

Christopher Isherwood & the Monastery Part 2

“How delightful religion used to be—in the days when I wasn’t doing anything particular about it!”¹ Christopher Isherwood, September 1943

Introduction

Christopher Isherwood & the Monastery Parts 1 and 2 are an expansion of a section of a more wide-ranging biography, [Christopher Isherwood & Vedanta](#) (American Vedantist, December 15, 2014). Parts 1 and 2 will be incorporated into that larger piece. In *Christopher Isherwood & the Monastery, Part 1*, we’ve seen the circumstances for Isherwood’s monasticism, the cast of characters, the setting, the routine, and been privy to his inner-struggles with the life. But despite the struggles, these were his salad days. It is recommended that Part 1 be read in preparation for Part 2, which chronicles a losing battle, his painful departure from the monastery. Isherwood was certainly not alone in finding spiritual life sometimes an oasis, at other times a battlefield. Virtually all spiritual aspirants encounter the resistance waged by the ego that has been laid on the sacrificial altar.

To Be or Not

An exchange with Swami Prabhavananda that took place during the depths of Isherwood’s inner-struggles with monasticism may give us some insight into the mindset that overcomes these inevitable obstacles. As a very young monk, Swami Prabhavananda, Chris’ guru, had gone through a dry period where he lost his faith. Isherwood, in the throes of doubt and depression and uncertainty about remaining a monk, asked Swami if he had considered leaving the monastery at that time. Swami’s response: “Because I had stopped believing in God, that did not mean that I believed in the world.”²

But Chris believed in The World, and it believed in him right back. He was already a celebrity, a critically acclaimed novelist and working screen writer, a first son and heir, handsome, outgoing, popular, and most importantly, favored by Swami. Chris had a lot to renounce.

When we pick up the narrative, Isherwood’s monastic trajectory is changing. In his journal, he refers to the monastery/temple community as simply “Ivar Avenue.” Rather than arming himself against the passions as he had done initially with prayer, self-analysis, shrine time, and more prayer, he seems to be packing his bags, identifying those things that will serve him in maintaining a spiritual life outside the monastery. In hindsight, we will see that he actually utilized far fewer aids than he had anticipated. It may have boiled down to one abiding lifeline: Guru Bhakti.

Meanwhile, my prayer is: “Oh Lord, make something turn up! Either bounce me out of this way of life, or bounce me deeper into it, but don’t leave me stranded on the edge.” He won’t either. I know that. The mere movement of life will carry me somewhere. Meanwhile, I just have to keep my head above water.³

Swami Prabhavananda initially prescribed increasingly demanding spiritual disciplines for the fledgling monk, seemingly not allowing spare time for Isherwood’s mind to stray; but, knowing his disciple well, while not entirely abandoning the strategy of piling on the japam, Swami seems to be helping Chris secure those things to take with him into the world. Isherwood notes that Swami began to make spontaneous, seemingly unsolicited comments like “One thing I can promise you. You will never regret having come here. Never.”⁴

Isherwood became increasingly depressed, plagued by lust, and negative about monastic life. While sometimes extolling the virtues of transculturalism: “To *live* this synthesis of East and West is the most valuable kind of pioneer work I can imagine ...”⁵ he also mentions, “I realize now how little I usually regard him [Swami Prabhavananda] as an Oriental—and this is slightly disconcerting.”⁶

He notes that occasionally in the presence of a group from other cultures, as for instance an assemblage of Swamis, Swami Prabhavananda would culturally shape shift, easily at home with the trappings of another culture. This social flexibility would prove essential to the mission of the Gita translation, which we will discuss in depth later. Isherwood articulates his grievance with cultural imposition as such:

What I didn’t mention in my last entry is that a good deal of my state of tension was concerned with India: Swami Vishwananda, and the arrival of a copy of the rules and regulations of the Belur Math. My God, I thought, what is this gang I am joining? Is it to be curry and turbans unwinding uphill all the way to the very end?⁷ Swami was quite wonderful, because he answered my fears and doubts indirectly, telepathically almost, by asking me to write a letter to the Math for him, explaining that their rules could not possibly apply to western probationers. “If they refuse to change,” he said, “I should leave the order!” What a little rock of safety he is!⁸

This conflict regarding the proper cultivation of a transplant (Vedanta) in alien ground (the West), where to distinguish between essential religion and non-essential local culture, would continue to play itself out for the rest of Swami Prabhavananda’s life.

