

René Guénon and Sri Ramana Maharshi

Two Remarkable Sages in Modern Times

Part One

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Since that time [of the Kali-Yuga or 'dark age'], the truths which were formerly within reach of all men have become more and more hidden and inaccessible; those who possess them grow gradually less and less numerous, and although the treasure of 'non-human' wisdom that was before the ages can never be lost, it becomes enveloped in ever more impenetrable veils, which hide it from men's sight and make it extremely

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difficult to discover.... [T]hose who aspire to true knowledge must find [it] again; but it is also stated that what is thus hidden will become visible once more at the end of the cycle.

– René Guénon¹

Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) stands as one of the consummate spiritual pillars of the 20th century, yet in contrast one might ask who was René Guénon (1886-1951), the man that the Maharshi regarded as “the Great Sufi”?² We can safely assume given the stature of such a personage that this recognition was not made frivolously and without substantial cause. While no praises are necessary to validate his stature we recall that it was the great Hindu saint Sri Anandamayi Ma (1896-1982) who prostrated herself before the Maharshi’s tomb and pronounced: “He is the ocean and we are the rivers that run into it.”³ One of the twentieth-century’s most venerated exponents of Advaita Vedanta, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897-1981), said the following regarding the Maharshi: “It may have either rain or sun, either joy or sorrow, your faith must stay ever in Ramana.”⁴ Guénon’s own reverence for the Maharshi is documented in the several book reviews that he wrote on the Maharshi’s work, including his written correspondence with others.⁵ One relevant

¹ René Guénon, ‘The Dark Age’, in *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. Arthur Osborne (London: Luzac and Company, 1942), pp.10-11.

² Roger Maridot, ‘Forward’, to René Guénon, *Miscellanea*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, Cecil Bethell, Patrick Moore and Hubert Schiff (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. xviii. Xavier Accart in his book *Guénon ou le renversement des clartés: influence d’un métaphysicien sur la vie littéraire et intellectuelle française (1920-1970)* (Guénon or the Reversal of the Light: Influence of a Metaphysician on French Literary and Intellectual Life) indicates that it was Henri Hartung who asserted that Sri Ramana Maharshi declared that Guénon was ‘the Great Sufi’.

³ Anandamayi Ma, quoted in Arthur Osborne, ‘Retirement’, in *My Life and Quest* (2005), p.145.

⁴ Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, quoted in Henri Hartung, ‘The Path of Realization’, *The Mountain Path*, Vol. 22, No. 2. (April 1985), p.81.

⁵ René Guénon, ‘Reviews of Books: Other Authors’, in *Studies in Hinduism*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, ed. Samuel D. Fohr (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 147-153.

example is Guénon's lament for the loss of the Maharshi and that he: "understood the emotion only too well as the news of the death of Sri Ramana had also affected him likewise." And that he was: "very sad [...] for all those who would have still had a great need of his presence."⁶ When we inquire further into the relationship between these two remarkable figures that influenced and continue to influence seekers both of the East and the West, a vast and rich tapestry of interconnected personages converge and events unfold from within the narrative in an extraordinary manner. In fact, what emerges is not only a thread that weaves a web of interesting connections, significant as they may be, but a tour de force of the highest intellectual and spiritual rigour that has questionably appeared in the modern and postmodern world.

It is necessary to clarify from the start that we are not placing Guénon on equal footing with Sri Ramana Maharshi, for this would be an egregious error, including a fundamental distortion of Guénon's function, for unlike the Maharshi, he was not a spiritual master.⁷ Guénon on the other hand was a preeminent expositor of the integral metaphysics of the perennial philosophy, who diagnosed the bankruptcy of the modern West that was due to its forgetfulness of the Absolute and in this sense, he could however be considered a pandit, someone who transmits spiritual doctrine but does not function as a spiritual master. There are certain nuances that must not be overlooked with regard to their distinct roles while the Maharshi was equally universalist in his outlook, as he acknowledged the "transcendent unity of religions", he arguably did not have the same intellectual rigour as did Guénon with regard to the diverse revelations of the world nor did he perceive the fullness of the modern

⁶ Xavier Accart, 'Ramana Maharshi and René Guénon', *The Mountain Path* (July 2007), p.103.

⁷ "There is no misfortune worse than having disciples', Guénon wrote to Martin Lings, 'I would never have wanted to have any [disciples], not for anything in the world!' (letter to Martin Lings, July 26, 1950)" (Michael Oren Fitzgerald, 'Notes', in *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy* [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010], p.185).

malaise. In contradistinction, the Maharshi was a spiritual master who attained Deliverance (*moksha* or *mukti*) and applied this transcendent knowledge into practice, while Guénon's inner state we do not know and would be reluctant to speculate upon, for who knows how far his 'pure connaissance' took him?

