

René Guénon and Sri Ramana Maharshi

Two Remarkable Sages in Modern Times

Part Two

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Despite the fact that Guénon and Ramana Maharshi never met in person, they did however have vital and interesting points of contact through two individuals, Arthur Osborne (1906-1970) and Henri Hartung (1921-1988). And while Ramana Maharshi's role was dominant in the lives of both Osborne and Hartung, a lesser known fact is the principal influence of the work of the French metaphysician René Guénon upon both of these writers.

Osborne was an English writer, who travelled to India in September 1941, for a family holiday while living in Siam (present-

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day Thailand). Although he needed to return to Siam as he was lecturing at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, his wife Lucia Osborne (1904-1987) along with their three children (Catherine, Adam and Frania), stayed on in India, to reside in the cottage of a friend by the name of David McIver (who was also familiar with Guénon's writings) in Tiruvannamalai in close proximity to Ramana Maharshi. Osborne's destiny did not allow him to return to be with his family, let alone have his first in person darshan with Sri Ramana, until four years later due to his detainment in a Japanese detention camp because of the war.

In 1964 he served as the founding editor of *The Mountain Path*, which centered on the perennial wisdom: "The aim of this journal is to set forth the traditional wisdom of all religions and all ages, especially as testified to by their saints and mystics, and to clarify the paths available to seekers in the conditions of our modern world." Osborne was pivotal in making Ramana Maharshi's teachings known to wider audiences around the world through the following books: *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self Knowledge* (1954), *The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi* (1959) and *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi in His Own Words* (1962), consequently Osborne was also a biographer of Shirdi Sai Baba (1838-1918), who in many ways was a precursor along with Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) to the Maharshi.

In 1947, while Hartung was in India on business, he was approached by Raja Rao (1908-2006), an Indian writer in a café, who was consequently a disciple of Sri Atmananda (Krishna Menon, 1883-1959), yet suggested to Hartung that he go to see Sri Ramana Maharshi. Hartung's encounter with Ramana Maharshi was decisive. Along with Paul Brunton (1898-1981) and Jean Herbert (1897-1980), Hartung became instrumental in making Sri Ramana Maharshi's teachings known to the French speaking public. In 1977, Henri Hartung and his wife Sylvie Hartung, established an Ashram in Switzerland named Centre de Rencontres Spirituelles et de Méditation (spiritual meeting and meditation centre), which also brought awareness of Ramana Maharshi's teachings. While Hartung's initial encounter with the Sage of Arunachala occurred in 1947 he

returned thirty-years later in 1977 and then in 1988 to be once again at Ramanasramam and this was his final darshan.

In the case of Osborne, he was introduced to Guénon's writings in the summer of 1936 through a personal friend that he knew from Oxford University, Martin Lings (1909-2005). "It was through Martin [Lings] that my wife and I were drawn to Guénon and thereby indirectly to Bhagavan." Osborne was thirty years of age at the time and was living in Poland with his wife and his newly born daughter. Lings had come to stay with them on his way back to Lithuania where he was an English lecturer at University of Kaunas. Osborne informs readers that from a young age he had very strong reservations regarding the modern world: "I intuitively rejected modern civilization."

One can see how this early intuition lead to his affiliation to a group that formed around Guénon's work; with Guénon's approval each had selected one of his works to translate. Lings translated *Orient et Occident* (1924) or *East and West* (1941) under the pseudonym William Massey and Osborne translated its sequel, *La Crise du Monde Moderne* (1927) or *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1942). Osborne in fact had a lot of correspondence with Guénon about the translation that he undertook. Guénon's work brought into focus the essential errors underlying the contemporary era with such precision and clarity which had never before been articulated. Osborne speaks of the extraordinary role that Guénon played in reclaiming the sacred origins of the premodern West: "He [René Guénon] probably did more than any other person to awaken Western intellectuals to their lost heritage by reminding them that there is a Goal and there are paths to the Goal." He additionally adds: "The one person who was instrumental more than any other in the restoration of traditional wisdom to the West was René Guénon."

While Guénon's function was not that of a spiritual master his books were not without a certain barakah or spiritual influence as Osborne confirms: "[H]e [Guénon] himself was not a guru and did not give initiation. Nevertheless, I am convinced that some spiritual influence flowed from him to those who read his books and re-directed their lives accordingly."

