoretical and philosophical element, embodied in a suffix *-ism*.¹⁷ Numerous definitions of the term *taṣawwuf*, produced among Sufis, focus on purity of heart, certain spiritual states, and extreme religious devotion. In all these definitions, a transformative aspect, which promotes an ethical development and training of human ego, is identified as a necessary marker of the “process of becoming a Sufi.”¹⁸

Before approaching the Gurdjieff and Sufism connection through the topic of the self, two points should be underlined. The first point is the importance of the First Series of *All and Everything*, that is *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, published in 1950. In his magnum opus (a text of 1,238 pages), Gurdjieff suggests an alternative history of human civilization where he introduces his opinion about religion, culture, history, science, and, most importantly, about perfection of the self. Despite such a wealth of material on spiritual development, which allows us to have a sufficient overview of Gurdjieff's method, only some aspects of his teachings have received attention.¹⁹ There is also

16 Julia D. Howell, “Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60/3 (2001): 701-729.

17 Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism*, New York and London: New York University Press, 1989, 30–32.

18 Carl W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985, 1–4.

19 For example, see Paul Beekman Taylor, *The Philosophy of G.I. Gurdjieff: Time, Word, and Being in All and Everything*, Utrecht: Eureka Editions, 2007; Johanna Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music: The Gurdjieff/ de Hartmann Piano Music and Its Esoteric Significance*, Leiden: Brill, 2015; Carole Cusack, ed. “Special Issue: G.

an interest in his personal life, including connections with other people and activity of his groups.²⁰ Interpreting particular parts of his heritage and giving them specific mood is not wrong per se. However, it overshadows the content and importance of his written works. Certain aspects of his life may improve the understanding of the development of his ideas, but not replace them. Moreover, much about Gurdjieff's method was received from his disciples and followers through their numerous records of his public lectures and private talks. It is difficult to say, it was Gurdjieff's own intention to stay enigmatic and to make his teaching accessible only to his students or not. Consequently, his own texts have almost entirely been neglected and his method has mainly been reconstructed through the records of others and limited to their interpretations.

The problem of the partial interpretation of intellectual and mystical systems (consider Gurdjieff a mystic or not) and neglect of their own principles to fit to various frames is also relevant for Gurdjieff's case. On the one hand, representing Gurdjieff as purely a product of a Western esoteric environment would mean that he was among pioneers of the so-called New Age spirituality and disconnect him from a religious heritage that is sensible in his method. To allocate him among those connected with "individualistic and largely 'post-religious' phenomenon of self-spirituality,"²¹ without attentive analysis of his works, is unproductive. On the other hand, considering him as belonging to one

I. Gurdjieff, "The Arts, and the Production of Culture," *Religion and the Arts* 21/1–2 (2017).

20 For example, Carole M. Cusack, "Intentional Communities in the Gurdjieff Teaching," *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 6/2 (2015): 159–178; Paul Beekman Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage*, New York: Weiser Books, 2001; Paul Beekman Taylor, *Shadows of Heaven: Gurdjieff and Toomer*, New York: Weiser Books, 1998; Roger Lipsey, *Gurdjieff Reconsidered: The Life, the Teachings, the Legacy*, Boulder: Shambhala, 2019.

21 Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, London; New York: Routledge, 2005, 171.

concrete religious tradition would diminish the complexity of his ideas. The motive of a control of thoughts, feelings, and actions is present in many religious systems and can hardly be identified within one specific tradition. A tendency to place his system in different frames inevitably led to a neglect of his method, which regardless of opinion about its unsystematic nature, has its inner organization and logic.

The second point is the importance of the environment where Gurdjieff's ideas circulated and encountered Sufism. In the study on Gurdjieff and Sufism in America, Pittman very briefly mentions the importance of "the longer history of Sufism in the West," incorporating it into a broader discourse about the East.²² However, he does not elaborate the topic and shifts to the specific cases of Gurdjieff's connections. Nevertheless, the environment of Gurdjieff, as well as Gurdjieff himself, understood the popularity of the enigmatic Orient.²³ As Joseph Azize argues, Gurdjieff used this "Eastern" component in order to surround himself with spiritual charm to attract that part of his audience that was not interested in the solely practical usage of his method but needed this exotic allure.²⁴ Sufism, being a part of this allure, received its popularity due to the interest of specific groups of people, belonging to Western esoteric and occult environment, which advocated spirituality and universality of religious traditions, not their strong ritual and socio-political elements. As a result of this division between the "inner" Sufism and the "outer" Islam, Sufi teachings were interpreted as being exclusively oriented towards

22 Pittman, *Classical Spirituality in Contemporary America*, 3.

23 The image of "Orient" was described later by Edward Said in his prominent work. See Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, New York: Random House, 1979.

