

## VI. Literary Works (1950-1976)

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### 1. Swami Prabhavananda

Swami Prabhavananda contributed greatly to bringing the essential message of Vedanta to the West. The sixteen books he wrote can be grouped into five categories. A more detailed discussion of his pre-1950 works appears earlier in this book.

(1) **Translations of religious scripture** (4): *Srimad Bhagavatam: The Wisdom of God* (1943); *Bhagavad-Gita* with C. Isherwood (1944); *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination* with C. Isherwood (1947); and *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal* with F. Manchester (1948).



Swami Prabhavananda

*Crest Jewel of Discrimination (The Vivekachudamani)*. This technique adds life to his commentaries, making them both illuminating and interesting to read. Such a comparative analysis helps to illustrate the similarities between the scriptures of various religions, and also within the subdivisions of the Hindu tradition. Furthermore, Prabhavananda's books are not dry, ponderous, intellectual treatises, but discussions of spiritual ideas and practices.

Swami Prabhavananda's commentary on the *Yoga Sutras* provides us with insights like the following:

The scriptures are based upon the superconscious knowledge obtained by the great spiritual teachers while in the state of perfect yoga. Therefore, they also are right knowledge. They represent a kind of direct perception far more intimate than the perceptions of the senses, and the truths they teach can be verified by anyone who attains to this superconscious vision [p. 25].... We are to live so that no harm or pain is caused by our thoughts, words or deeds to any other being. In a positive sense, this means that we must cultivate love for all, and try to see the Atman within everybody. We must think

of ourselves as the servants of mankind, and be ready to put ourselves at the disposal of those who need us [p. 141].... Bhakti yoga is the path of loving devotion to God. It is expressed by means of ritual worship, prayer and japam. It is the cultivation of a direct, intense, personal relationship between worshiper and worshiped. In the practice of bhakti yoga, some special aspect of God, or some divine incarnation, is chosen, so that the devotee's love may become more easily concentrated [pp. 154-55].

Concerning *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali*, two Indian scholars and a reviewer for an American periodical observed:

It is in the fitness of things that one of the celebrated monks of the Ramakrishna Order in collaboration with the well-known writer Christopher Isherwood undertook the task of translating the *Yoga Sutras* into English and also providing an illuminating commentary thereon, avoiding the technicalities of the system and putting it in a very lucid manner suited for the modern mind. The truths of the Yoga philosophy have been reaffirmed and strengthened here through the parallel utterances from the lips of Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Shankara, Kabir, Buddha, and other mystics of the East and West as well as through quotations from eminent modern scientists like Schrodinger. This makes the book eminently readable for the modern mind.... The book should be widely read by all spiritual seekers who want to know "what yoga is, what its aims are, how it can be practiced, what powers can be attained by it and finally what liberation of the soul consists in" (Govinda Mukhopadhyay, Head of the Department of Sanskrit at the University of Burdwan, *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission of Culture*, September 1977).

[Prabhavananda and Isherwood] deserve to be warmly congratulated for dealing with a difficult subject like the Yoga aphorisms of the great sage Patanjali, in intelligible English, with commendable ease and clarity of thought and expression.... it must be said that to a great extent the work is their own and bears the imprint of originality. The various quotations from the *Gita* and the *Bible*, as well as from Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and others are very appropriate and to the point; they heighten the interest of the reader and help him in grasping the spiritual significance of the various aphorisms (Devi Datt Punetha, *Prabuddha Bharata*, November 1953).<sup>1</sup>

No matter what his religious belief, a person can only be the richer for having studied this translation of the famous Aphorisms of Patanjali. The language is simple so that anyone can read it and derive spiritual benefit from it if they are open-minded. I can recommend it both for the one who has become familiar with Hindu religion and philosophy and for the one who has not. For the first it is a new and fresh presentation of an old theme; for the second, it is clear, understandable and easy to grasp. It should do much to bring about a meeting of Eastern and Western thought.... There is much in this book to give food for thought and inspiration for spiritual practice (*The Awakener*, October 1953).

