



This is an article I wrote for TalkTalk, an Enneagram newsletter, following an International Enneagram Association meeting in the late 1990s.

Karen Webb
Enneagram Studies UK

Spiritual Inspiration from the IEA Conference: Establishing Enneagram Communities

One of the most inspiring talks I attended at the IEA Conference was given by Australian David Burke (MEd BEc). From expectations of a scholarly - though probably humorous, given the man - exposition, David took all of us present (25, and I wish it had been all 500) to a deeply felt and profoundly joyous affirmation of the need to surrender to the reign of God.

I have rarely felt so peacefully elated, so full of laughter and love, so at one with those who shared the experience, so reluctant to disperse it by doing something else. And this after a 1 hour workshop!

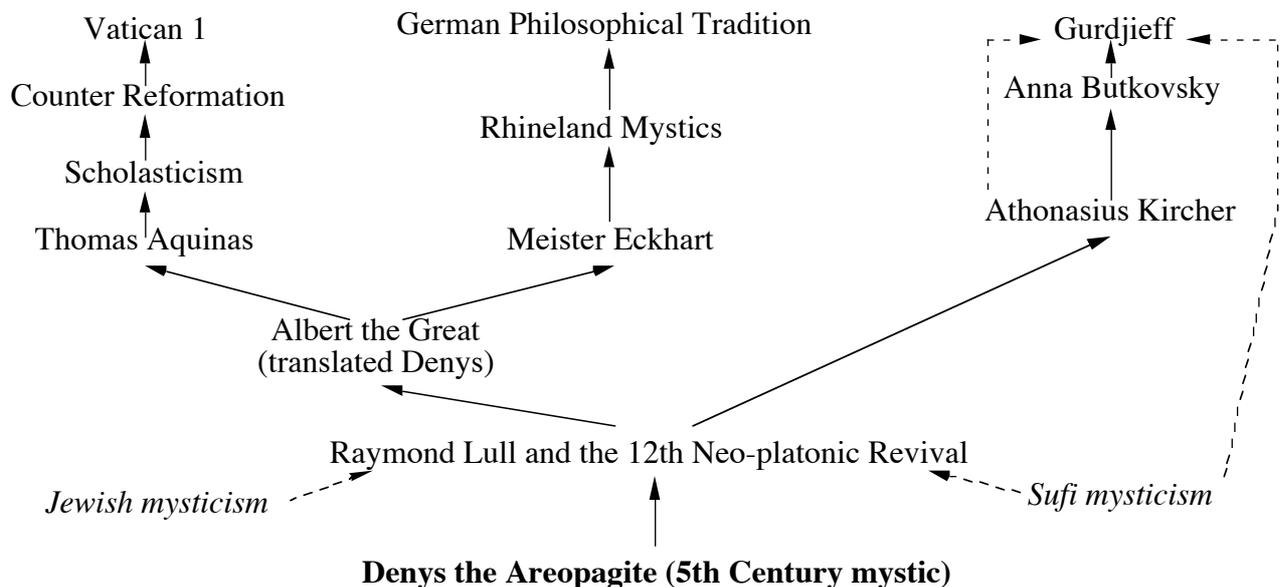
So how did we get there? By comparing Gurdjieff's system with the writings of Denys the Areopagite, via Raymond Lull and the neo-platonic revival - and then looking at the spiritual implications.

First, the (bare and brief) historical facts:

Gurdjieff's System is Neo-Platonic

Gurdjieff's system is spiritual; and though the Enneagram he used was learnt from the Sufis, his system has neo-platonic origins (and he described it as Christian, whatever 'true' Christians may think of that claim).

The Corpus Areopagiticum - the 4 books and 10 letters of Denys the Areopagite - was the first real application of the work of Plotinus Porphyry Proclus in the 4th century. This has influenced not only Christian but also Jewish and Sufi mysticism.



David Burke managed to make even this part of his presentation enlivening. He clearly loves the early and mediæval mystics, as well as the Enneagram, and the topic for his workshop comes from his nearly complete thesis, which I very much look forward to reading.

Having given us the history, he went on to compare the spirituality of the teachings of Denys and of Gurdjieff. The similarities are astounding, as you can see from the table below.

Spiritual teachings	Denys	Gurdjieff
Levels of Being	7	7
Metanoia is required	yes	yes
Man as microcosm	yes	yes
There is a chain of Revelation	Hierarchia*	Sarmouni (Sufi)
Goal of spiritual work	Resurrection	Immortality
The essence of man	Unified	Unified
The habitual state	Fragmented	Fragmented

So what has all this to do with 'Establishing Enneagram Communities'? The answer lies in *Hierarchia - Denys's Chain of Revelation. This describes a helix of ascent; and he taught that it is the community which ascends, fuelled by the desire to return to God, the individuals within it being transformed as it goes.

Denys believed Matthew 3:2: 'The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news.'. Of course, the word 'repent' is translated from 'metanoia' - change of mind. In other words, he was saying "Get conscious!"

According to Denys, man's habitual state is alienation marked by complexity. The ascent is marked by simplicity. Spiritual transformation involves two processes, which usually happen together:

- ✧ Apophatic Ascent - letting go
- ✧ Kataphatic Descent - coming to know ourselves, and thereby, the divine.

Anything sound familiar in the context of the Enneagram teaching? We all thought so!

- ✧ Back to Denys: for this to come about, we need:
 - chains of revelation/ transformation (hierarchia)
 - awareness of the divine
 - abandonment to the divine.
- ✧ and individual transformation
 - results in transformation of the world
 - *begins* with observation of the self.
- ✧ Observing the self results in observing the reign of God.
- ✧ Individual transformation is *completed* with the abandonment to the reign of God.
- ✧ Individual transformation takes place within hierarchia.

We come full circle, from the community's commitment to return to God to our personal transformation - which cannot take place with-out the community's desire - and which results in the helical ascension of the community back to God. *We are transformed together or not at all.*

David observed that the Enneagram is a key, and like any key it works in the correct lock. It fits the neo-platonic lock. (Ignatian spirituality is not neo-platonic, and so the key had to be changed a little to fit within that system. This doesn't mean it doesn't work, but that it is less effective in that context than in its own.)

He left us with three observations and one challenging and uplifting question.

- ✧ Society today is *not* committed to return to God.
- ✧ One can see from the few occasions in history when it has been, that the process of hierarchia is true.
- ✧ We, as Enneagram lovers, could embody the chain of revelation, could form the community fuelled by the desire to return to God.

And so (unless you have no spiritual faith at all) *what else on earth could you possibly want to do?*

I don't know if this will convey a part of the experience of loving, joyful, freeing, inspiring necessity we all felt. I hope so.

David Burke, organisational consultant and director of Ingenious Communications, convened the first Australian Enneagram Conference. He is the founder of the Australian Institute for Enneagram Studies.[www.enneagram.com.au](http://www enneagram.com.au)