

## Why Me?

[December 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<sup>1</sup>

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 themselves 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 of third party accounts 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 above opening quote regarding interpreting Aldous Huxley's life and encountered it himself in reaction to his own more nakedly spiritual works. For instance, of the 1945 *Time Magazine* article, written upon the publishing of *The Bhagavad Gita* by a reporter who actually came to the center to observe and interview first-hand, Isherwood writes, "The mistakes made by the writer—no more and no fewer than were to be expected—all became household jokes."<sup>2</sup>

Intellectuals have often rejected the conclusions of writers or thinkers whose personal philosophies have taken a religious turn. Although they have initially admired their

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries Volume Two*, Ed. Katherine Bucknell, Harper, p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *My Guru and His Disciple*, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980, p. 182.

<sup>3</sup> Swami Prabhavananda, Christopher Isherwood's *Disciple*, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980, p. 182. *Pratanjai*, Vedanta Press, 1970, p.

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 screenwriter and Hollywood partier, a buddy, or 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 association there until Swami's death. 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 flavor of spirituality is 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 of a personal God, diminishes the ability to fully understand the religious component of Isherwood's personality on *his* terms.

“For true religion is not ‘taught’ like history or mathematics; it is transmitted, like light or heat.”<sup>3</sup>

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 Three, Liberation*, who observes: “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).”<sup>4</sup> This is as insightful as suggesting that Isherwood's life would have been simpler if he just became a heterosexual.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Swami Prabhavananda, Christopher Isherwood, *How to Know God, the Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjai*, Vedanta Press, 1970, p. 150.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries Volume Three, Liberation*, Ed. Katherine Bucknell, HarperFlamingo, p.xiii. (Henceforth the Diaries will be identified as *Volume One, Volume Two, Volume Three*.)

In another subtly less abrasive but equally specious incident of unqualified speculation in White's preface, he "assumes" that Isherwood has reservations about dying because he will have to leave Don, but that as a Hindu Chris "must have imagined he'd join Don in a future life." This demonstrates a shallow, mid-century survey-course-in-World's-Religions understanding of Hinduism in general. However, Chris' Ramakrishna-Vedanta specifically teaches that freedom from further rebirth is the goal. And more specifically still, Prabhavananda's disciples were tasked with liberation in this very life. No future rebirth! Swami hammered this point. White's misconceptions only demonstrate that even if one has been close to Isherwood on many fronts, one is not necessarily qualified to hold forth on Isherwood's practice of Ramakrishna-Vedanta.

Within the Vedanta circle, both John Yale (Swami Vidyatmananda) and Swami Yogeshananda (Six Lighted Windows<sup>5</sup>) 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](#).<sup>6</sup> 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 buddy, 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.

I also want to take the opportunity to document my version of two events recorded in *My Guru and His Disciple* that Isherwood got wrong in the section Begging to Differ—My Guru, Too.

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.

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<sup>5</sup> Swami Yogeshananda, *Six Lighted Windows*, Vedanta Press (<https://vedanta.com>)

<sup>6</sup> <https://ramakrishna.de/vidyatmananda>