But Isherwood’s major adversary was not culture, but lust. Swami, while recognizing the disruptive quality of lust, never made Isherwood feel guilty or hopeless. Isherwood did that ad nauseam all by himself. “April 18th: Talked to Swami after breakfast and told him about yesterday. I forget already just exactly what he said—it was the way he said it that

matters. No, it didn't make any difference if I left this place: it would always be my home. God wasn't specially here. Acts aren't important in themselves. It's no good promising not to do things. 'That's your Christian training,' said Swami smiling."⁹

So what is the "Vedanta training"? "...As Sri Krishna tells us, 'no one who seeks Brahman ever comes to an evil end.' And so, even when such a lapse takes place, we may believe that the spiritual aspirant will eventually find his way back to the path..."¹⁰ Swami also told him, "Do you know what purity is, Chris? Purity is telling the truth."¹¹ As many times as Swami tried to instill this teaching, Isherwood himself couldn't shake the guilt he associated with lust.

Chris' malaise became an urgently difficult dry period. Isherwood cited others in the community as similarly afflicted at this time, painting it as a shared hysteria at "Ivar Avenue." The other Family members he cites, however, weren't the ones who would succeed at monastic life. Those more successful ones drop out of the sight of the journals. Indeed, they were not the ones he spent most of his time with or confided in. He seemed to prefer the company of saucier Family members. To cite an example of an outstanding living community resource, in Part 1, we introduced Sister (Mrs. Carrie Mead Wyckoff, known as Sister Lalita, one of the Mead Sisters who had hosted Swami Vivekananda in Pasadena during his second American tour and also had association with other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna.) She was considered by many, including Swami Prabhavananda, a saint. Isherwood had respect for her through the lens of Swami's reverence, but he doesn't record personal contact or even curiosity about her, even though Sister was humble and accessible. Likewise, he had association with many of the second generation swamis, the disciples of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna himself, but wasn't impressed by them. The most he could muster was finding Swami Vivedishananda likeable.

I've just had a talk with Swami, alone. I told him that I feel so frustrated whenever there are any rules to follow. He said that there aren't any rules; you were just to do what you felt you had to. I said I felt bothered by pujas. He said, well then, don't come to them.¹²

At this time, he even lost his taste for the worship, an assignment he previously praised as being beneficial. The irritation continued:

...a day or two ago, Swami said to Madhabi in my presence: "Why do you read novels? All books that do not give the word of God are just a trash." So I worked this up into a sulk, the usual kind—that I'm not "understood" here, that Swami hates art, and that this is what keeps all my friends away from Ivar Avenue, etc. *[However, instructions are very specific to the individual. While Swami may say this to one, it is not an overarching prescription for all.]* Actually—don't I know it

all too well?—I'm merely sulking because I want to go off and play around X. I worked off some spite at the committee meeting of the Vedanta Society by announcing that I'd resign from being president this year.

April 14th Swami sitting on the temple steps this morning, asked me so sweetly why I resigned from the committee. I put it that I just dislike taking any official position here because I want to feel free to walk out at a moment's notice. Swami accepted this as though it were the whole truth—and, as usual, his love and utter lack of egotism melted me completely, I suppose that's what Brahmananda [Swami Prabavananda's guru] did to you: you felt he was more on "your" side than you were yourself. "I'm thinking of nothing but your own good": only a saint can honestly say that.¹³

But this period of restless dissatisfaction was to be determinative. As we've seen, Isherwood took sabbaticals to Santa Monica, staying with old friends, outings he called "backsliding." On this particular trip, his restlessness followed him to his getaway. We include the following because it illustrates the unusually wide range of choices available to Isherwood.

Last night, because I was so bored, I found myself doing what I would have least expected—hunting up Tennessee Williams. I located him, after some search, at a very squalid rooming house called The Palisades, at the other end of town—sitting typing a film story in a yachting cap, amidst a litter of dirty coffee cups, crumpled bed linen and old newspapers. He seemed not in the least surprised to see me. In fact, his manner was that of a meditative sage to whose humble cabin the world-weary wanderer finally returns. He took it, with discreetly concealed amusement, as the most natural thing in the world that I should be having myself a holiday from the monastery. We had supper together on the pier and I drank quite a lot of beer and talked sex the entire evening. Tennessee is the most relaxed creature imaginable: he works till he's tired, eats when he feels like it, sleeps when he feels inclined. The autoglide [motor scooter] has long since broken down, so Tennessee has stopped paying for it, and the dealer is suing him, and he doesn't give a damn.¹⁴

It was on this break, at the 6 month mark, that he broke his celibacy. He considered it trivial at the time and not particularly enjoyable; but it was the first of repeated casual encounters. Ultimately, he embarked on a more serious liaison.

