

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 Isherwood¹

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 literary 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, that Chris was a part of, was an original creation not to be revealed by generalized texts on Vedanta.

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 an oversimplification or lack of understanding of, even disrespect for, Isherwood's religious aspirations and the religion itself by those presenting him to a broad public. For instance, of the 1945 *Time Magazine* article, written upon the publishing of *The Bhagavad Gita* by a reporter who came to the center to observe first-hand, Isherwood writes, "The mistakes made by the writer—no more and no fewer than were to be expected—all became household jokes."²

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 worldview. Isherwood wrote of his first-hand experience in his essay *Hypothesis and Belief* "If a member of the so-called intellectual

¹ Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries Volume Two*, Ed. Katherine Bucknell, Harper, p. 299. (Henceforth the Diaries will be identified as *Volume One*, *Volume Two*, *Volume Three*.) Excerpts from DIARIES: Volumes 1, 2 and 3 by Christopher Isherwood, edited by Katherine Bucknell. Copyright © 1996, 2011 and 2013 by Don Bachardy, used by permission of The Wylie Agency LLC.

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

class joins any religious group...he will have to prepare himself for a great deal of criticism from his unconverted and more skeptical friends.”³

Christopher Isherwood 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 regular association there until Swami Prabhavananda'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.

Within the Vedanta circle, both John Yale (Swami Vidyatmananda) and Swami Yogeshananda (*Six Lighted Windows*⁴), both very fine writers, were Chris' friends and spiritual colleagues 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*.⁵ But none of their memoirs were exclusively about Isherwood; he was a vivid supporting character in a larger story.

While not trying to suggest that I was in any way Isherwood's pal, I did have several personal interactions with him, both through the Vedanta Society and from being a denizen of that fabulous Tsunami Zone, pre-prosperity Westside L.A. Our family was very fortunate in that we were Chris' drivers for a while in the 1970s during the gas crisis, which is where I got to know him best, hear wonderful tales, and interrogate him. He made one comfortable in his presence. This was at a time when Chris was so unnerved by his partner Don Bachardy's driving that he had to lie down in the back seat when Don drove. It's a testament to my partner Jon's driving that Chris sat shotgun without flinching.

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 in the presence of Swami Prabhavananda at his Hollywood Center. Motivation enough.

³ Christopher Isherwood, *The Wishing Tree, Christopher Isherwood on Mystical Religion*, ed. Robert Adjemian, Vedanta Press, 2002, p. 68.

⁴ Swami Yogeshananda, *Six Lighted Windows*, Vedanta Press.

⁵ *The Making of a Devotee* ramakrishna.de/vidyatmananda/ is an online book, free to the reader. As Kindle is touchy about links, all links and multimedia will be available at the portal mondajmedia.org/CIV.htm.