Swami Prabhavananda authored a classic commentary on a crucial section of the New Testament titled, *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta* (1963). The Sermon, which is the essence of Christian spiritual ethics, was regarded by Prabhavananda as embodying universal truths applicable to all religions. His Vedantic interpretation of it is based on the religious teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Brahmananda, Swami Vivekananda, and several Christian mystics. The central theme of the book is that Christ came to teach people how to be reborn into the Kingdom of Heaven, how to attain God-consciousness. According to him, the Sermon on the Mount is the "eternal gospel" which all spiritual seekers can realize within themselves. Since the time of Swami Vivekananda, many Indians have interpreted Jesus Christ from a Vedanta standpoint, notably Swamis Akhilananda's *Hindu View of Christ* (1949) and Satprakashananda's *Hinduism and Christianity* (1975).

A sample of the ideas in the Prabhavananda book include:

A great spiritual teacher gathers pure souls around him and teaches them, not only by word of mouth, but by actual transmission of spirituality. He does not simply give them self-confidence; he actually illumines the hearts of his disciples [p. 35].... Christ declared, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you." This means that grace is necessary,

but does it mean that God is partial? Swami Turiyananda, who was asked this question one day, answered: “The Lord is not partial. His grace falls equally upon saint and sinner, just as rain falls on all the land. But only the ground which is cultivated, produces a good harvest” [p. 93].

According to the evaluation of Swami Rasajnananda, who was the editor of the *Prabuddha Bharata* 1969-1970, Swami Prabhavananda, author of *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta*, “has lived with Sri Ramakrishna’s disciples, all extraordinary men in whom perfection was best exemplified. He has, therefore, a depth of understanding which few are privileged to have. His interpretations have a special authentic ring because teachers of practically all religions whom he quotes support him” (*Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission of Culture*, July 1975).

In the words of Timothy Fetler, Head of the Philosophy Department at Santa Barbara City College:

Few books in the field of comparative religions have been able to capture with vitality and lucidity the common spiritual essence underlying Christianity and the great religions of the East. The latest book by Swami Prabhavananda, founder-head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, performs this feat admirably.... At times the Swami’s message reaches high inspirational levels. Even when touching on controversial theological issues, the handling is never superficial in spite of the simple and direct style which makes the reading more a pleasure than a study.... The result is a book which is not only a practical guide to the Sermon on the Mount, but also a rendering into living terms of its eternal message.<sup>2</sup>

Another reviewer states that Swami Prabhavananda:

acquired a deep understanding of both the Bible and the western approach to religion. He had the highest respect for Jesus as a spiritual teacher and often used his words to elaborate and exemplify the themes he was explaining.... [This commentary] is a thorough analysis of several chapters from Matthew from a principally Hindu viewpoint, with frequent references to Buddhism. Lucid and inspiring, it provides many valuable insights for daily living and the spiritual quest, as well as understanding of key issues in comparative religious studies (Paul Rooke, International Headquarters of the Theosophical Society, Pasadena, CA).<sup>3</sup>

Cathy H. C. Hsu, formerly a Professor at Kansas State University, in her book *Global Tourism* (2006) makes the following point:

The Hindu Swami Prabhavananda interprets *The Sermon on the Mount* with unusual clarity and beauty. In contrast to a far-off, scarcely attainable ideal, the teaching of Jesus is for him a practical program for daily living which enables the divine to unfold and manifest itself as the only real goal of human life. Every day of their contemplative lives the sannyasins of the Ramakrishna Order, to which Prabhavananda belongs, follow the way of perfection by clearing their minds of all sense of ego, hatred, resentment, fault-finding and criticism of others and by praying for love and sympathy toward all. Prabhavananda tells how his master Swami Brahmananda, who, although not a student of the Bible is said to have taught in the same way as Christ in almost identical words, one day beheld in a spiritual vision Christ “with his gaze fixed on him.” Henceforth to this day Christ, the embodiment of love, “who poured out his heart’s blood for the redemption of mankind,” is worshiped “as a manifest expression of divinity” and revered “as one of the greatest of illumined teachers” in all monasteries of the Ramakrishna Order.<sup>4</sup>