How many times must I repeat it: at the moment of action, no one is free? What happened the other day could never have happened if I hadn't been lounging and slacking for days before. The whole time I was in Santa Monica, I scarcely meditated once, or told my beads, or kept up any discipline at all. The act itself

was nothing. I only mind about it because it breaks a record and hurts my vanity...It's amazing how one blinds oneself. How, with closed eyes like a sleepwalker—or like one who is *pretending* to sleepwalk—one edges nearer and nearer to the table on which the candy stands.¹⁵

In 1943, Chris had become infatuated from a distance with a young man he called “X.”, the pseudonym rendering “X” glamorous.¹⁶ For a long time, Isherwood felt he could just flirt with the thought of “X,” never letting the fantasy break through the surface. But he writes that he is “falling in love” with “X.” It became a long-standing, but for X, casual relationship. And while being a critical mass for leaving, the relationship fell apart, as a result of Chris’ jealousy, around the time Chris left the monastery.

A day in the life of the “X” fever:

Finished Vespers. Ate a sardine supper. Put in a final fifteen minutes, to make up seven hours. I feel a kind of stolid, forlorn satisfaction; nothing more. Terribly tired. I'm like a nursemaid who has been dragged around all day by a spoilt child, full of energy and whims and demands. The child is asleep at last; but he'll be awake at crack of dawn and rarin' to go. Oh God, I am so sick of him, and his complaints, and his damn love affair. He needs a sound whipping.¹⁷

While still struggling to hang in at Ivar Avenue, Chris hits on a plan.

Sometimes, I feel that everything would be solved if I could get the right kind of person here. Somebody who had the same problem as myself. Somebody who spoke my language. Somebody I could talk to. But I know that this is only another attempt to wriggle away from the relationship I have to cultivate: the relationship to the shrine and what it stands for. Everything else is a substitute, and would end as all substitutes end.¹⁸

The above statement is curiously circular. He wants to fill his loneliness with a worldly companion but by the end of the paragraph recognizes that anything short of the Divine is a dodge that will only end in failure, and yet, still wants that human solution. An old friend, Vernon, has finished his military obligation and has become available. At this point, the social historic context should be addressed. In the journal, Isherwood is nonspecific about relationships, so we only go as far as he mentions as to their nature. He also tends to use pseudonyms for his friends. We must keep in mind that in the 1940s and later, homosexuals were in constant jeopardy. Exposure could mean career destruction, blackmail, forcible commitment to mental institutions for draconian and permanently damaging treatments, and even jail, so Isherwood's discretion is not surprising. His own openness is all the more impressive.

He finally confessed everything to Swami.

After breakfast, I went into Swami's study and told him everything—all about my relations with X. Swami rose to the occasion, as he always does. "Once you have come to Ramakrishna, you will be taken care of," he said: "I promise you that. Even if you eat mud, you will be alright."

I also told him about my plans for Vernon. I said we would want to live separately, maybe around the corner. Swami agreed to everything, but of course I can see he wants to get Vernon into the family, right from the start. He said, "I don't want you to leave here, Chris. I want you to stay with me as long as I'm alive. I think you'd be all right even if you left here. But I want you...I think you have the makings of a saint."

I laughed. I was really staggered. "No," said Swami, "I mean it. You have devotion. You have the driving power. And you are sincere. What else is there?"¹⁹

Again we should reiterate that different disciples were treated differently. Generalizations can't be made from Swami's discipline of Chris of which Isherwood writes:

But the fact remains that *he* is much more lenient towards me than he is toward the others. I don't think this proves anything either way, except that I'm much more tiresome and demanding. Maybe, also, that Swami realizes what a lot of karmas I dragged into Ivar Avenue out of the past. With Sarada, who's young and has a real vocation, he can afford to be strict; and in many ways, I think he's fonder of her than of any of us. It's really no compliment to be let off lightly: it means I'm too weak to be disciplined.²⁰