Guénon is the founder of what later became known as the Traditionalist or Perennialist school comprised of eminent figures such as Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) and Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984) to name a few. Guénon humbly summarises his role: "I have no other merit than to have expressed to the best of my ability some traditional ideas."⁸ He additionally made it clear that the articulation of the traditional teachings of all-times and places was not a reflection of his own personal or subjective ideas: "[S]uch disposition becomes a homage rendered to the doctrine expressed by us in a way that is totally independent of any individualistic consideration."⁹ Similar to the Maharshi, Guénon was a jnanic type as he was born with a gift from above, yet his function was not that of a spiritual teacher:

"The pneumatic is in a way the 'incarnation' of a spiritual archetype, which means that he is born with a state of knowledge which, for others, would be precisely the end and not the point of departure; the pneumatic does not 'progress' to something 'other than himself,' he remains in place so as to become fully himself – namely his archetype – by progressively eliminating veils or husks, impediments contracted from the ambiance and possibly also from heredity."¹⁰

In the case of Schuon, he was also a jnanic type, yet he had a rare intellectual qualification that allowed him to plumb the depths of the spiritual heritage of all times and places and simultaneously the

⁸ René Guénon, quoted in Frithjof Schuon, 'René Guénon: Definitions', in *René Guénon: Some Observations* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p.5.

⁹ Marco Bastriocchi, 'The Last Pillars of Wisdom', in S. Durai Raja Singam, *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* (Kuala Lumpur: Khee Ment, 1974), p.356.

¹⁰ Frithjof Schuon, 'René Guénon: A Note', in *René Guénon: Some Observations* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p.6.



René Guénon

ability to apply this knowledge as a spiritual master, which Guénon himself confirmed.¹¹ Schuon's relationship with the Maharshi has also been explored¹² and it is important to note Schuon's high regard for the Sage of Arunachala:

“In Sri Ramana Maharshi one meets again ancient and eternal India. The Vedantic truth – the truth of the Upanishads – is brought back to its simplest expression but without any kind of betrayal.... That spiritual function which can be described as ‘action of presence’ found in the Maharshi its most rigorous expression. Sri Ramana was as it were the incarnation, in these latter days and in the face of the modern activist fever, of what is primordial and incorruptible in India.... The whole Vedanta is contained in the Maharshi's question ‘Who am I? The answer is: the Inexpressible.’¹³

It is useful to also recall that Ananda K. Coomaraswamy had also confirmed the remarkable stature of the Sage of Arunachala: “Sri Ramana Maharshi – probably the greatest living Indian teacher”.¹⁴ Whitall N. Perry (1920-2005), one of the few individuals acquainted with all four leading figures of the Traditionalist or Perennialist school, Guénon, Schuon, Coomaraswamy and Burckhardt, regarded the Maharshi as a “Hindu sage, noted for method of intellectual

¹¹ See Michael Oren Fitzgerald, ‘Descent of Responsibility’, in *Frithjof Schuon: The Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010), pp.36-41.

¹² See Mateus Soares de Azevedo, ‘Frithjof Schuon and Sri Ramana Maharshi: A Survey of the Spiritual Masters of the 20th Century’, *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, Vol. 10 (Winter 2002), pp.185-195.

¹³ Frithjof Schuon, ‘The Vedanta’, in *Language of the Self* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1999), pp.40-41.

¹⁴ Alvin Moore, Jr. and Rama P. Coomaraswamy (eds.), ‘Letter to Father Columba Carey-Elwes, OSB – June 14, 1947’, in *Selected Letters of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.87; “I have the highest respect for Ramana Maharshi and I think he ranks with Sri Ramakrishna. I should think it a great privilege to take the dust of his feet.” (S. Durai Raja Singam and Joseph A. Fitzgerald (eds.), ‘Sri Ramana Maharshi’, in *The Wisdom of Ananda Coomaraswamy: Reflections on Indian Art, Life, and Religion* [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2011], p.128).

penetration.”¹⁵ A widely renowned contemporary representative of the Traditionalist school, Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), said this of the Maharshi: “Sri Ramana Maharshi, one of the greatest recent spiritual figures of Hinduism.”¹⁶

Due to the widespread interest in the teachings of non-duality, not limited to Advaita Vedanta, but found at the heart of all of the religions, as it speaks most directly to the universal and uncoloured light underlying them all, we must emphasize the crucial role that both René Guénon and Sri Ramana Maharshi have in providing seekers of truth with discernment and reliable knowledge about the spiritual path. Regarding the authenticity of Guénon’s approach to the *sanatana dharma* or Hinduism, we must not overlook the following:

René Guénon was the first European who dared to affirm in the West the superiority of the Hindu spirit over the modern Western spirit, and, in the name of Eastern spirituality and that of the ancient West, dared mercilessly to criticize modern civilization as it has developed for about the last four centuries. It is absurd to claim that an author of European and Christian origin, who has studied, in Sanskrit, the sacred Scriptures of India and the commentaries of Sri Sankara and other sages, and who alone in the West places Hindu wisdom above all philosophies, has understood nothing of this wisdom. Guénon wrote much in his life. He expounded all the fundamental data that it is necessary to know in the West in order to understand India.¹⁷

While we could cite many sources that speak to the authenticity of Guénon’s comprehension of the Hindu *dharma*, including the other plenary traditions, we recall that:

¹⁵ Whitall N. Perry (ed.), ‘Index of Sources’, in *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p.1105.

