

[Ren\[?\] Gu\[?\]non](#)

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Ren[?] Gu[?]non

First French Vedantist's Influence Still Strong In European Countries

Mathur, Rakesh In 1987, Robin Waterfield wrote *Ren[?] Gu[?]non and the Future of the West*, an authoritative biography of the famous French Vedantist. In an interview conducted at his Oxford, England, home, Waterfield spoke with HINDUISM TODAY correspondent Rakesh Mathur about Gu[?]non's life work, which is little-known outside France.

Robin Waterfield in conversation with Rakesh Mathur

I came to know about Gu[?]non way back in 1946, when I training with a Jungian analyst, Mrs. Tony Susman. Mrs. Susman introduced me to the writings of Swami Vivekananda and also a professor who knew Gu[?]non. I never met Gu[?]non personally, but in Paris I did a thorough research on his life in France. I met many of his colleagues and friends and familiarized myself with his milieu.

Gu[?]non admired Vedanta because it was both religion and philosophy. The vital form of it was so pure, impersonal, so direct and what he called "la v[?]rit[?] v[?]cu" ["experienced truth"]. He didn't just take Vedanta and put it up against some other philosophy and compare the two. He believed it is something that you have to live by.

Ren[?] Gu[?]non believed that there is a spirituality which lies above the great religious traditions of the world. He called it "a primordial tradition." He was born in France in 1886. His interest in Hinduism arose very early in his life and was promoted by reports of the World Parliament of Religion in 1893 in Chicago, where Swami Vivekananda spoke. Gu[?]non himself always felt that Swami Vivekananda adjusted his message rather too much to the western taste.

As early as 1922, Gu[?]non was proposing to do a thesis for his higher degree in Sorbonne, University of Paris, on Hinduism. He submitted a book. Introduction to Hindu Doctrine, for this purpose. But it was far too partisan. He felt deeply committed to the Hindu teaching of Hindu spirituality. The Sorbonne University authorities wanted something even handed, which Gu[?]non could not do.

In order to understand Vedanta at all, one needs a transformation, a change of outlook - your whole being and personality has to go along with your religion, with your devotion to your quest. It is not just a part of your life. Vedanta has to alter your whole life. Certainly it did that with Gu[?]non.

In the evolution of western understanding of the Vedanta and the Vedantic philosophy up to Gu[?]non, no other thinker actually adopted Vedanta as a philosophy of life. Max M[?]ller was a wonderful scholar, and he looked on the Sanskrit text as work for scholarship. But M[?]ller until late in his life remained a convinced Christian. When Keshab Chandra Sen [founder of the Brahmo Samaj in India] came over to Europe in 1860's and 70's, Max M[?]ller urged him to become a Christian.

Gu[?]non firmly believed that there was one principal unity - you may call it God or whatever - that can be contacted or related to by us human beings. It is not a matter of reason or intellectual thinking or rationality, but a direct intuition. It seems that the heart of Vedanta rests there. We [in Europe] cannot appreciate the rituals and emotional aspects of Vedanta, because they are not part of our culture. We can understand it as a literature.

[Gu[?]non thought] God was a clever mathematician, and this unemotional, unsentimental, unmystical direct approach appealed to him so much, and to many people today through him.

Unfortunately, we could not find out who Gu[?]non's guru was. But he always said that he had an authentic Vedanta teacher who taught him. It is for sure that this teacher was an Indian who visited Paris.

Gu[?]non kept on his wall a large portrait of an Indian woman. He never said who she was. There is no doubt that he gained a very comprehensive knowledge of the Advaita form of Vedanta through both direct oral teaching and book studies.

Gu[?]non never went to India. That is the extraordinary thing. In fact, he had only two residences in his life. First, as a young man, he went to live in Paris. He lived there until he left for Egypt ostensibly for a short visit to collect material on Sufism in 1931. He never came back.

He was deeply involved in Islam after Hinduism. I think that he found Islamic simplicity and Islamic mysticism very congenial. It seemed to mesh in the unitary "God is one" philosophy of his. He said emphatically that his adopting Islam was not a conversion. He would say, "I am a member of every great religious tradition. I admire and respect them all." Though the one he respected least was the one he was born into - Christianity.

He had great interest in mathematics. For that reason also, he found Islam congenial. He wrote about Chinese Taoism, and said that this was the purest expression of the primordial tradition. But the basic philosophical system which ruled all of them was the Advaita of Shankara.

Gu[?]non's influence is beginning to increase outside France. He always had followers in Europe. I think that he has been translated into almost every European language. He had a slightly contemporary follower called Julian Evano in Italy. Gu[?]non has become a part of studies of theology in America. In the seminaries, he is studied and even feared. Some people think that he is an advocate of a new paganism. In a book called, Pagan Temptation, by Prof. Thoma Molnar, there are many references to Gu[?]non. I don't think that the professor understands Gu[?]non but knows he is a force to be reckoned with in the western world. The professor thinks of Hinduism as polytheism. But I really think that we, the westerners, got over the myth about Hinduism - heathens bowing down in front of the wooded and stone statues. Unfortunately, there are still many westerners who would dismiss Hinduism as idol worshipping and maintain that Christianity has nothing of the sort in it.

Waterfield's Next Book

Besides writing about Gu[?]non, now I am engaged in doing a book which is a history of 150 years of Hindu missionary work in the West. I became interested in this subject by picking up a little book in French called The Modern Gurus. "Guru" is quite a marked feature of our western life. Gurus become the subject of newspaper yellow journalism, the subject of some amusement and entertainment and ridicule. But nobody knows about them very much. Well, I thought that I don't know very much about them myself. I had heard of them, their eccentricities, and I thought that this little book will be of interest.

I bought it and read it. I soon found that it was good in its way, but it only started with Vivekananda and ended with Ramakrishna Mission. Everything possible is known about Vivekananda. I found that he was not by any means the first of the Hindu missionaries (if we like the word in Christian terms) or preachers, thinkers or holy men who had come to the West.

It was not difficult for me to find that the first sincere Hindu to come to the West was the great Raja Ram Mohan Roy. I believe that Raja Ram Mohan Roy was essentially a religious man, beside being the father of India's free press and independence.

Roy was deeply influenced by the work of Christian missionaries. For a short time, he joined a Unitarian Church in India. He wanted to come to Europe, not primarily to teach Hinduism, but to gain technical information to raise the standard of living and the abilities of Indians so that they could be independent of the western influence. But throughout his stay in London and in Bristol, he had always been asked to preach. He gave a wonderful lecture to the Swedenborg Society. He was seen as a holy man.

I saw Roy as a man with a mission to present Hindu philosophy, Hindu religious ideas which had to be put across to the West. He came to England in 1830 but before he came here, he had caused quite a stir in America. He was the subject of innumerable articles in the American religious press at that time. Most of the members of the University of Harvard at that time were Unitarians. Ralph W. Emerson, who was at that time a student at Harvard, was enormously influenced by Ram Mohan Roy.

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