When Vernon arrived in August 1944, Chris rented a studio apartment for him in the neighborhood and planned to join him there; but, as Chris has mentioned, Swami had other plans. Coincidentally, that summer, Spencer Kellogg had offered Ananda Bhavan, one of his houses overlooking Montecito, to Swami and The Family for their summer retreats. After absorbing Vernon into the community, Swami suggested that he stay at the beautiful Montecito property, thereby putting space, roughly 100 miles, between Vernon and Chris; but there was also quite a bit of commuting between Hollywood and Montecito. Swami instructed Chris: "...that when I go up to Ananda Bhavan he wants me to make a great deal of japam." Saying, "When once you are established in that, you can go anywhere. It is all the same."²¹

That summer of 1944, Mr. Kellogg donated the property to Swami Prabhavananda. Here are the circumstances of the gift from Gopal Stavig's [Ramakrishna-Vedanta in Southern California](#)

Swami Prabhavananda first met Spencer Kellogg in 1941, when he went to the latter's home in Montecito to pick up Nikhilananda. Subsequently, Spencer made an appointment to have an interview with Prabhavananda in Hollywood. Prabhavananda later initiated him, but only after he had received permission from Nikhilananda, who had met him first. Some time later Spencer[,] who had a bad heart, offered his beautiful country estate, which he named Ananda Bhavan (Sanskrit for Home of Peace) and "the Divine Mother's place" to the Vedanta Society. Because of the potential tax burden on the Society, Prabhavananda turned down his offer.

Sister Amiya Corbin tells us: When Mr. Kellogg offered to lend his home for the summer vacation in 1944, Swami gladly accepted. One day while taking his walk, Swami came upon Mr. Kellogg sweeping up the leaves under the eucalyptus trees around the little temple he had built on the property. As he drew near he heard Mr. Kellogg talking to himself, saying, "I must give this place to Swami. And now I will also provide an endowment which will maintain it." Deeply touched, Swami went up to Mr. Kellogg who until then had been unaware of his presence, and taking his hand said, "All right. Mr. Kellogg. We accept your offer." Legal plans for the transference of the property followed, so that in the spring of 1945, shortly after the unexpected sudden death of Mr. Kellogg in December of 1944, the Society came into possession of the property with its several buildings and twelve acres of land near Santa Barbara.²²

Even though the time Chris and Vernon spent together had been limited, the relationship cracked along the same fault lines that had originally broken it before Chris' time in the monastery.

The Bhagavad Gita Translation²³

Swami had originally drawn Isherwood into the monastery to work on a translation of the Bhagavad Gita, the first of many such collaborations between the two. Chris mentions working on the translation throughout 1943, but in November of that year, the work dramatically took shape. We relate two first person accounts of the events, the process, and the impetus, both Swami Prabhavananda's and Christopher Isherwood's. They differ slightly and present different perspectives, which demonstrates the uncertain nature of histories.

Here are Swami Prabhavananda's comments about how the translation came about:

Once I was away for a rest in Palm Springs. I had a Gita translation with me. When I read the twelfth chapter, I felt that the meaning had not been brought out; I saw deeper meaning in it. So I started to translate, and then Chris helped me.

I translated and Chris edited. When Peggy Kiskadden came, she read what we had done and could not understand it. Then we went to Aldous [Huxley]. Chris

read aloud, and Aldous listened. Aldous said, “No, that is not right yet. Forget that Krishna is speaking to the Hindus in Sanskrit. Forget that this is a translation. Think that Krishna is speaking to an American audience in English.”

...Chris rewrote the whole eleventh chapter of the Gita following Tennyson, I think. He produced the book in a week. He was inspired.”

It must be mentioned that Isherwood was by no means a Sanskrit scholar. Here is how he describes the division of functions:

Our work on the Gita was, for me, not only a literary problem but an education in Vedanta philosophy. Even if the result had not been intended for publication, I should have felt that every moment of it was worthwhile. For the slow, thorough-going process of translating a text—considering all the significance of each word and often spending a day on three or four verses—is the ideal way to study, *if* you have a teacher like Prabhavananda.

