

Why Me?

[12/11/1963, a few weeks after Aldous Huxley's death] The publisher had suggested John Lehmann should write the biography. Laura [Huxley] asked me what I thought of the idea, so I had to tell her that John disbelieves in, and is aggressive toward, the metaphysical beliefs that Aldous held. All he would describe would be a clever young intellectual who later was corrupted by Hollywood and went astray after spooks.

Christopher Isherwood, Diaries Volume Two, p. 299

Within the Vedanta movement, too little is known of the depth of Christopher Isherwood's involvement. Many notable writers and thinkers have been a part of Vedanta's literary and intellectual legacy; they've come and gone, maybe thrown kisses from a distance; but none can compare to Isherwood in the faithful, selfless, enduring dedication of his formidable skills. And because Vedanta centers in the West are rare and spread out geographically, many Vedantists don't realize that the centers have evolved their own unique cultures and morphed over time, shaped by local conditions. Swami Prabhavananda's Southern California mid-twentieth century society was an original creation, not to be revealed by generalized texts.

But while this Christopher Isherwood research originally began as an assignment with a Vedanta audience in mind, my reading soon exposed a lack of understanding of, even disrespect for, Isherwood's religious aspirations and the religion itself by those presenting him to a broad public. He was aware of this hazard as described by him in the opening quote regarding interpreting Aldous Huxley's life and encountered it himself in reaction to his own more nakedly spiritual works. Intellectuals have often rejected the conclusions of writers or thinkers whose personal philosophies have taken a religious turn. Although they have initially admired their subject's intelligence, they feel free to either disregard or mock their subject's natural evolution if it differs from their own world view.

This is certainly true of writings on Christopher Isherwood, who was a character of such complexity that only a Christopher Isherwood could cover all the ground his life encompassed. For my part, I don't pretend to be competent to discuss Isherwood as a literary figure, a gay rights pioneer, a creature of the Hollywood movie studio culture, a buddy, or a mentor. But I do know first-hand the unique culture and the characters of the Southern California Vedanta Society and was present for the last six years of

Isherwood's active association there. In short, I'll write what I know, leave the rest to others, and hope they have the self-awareness to do likewise.

But lately there's been a new wrinkle: scholars who consider themselves tolerant of spirituality but take a very narrow view of what's intellectually permissible, and are sometimes not serious practitioners themselves. In general, they reduce Isherwood's Vedanta to a sterile, monochromatic, God-optional (but discouraged), easily memorized formula: Atman=Brahman. While this is arguably what it boils down to in the end, it misses the lively, sweaty, exhilarating trek to get there—to actually realize it—which is anything but antiseptic and facile; it's a full contact sport. The absence of respect for, or even knowledge of, methodology, let alone a personal God, diminishes the ability to fully understand the religious component of Isherwood's personality on *his* terms.

Intimates and admirers broadly sympathetic to his spiritual aspirations, yet missing the mark, are exemplified by Edmund White in his excellent preface to *Diaries Volume 3, Liberation*, who observes in all seriousness: “In America, Hinduism was more puzzling than anything. (‘Why didn't he go directly to Zen?’ most of us wondered; Hinduism seemed to Zen what Jung seemed to Freud: seedy, not very rigorous, slightly embarrassing)¹ This is as insightful as suggesting that Isherwood's life would have been simpler if he just became a heterosexual.

Conversely, Isherwood told a story involving his social group that included Igor Stravinsky. Stravinsky commented that Chris was not the musical one. Accepting this boundary with good humor, it's unlikely that Chris formed, let alone expressed, any opinion as to what key “The Rite of Spring” *should* have been composed in.

In the Vedanta circle, both John Yale (Swami Vidyatmananda) and Swami Yogeshananda (Six Lighted Windows²) were friends of his in earlier days and wrote their first-hand experiences of him. I've referred to their works often, especially John Yale's memoir [The Making of a Devotee](#).³ But none of their memoirs were exclusively about Isherwood; he was a supporting character in a larger story.

While not trying to suggest that I was in any way Isherwood's pal, I did have several interactions with him, both through the Vedanta Society and from being a denizen of that fabulous Tsunami Zone, pre-prosperity Westside L.A. Because I'm sometimes asked to relate the stories and as I'm old enough to be approaching my expiration date, I

intend to write them up informally, working title: *Throwing Spaghetti a la Isherwood at the Wall* to be posted on vedantawritings.com.

But truth be told, the reason I stuck with this research after its initial presentation was not to correct an either distorted or under-appreciated record. Every day I worked on it, I felt I had spent that day at Prabhavananda's Vedanta Society. Motivation enough.

¹ Diaries Volume Three, Liberation, Katherine Bucknell, HarperFlamingo, p.xiii.

² Vedanta Press (<https://vedanta.com>)

³ <https://ramakrishna.de/vidyatmananda>