24 Joseph Azize, "Gurdjieff's Sacred Dances and Movements," in *New Religions and Cultural Production*, ed. Carole M. Cusack and Alex Norman, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2012, 304–305.

a private and poetical engagement with the divine.²⁵ In other words, some elements of Islamic mysticism obtained particular attention. Nevertheless, Sufism is a major mystical tradition in Islam, formed in the seventh and eighth centuries and based on a sacred scripture (the Quran) and a prophetic tradition (the Sunnah).²⁶ During this period, there appeared individuals stressing the importance of an ascetic lifestyle and constant praying to God, around which were formed small communities in Syria and Eastern Iran. During the next stage (by the thirteenth century), these communities contributed to the appearance of the social institutions, or brotherhoods, which created their own practices and manuals. By the sixteenth century, Sufism became an important and powerful part of Muslim societies, influencing spiritual and intellectual life. This situation continued until the twentieth century, when the Sufi brotherhoods were harshly criticized by Islamic reformers and modernists as incompatible with modern life realities.²⁷ Therefore, historically, the term *Sufism* designates a wide range of social, cultural, political, and religious phenomena.

A comparative element implemented in the present study will be employed twice. The first time, when Gurdjieff's thoughts will be analyzed by comparison with modern epistemologies of the self, particularly with the idea of the potentiality of the self. The second time, when his reflections will be included in the survey of the Sufi ideas about human ego and its perfection. Due to a huge variety of interpretations and approaches to self-problematics in Sufism, when choosing a particular thinker and his ideas, two main criteria

25 Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh, "Comparative Mysticism and the Problem of Interpretation: Rumi and Meister Eckhart," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* (2015): 1–2.

26 Mystical traditions in Islam are not limited to what is called Sufism, but also include, for example, the Transcendent philosophy of Sadr al-Din Shirazi (d. 1640).

27 Alexander D. Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*, Leiden: Brill, 2000, 1–3.

must be considered. First, a Sufi mystic should have a strong practical orientation of his teachings. Second, the mystic and his legacy must figure prominently in contemporary spiritual discourses. Jalal ad-Din Rumi (d. 1273), a Persian Sufi-poet, satisfies all mentioned criteria. Rumi's Sufism has one of the strongest practical orientations.²⁸ His poetical legacy, in contrast to his philosophical and theological legacy, had received special attention in the 1970s when the advocates of New Age spirituality used the medieval Sufi for their own purposes. There is a considerable resemblance between Gurdjieff and Rumi regarding the dominance of the practical side in obtaining freedom from desires. This practical orientation and the importance of self-discipline can also be found in the idea of a mystical death. To better demonstrate the importance of this idea and practice, in addition to Rumi, I will focus on Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), a prominent theologian and Sufi thinker, who emphasized the topic of death in his works and developed specific techniques. Consequently, Sufi approach to the self will be investigated in its own context and from different perspectives. Instead of a side-by-side comparison, Gurdjieff's ideas will be incorporated and juxtaposed with reflections of certain Sufi masters.

Taking into consideration the two factors mentioned above, I have formulated three methodological tools which constitute the methodology of the current study. They are the systematization of Gurdjieff's method in its inner coherence, the consideration of modern epistemologies of the self, and the systematization of the Sufi approach to the self in its own Sufi foundations. An attempt will be made to analyze Gurdjieff's teachings in *Tales* and to formulate his approach to the self. There are several studies, which

28 Among recent works on his practical mysticism, see Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh, *Practical Mysticism in Islam and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Jalal al-Din Rumi and Meister Eckhart*, London, New York: Routledge, 2016; see also Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi*, revised edition, Oxford: Oneworld, 2008.