The swami’s English was fluent and his knowledge of Sanskrit equally good... At that time, I knew no Sanskrit whatsoever; even today I ... could easily write down my little vocabulary on one side of a postcard. My share of the collaboration was therefore secondary. Prabhavananda told me the meaning of a phrase; we then considered how its meaning could best be conveyed in English.²⁴

The Prabhavananda Gita introduced many Sanskrit terms into the American vocabulary. Isherwood explains at length that certain Sanskrit words must remain in their original as there are no concise English language equivalents. This new vocabulary was also personally important to him. He writes “My prejudices [against religion] were largely semantic. I could only approach the subject of mystical religion with the aid of a brand new vocabulary. Sanskrit supplied it. Here were a lot of new words, exact, antiseptic, uncontaminated...Every idea could be made over.”²⁵

From the Translator’s Preface of the *Gita* we read:

Extremely literal translations of the Gita already exist. We have aimed, rather at an interpretation. Here is one of the greatest religious documents of the world: let us not approach it too pedantically as an archaic text which must be jealously guarded by university professors. It has something to say, urgently, to every one of us. We have to extract that message from the terseness of the original Sanskrit.

Here is how Isherwood describes the artistic breakthrough:

November 22, 1943: After much hesitation, Peggy confessed that she thinks our version really isn’t much better than any of the others. It’s dull and it’s clumsy and it reeks of Sanskrit. What’s more, she’s already talked to Aldous (who’s seen some of it) and he agrees. It was an awful moment, because, once she’d said it,

it was only too obvious. I felt a wave of depression sweep over me—and Swami, seeing how I felt, suddenly turned very small and grey and shrivelled, a bird on a winter bough. And then—it was really amazing—I saw, in a flash, what was wrong. I went to my room with the manuscript. Our version began:

Oh changeless Krishna, drive my chariot between the two armies who are eager for battle, that I may see those whom I shall have to fight in this coming war. I wish to see the men who have assembled here, taking the side of the enemy in order to please the evil-minded son of Dhritarashtra.

In about a half an hour, I had turned this into:

Krishna the changeless,
Halt my chariot
There where the warriors,
Bold for the battle,
Face their foemen.
Between the armies
There let me see them
The men I must fight with,
Gathered together
Now at the bidding
Of him their leader,
Blind Dhritarashtra's
Evil offspring:
Such are my foes
In the war that is coming

I brought this back and showed it to Swami and Peggy, and they were both very excited. I'm excited myself—because it opens up all sorts of possibilities. I now realize how horribly bored I was with the old translation. I don't see my way clearly, yet, but obviously this method can be applied throughout the book. There should be several kinds of verse, including, maybe, some hexameters; and I think I can vary the prose style too. We are going to Aldous this evening, to discuss the whole thing with him.

December 9, 1943: Since our decision, the revised Gita has been going ahead as if by magic. I've never worked so hard. The whole thing seems to be already in my head: It's as though I'd been secretly assembling it there, like an invading army, all these months. Unfortunately—perhaps due to the strain and excitement—I've started smoking again, more than ever. At first it made me sick to my stomach, but I kept right at it.²⁶

Until the manuscript was completed, Chris stayed on the temple grounds; he didn't want to be physically separated from Swami.

June 20, 1944: Marcel Rodd is going to take over the distribution, and publish the next edition. ...He's a strange, pale, little shrimp of a man, with great dark eyes, full of a sort of sly, boyish impudence. He's English—with Levantine blood; a Jew, I think. He makes Swami become much more Oriental than usual: they meet, as it were, at a halfway house in the Near East, and sit bargaining and giggling, understanding each other perfectly.²⁷

The book's association with Aldous Huxley and Christopher helped to bring it to the public's attention, being an incentive for both Marcel Rodd to publish and a *Time Magazine* to write an article. In January, 1945, a writer from *Time Magazine* came to the temple and interviewed Swami and Chris. At the time, even though many translations already existed, the general public knew almost nothing about the Gita.²⁸

In [February 1945 Time Magazine Magazine \(see original article\)](#) printed the article, praising the Gita translation, calling it "a distinguished literary work." Isherwood writes of the article and the Family's response:

The mistakes made by the writer—no more and no fewer than were to be expected—all became household jokes. There was the "alabaster" temple, the "small house" in which four men and eight women live "monastically," the robe which "sweeps to the floor," the "dispassionate" ceremony (whatever that might mean) which lasts just over ten minutes, three times a day.