¹⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr with Ramin Jahanbegloo, ‘What Is Spirituality?’ in *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), pp.168-169.

¹⁷ Frithjof Schuon, quoted from a letter to Atmananda Krishna Menon, Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude, ‘Notes’, in *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), p.142.

It was not until 1949, while staying in Benares, that I came to read Guénon's work. It had been recommended to me by Alain Daniélou (1907-1994), who had shown Guénon books to the orthodox Pandits [of India]. Their verdict was unequivocal: of all the Westerners who have studied Hindu doctrines, only Guénon, they said, has really understood their meaning.¹⁸

Given the radically compromised era of the present time and the diminishing of certain spiritual possibilities for seekers, it is not surprising that the teachings of non-duality have been appropriated by many pseudo-teachers of neo-advaita, including the New Age movement. For example many teachers within the contemporary spiritual milieu attempt to trace their lineage back to Sri Ramana Maharshi to establish their legitimacy, yet this is highly questionable to say the least.¹⁹ In this upside-down era, the fact that numerous individuals, who have neither a traditional religious and spiritual affiliation nor authorisation, are endeavouring to guide others, it is a sure sign of a decadent spiritual milieu. The Maharshi, emphasised not unlike other sages that: “[T]he Guru is always within you.”²⁰ While this is undoubtedly true and orthodox according to the different ways that immanence is expressed in the sapiential traditions, without prior transcendence there is no immanence. The less credulous have

¹⁸ Roger du Pasquier, quoted in Paul Chacornac, ‘The Call of the East’, in *The Simple Life of René Guénon*, trans. Cecil Bethell (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p.59. “One may cite in this regard the high regard in which the late and much revered Shaykh of Al-Azhar, ‘Abd al-‘alim Ma‘mud [1910-1978], held the person and the writings of René Guénon, one of the founders of the school of sophia perennis, to which Nasr belongs. This paragon of Muslim ‘orthodoxy’ went so far as to say that Guénon was one of those personalities who have rightfully taken up their place in history, and that ‘Muslims place him close to al-Ghazali and his like.

¹⁹ See Christopher Quilkey, ‘Editorial: Lineage’, *The Mountain Path* (April 2004), pp.3-7; Phillip Charles Lucas, ‘When a Movement Is Not a Movement: Ramana Maharshi and Neo-Advaita in North America’, *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2011), pp.93-114.

²⁰ Ramana Maharshi, ‘The Guru’, in *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi in His Own Words*, ed. Arthur Osborne (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1978), p.102.

taken this traditional adage and subverted it.²¹ Additionally, Sri Ramana also clarified that: “I have never said that there is no need for a Guru.”²² Many of these alleged teachers are antagonistic to the idea of spiritual authority, considering it as hierarchal and therefore authoritarian. Moreover, many of these so-called spiritual teachings appear to be an amalgamation of popular psychology or self-help with some traditional spirituality mixed in with it, underscoring its inclination to be working more on the level of psychology rather than that of spirituality.²³ The line that blurs the role of the therapist or psychologist from the traditional spiritual teacher is dangerous in that it gives the mistaken impression that modern psychology and its therapies can remedy what traditional religion and spirituality cannot or it attempts to place them on equal ground, which could not be farther from the truth.²⁴

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).²⁵ 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. ▲

(To be continued)

²¹ See René Guénon, ‘True and False Spiritual Teachers’, in *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, ed. Samuel D. Fohr (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p.110.

²² Ramana Maharshi, ‘The Guru’, in *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi in His Own Words*, ed. Arthur Osborne (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1978), p.95.

²³ Arthur Osborne, ‘Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi’, in *My Life and Quest*, p.105.

²⁴ René Guénon, ‘The Confusion of the Psychic and the Spiritual’, in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 235-240; Arthur Osborne, ‘Modern Idolatries’, in *Be Still, It Is The Wind That Sings*. (2003), p.378.

²⁵ Xavier Accart, ‘Ramana Maharshi and René Guénon’, *The Mountain Path* (July 2007), pp. 98-103. [Book Excerpt translated by Cecil Bethell].