Hartung is said to have encountered the works of Guénon around 1938, when he was seventeen years old, through a friend named Olivier de Carfort. He recalls the tremendous impact of encountering Guénon's oeuvre: "A discovery, experienced as a revelation, of René Guénon, of metaphysics, therefore of Hinduism, and of the transformation of oneself." Hartung affirmed in a book dedication that he: "owes much to René Guénon who represented, for him, through what he had been and all that he had written, a permanent inner force." Hartung had met Michel Vâlsan (1911-1974) in Paris and began corresponding with Guénon through Vâlsan's recommendation; incidentally Vâlsan was also closely associated with Schuon.

It was through Guénon's insistence on participating in an orthodox spiritual path that both Osborne and Hartung entered Islam. It is important to note that Martin Lings, who was a friend and correspondent of Osborne, was also a close associate with both Guénon and Schuon, and he acted as a secretary to the former while he lived in Cairo, Egypt and was a disciple of the second. Martin Lings incidentally later became widely known throughout the Islamic world and was recognized as an immanent exponent of authentic Islam and Sufism. Osborne even discloses that: "If it had not been for the war we should probably have gone far enough West to seek initiation from Martin's [Lings] guru [Frithjof Schuon], but under the circumstances this was impossible." It is probable that Osborne had written correspondence with Schuon and that Hartung had met Schuon.

In August 1939, on a journey to India, Schuon accompanied by two English disciples, one of whom was John Levy or Premanandanath (1910-1976), who later became a disciple of Sri Atmananda and was by and large responsible for making his teaching known in the West was also highly influenced by Guénon. On a side note, Atmananda had a strong influence on Jean Klein (1912-1998), musicologist and doctor, who later became a spiritual teacher, who was influenced early on by Guénon. Klein's work continues on today through his student Francis Lucille (b. 1944).



John Maynard

Unfortunately for Schuon the trip to India was cut short as World War II had broken out, but they were able to stop in Cairo to visit Guénon en route. Levy wrote the following regarding the impact that Guénon had on his formative outlook that will resonate with many seekers:

“I owe to Guénon the sudden understanding that I and the universe are one and that this essential unity can actually be realized.... [H]is writings opened my eyes then and gave me a foretaste of the truth. His expression, ‘the Supreme Identity’, by which he referred to this essential oneness of the individual soul and the universal soul, struck the deepest chord in my being. It was this and one other thing that really gave me my direction. That other thing was the need of finding a competent personal guidance, without which absolute knowledge cannot be attained.”

Tibetan Buddhists, Marco Pallis (1895-1989) and Richard C. Nicholson (1905-1995), who revised Osborne’s initial translation of *The Crisis of the Modern World*, along with Ananda K. Coomaraswamy were responsible for pointing out Guénon’s errors with regard to Buddhism, which Guénon accepted. On a slightly tangential note, yet no less relevant, Pallis was an early associate of Chögyam Trungpa (1939-1987), and provided the introduction for his book *Born in Tibet* (1966). It was Trungpa who in many ways was responsible for introducing Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism to the West. While Guénon’s perspective was firmly grounded in Sankaracharya’s traditional point of view and true in and of itself, it did not allow for the Buddhist view of anatta or no-self and its complimentary expression of *atma* or Self to be validated in its own right. This was something that prompted Osborne to write *Buddhism and Christianity in the Light of Hinduism* (1959). Incidentally Osborne also took issue with Guénon’s rejection of reincarnation, yet Guénon again was only adhering to Sankaracharya’s dictum: “Verily, there is no other transmigrant than the Lord” (BrSBh 1.1.5). In 1947, Pallis and Nicholson accompanied by the son of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Rama P. Coomaraswamy (1929-2006) on a trip to India visiting

Guénon along the way in Cairo, also made a trip to Tiruvannamalai and received darshan from the Maharshi and circumambulated Arunachala known as *giri pradakshina*. ▲

At Your Feet

Sharada Bhanu

At your Feet, Ramana,
My work at your feet.
But the work's not mine
And where are your feet?
Where everything begins
Where you and I meet

Your work, then at your feet;
But where are your feet?
Listen to your Self
Your own heart beat

The work well done, and the work done ill
The work that saves and the work that kills
The work undone (I can't pay the bill)
I'll place all there if I can find out where

Ramana, I'll cast all my cares;
But where are your feet?
In the cave of the heart
Where everything starts

Ramana,
Where are your feet?
Where the 'I' repeats
Where the word retreats
Listen to your Self
Your own heart beat