Swami joined in our laughter, but he was perfectly satisfied with what had been written. He didn't take offense at the three adjectives used to describe him—"slight," "agreeable," "cigaret-smoking"—which I read as a condescending put-down. He found it no more than my due that the writer had featured me as the star of the Vedanta Society. The publicity didn't repel him, it made him prouder of me. On such occasions he was truly a father.²⁹

However, the Time reporter included a popular speculation concerning Chris and [The Razor's Edge](#). John Yale (Swami Vidyatmananda) writes:

In the mid 1940's a rumor became widespread which served to focus attention upon the possible pertinence of Indian mysticism to Westerners. It was known that Christopher Isherwood was living or had lived in a Hindu ashrama in Hollywood as the disciple of an Indian swami; and Maugham, who was a friend of Isherwood's, had just published a novel about a westerner who had become a Vedanta adept. Surely, then, Isherwood must be the prototype of Larry? It is strange that such an idea could take hold, since it is difficult to imagine two individuals more dissimilar than Maugham's Illinois-born hero and the British

writer. However the rumor persisted, and it was circulated by *Time* magazine. This called forth an interesting response from Isherwood, printed in *Time's* December 17, 1945, issue: ". . . I am not, as you have twice stated in your columns, the original, or part-original, of Larry in Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*. I can stand a good deal of kidding from my friends, but this rumor has poisoned my life for the past six months, and I wish it would die as quickly as possible."³⁰

Although Maugham would have been a better judge as to whether Larry was, at least in part, our Chris.

Throughout the nearly two years in the monastery, Chris had been looking for commercial writing work but hadn't succeeded in finding any. He did, however, write the novel *Prater Violet* at the monastery. Soon after the publishing of the Gita and resultant *Time Magazine* publicity, Isherwood was offered and accepted a job at Warner Brothers Studios. It was as though his assignment was complete and he was being released. He writes, "Up to that point, I was a monastic, despite my backslidings. Now I became a screenwriter who happened to be living in a monastery."³¹

The journal ends for several years on December 31, 1944. It would resume on December 26, 1949. This is that last entry:

Something has happened. Or rather, nothing has happened but I accept that nothing. Suddenly, I feel quite calm. Sure, I ought to stop seeing X., or leave Ivar Avenue, or both. I ought either to get a movie job or start a new story. But the whole problem—just because it seems insoluble at present—has to be accepted for what it is, and simply offered up. I'll let it develop and try to stop worrying. Sooner or later—probably much sooner—X. will go away. Sooner or later, I shall write another story, or get work, or money, or go East or to England. Nothing that is happening or may happen really prevents me from doing the one thing which ultimately matters. Make japam, watch and wait. Put all your emphasis upon that. Everything—even your scruples about your conduct—is vanity, in the last analysis. Never mind what other people think of you. Never mind what you think of yourself. Go ahead with the only valid activity, the one which never fails. Stop trying to tidy up your life. Stop making vows—you'll only break them. Less fussing and more faith. You've been an awful nuisance lately, but I forgive you. No, don't thank me. No more tears, I beg. Blow your nose, and pull up your socks, and shut up. You don't have to be a grim old stoic, either. Your life could be such fun. Now run along and enjoy yourself. And let's try to make this a *happy* new year.³²

Soon Isherwood would leave the monastery and the X. affair would end. As the contemporaneous journal entries had ended, what he has written of his final days at the monastery come from *My Guru and His Disciple*, written over 30 years after the fact. In looking back on his experience, Isherwood wrote:

When I asked myself, shouldn't I have left the Center much sooner than I did, I find that I can't say yes. It now seems to me that my humiliation and my guilt feelings were unimportant. By staying on, I was getting that much more exposure to Swami, which was all that mattered. Every day I spent near him was a day gained. And that I had lost the respect of many outside observers was, on the whole, good—or at least it was a thousand times better than if I had fooled anybody into thinking me holy.³³

The Take-away

February 28, 1944: Swami has been sick. Now he's recovered. He sits on the sofa and we forget him. We play, unmindful like children, in the completely uninteresting certainty of their father's love. If we cut our fingers, we'll remember and run to him at once. It isn't a relationship because there's no element of surprise, No possibility of change. He could not cease to care for us. Our demand on him is total and quite merciless. *Of course* he is and will be there—now, tomorrow, whenever we decide we want him.³⁴

Religion for Isherwood was overwhelmingly personal. The following statements illustrate his attitude:

7/16/43: Yes—I know all these things out of books; but until Swami himself points them out to me I never really believe them.³⁵

Lately, I have arrived at this formulation: religion—as I understand it—means a relationship. Either directly with God, or with someone who has a relationship with God: belief in another's belief—as I have with Swami.³⁶

And most explicitly:

...why do I believe in God? Not for any reason that would sound well in a sermon. I have had no visions, or revelations, or direct experience—except of the most cloudy and untrustworthy kind. No, I believe in the belief of others—that's all, and yet it's more than enough. I don't mean the belief that the saints had...I mean that a man I have actually met—the Swami—believes in God so entirely, so simply, so calmly, so intelligently and so lovingly, that I am bound to say, in all my quite large experience of human beings, disbelief has never produced a representative one quarter as convincing.³⁷

The guru, like a good doctor, prescribes treatments appropriate to the subject's condition. At first glance, Chris' relationship to Swami may look like guru bhakti. But the relationship with Isherwood has an extra component. Swami was a father to Chris, who had lost his own father at a young age, and not just a spiritual father, but a surrogate earthly father. The bond is expressed by both of them repeatedly throughout their lives.

Isherwood enjoyed an ease with Swami that was quite unusual and very much under Swami's control. (One withering look would shut down anyone getting too cute.) Isherwood's statement regarding Vidyatmananda's relationship to Swami illustrates the variety of experiences: Vidyatmananda told Chris that "...he longs to have a frank talk with Swami, but he can't, he is afraid of him. (Afraid of Swami! That only shows me how many different Swami's there must be, for different people.)"³⁸

After *The Writer and Vedanta*, a talk Chris gave at the Hollywood Temple, Swami Prabhavananda's closing words were simply, "I'll just make a short remark. I feel like a proud father." (Listen to the sound clip here: <http://www.mondaymedia.org/SPF.mp3>)

So what did Chris take away to sustain his spiritual life? From continuing the reading of the journal, his meditation and japam didn't sustain him or vice versa. It was rather his lifelong devotion to and continued association with his guru that carried him.

¹ Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries, Volume One*, ed. Katherine Bucknell, (Harper Flamingo), 1997, 317

² Ibid. 306

³ Ibid. 317

⁴ Ibid. 308

⁵ Ibid. 308

⁶ Ibid. 302

⁷ "Up-Hill," Christina Rossetti

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?

Yes, to the very end.

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?

From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?

A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.

May not the darkness hide it from my face?

You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?

Those who have gone before.

Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?

They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?

Of labour you shall find the sum.

Will there be beds for me and all who seek?

Yea, beds for all who come.

⁸ Isherwood, *Journals*, 305

⁹ Ibid. 344

¹⁰ Swami Prabhavananda Christopher Isherwood, *How to Know God, The Yoga Aphorisms of Pantajali*, Vedanta Press, 1970, 198

¹¹ Isherwood, *Journals*, 328

¹² Ibid. 353

-
- ¹³ Ibid. 343
- ¹⁴ Ibid. 311
- ¹⁵ Ibid. 314
- ¹⁶ Years later, Isherwood rechristened X “Alfred” in *My Guru*, saying that “Alfred” was humdrum a name as he could come up with.
- ¹⁷ Isherwood, Journals, 349
- ¹⁸ Ibid. Ibid. 316
- ¹⁹ Ibid. 352
- ²⁰ Ibid. 353
- ²¹ Ibid. 363
- ²² <http://www.vedantawritings.com/HVS3.pdf>
- ²³ An overlapping but different account [*The History and Impact of the Swami Prabhavananda – Christopher Isherwood Bhagavad Gita Translation*](#) by Jon Monday can be read at the American Vedantist website June 15, 2018.
- ²⁴ Christopher Isherwood, [*The Wishing Tree*](#), ed. Robert Adjemian, (Harper & Row) 1986, 182-183.
- ²⁵ Isherwood, *Diaries, Volume One*, ed. Katherine Bucknell.
- ²⁶ Ibid. 328-30
- ²⁷ Ibid. 350
- ²⁸ Christopher Isherwood, *My Guru and His Disciple* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980) p. 181
- ²⁹ Ibid. 182-3
- ³⁰ John Yale, [*The Making of a Devotee*](#)
- ³¹ *My Guru*, 185
- ³² Isherwood, Journals, 379
- ³³ *My Guru* 188
- ³⁴ Isherwood, Journals, 335
- ³⁵ Ibid. 303-4
- ³⁶ Ibid. 749
- ³⁷ Ibid. 284
- ³⁸ Ibid. 667