An ordained Minister of the Reformed Church, Jan (Johan) Peter Schouten served as the Chairman of the Committee on Hinduism for the Council of Religions in the Netherlands. In the review presented in *Jesus as Guru* (2008) he explains:

The theology of the creative Word, God incarnate, as described in John 1 also plays a major role in Prabhavananda. It appears that he has a profound knowledge of the development of the concept of logos. Via Plato, the Stoics and Philo, he ends up with the Gospel of John who describes the meaning of Christ via this concept. For Prabhavananda, there can be no doubt that it can be said that the Word of God became incarnate in Jesus Christ. He formulates the new application

of the logos doctrine by John as “attributing a real personality to the Logos” and “emphasizing not its creative aspect but its redemptive function.”

For both Akhilananda [*Hindu View of Christ*] and Prabhavananda, however, it is what this incarnation has to teach that is the most important. They are convinced that the words of Christ have not lost any relevance in twenty centuries, and they find it difficult to understand why Christians sometimes make relativistic remarks about the Gospel being a product of its age. The message of an avatara must have value for all ages.<sup>5</sup>

Swami Prabhavananda’s third masterpiece is the translation and commentary on *Narada’s Way of Divine Love: The Bhakti Sutras* (1971), with an Introduction by Christopher Isherwood. In this translation the Swami expressed the following ideas:

What prompted the saintly author Narada to expound his gospel of divine love? He did so because if a man attains love for God, this love leads him directly to realize God, experience his oneness with the Lord, the Self in all beings; and this is the most natural and easy path. For everyone has love in his heart, only this love has to be directed toward God [pp. 12-13].... There are two stages of spiritual experience. The devotee first experiences what is known as *savikalpa samadhi*, that is to say, he has the vision of his Chosen Ideal or particular aspect of God, accompanied by inexpressible bliss. There is still a sense of separateness from God. But at an even higher stage, love, lover, and the Beloved become one; there is complete union with God in this samadhi [p. 18].

This book is a suggested study guide, and a companion to the cassette series of fifteen audiotapes comprising thirty lectures delivered by Prabhavananda on the *Narada Bhakti Sutras* available from Vedanta.com. A reviewer tells us:

Swami Prabhavananda’s vibrant personality and lively delivery that comes through on the tapes.... [It] is a rich experience—one that will open your heart. Swami Prabhavananda’s words of love and truth sparkle like precious gems throughout the commentary, urging us to constantly remember the Divine with every thought, word, and action so that we may awaken divine love within ourselves. This commentary reminds us that the teachings of this ancient text are as relevant today as when Narada first taught them thousands of years ago. Don’t miss this sure-to-be-classic (Irene Petryszak, Himalayan International Institute).

Another evaluation from an Indian professor reads:

His exposition, therefore, is not dry or scholastic but at once enchanting and uplifting, lucid and profound. Technicalities inherent in the interpretation of such classical texts have been carefully avoided in order to enable even those who have no knowledge of Sanskrit and cannot read the original text to enter into the spirit of its teachings.... It can help many “to be in love with love” and thereby realize that “bhakti is the easiest of the yogas” (Govinda Mukhopadhyay, *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission of Culture*, February 1977).

(3) **Biographies of illumined souls** (2): *The Eternal Companion: Brahmananda, His Life and Teachings* (1944); and *Swami Premananda: Teachings and Reminiscences* (1968). The latter, with the exception of the reminiscences, is an edited translation from the original Bengali, accompanied by Premananda’s letters. Swami Premananda (1861-1918) was an ishvarakoti disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and became Manager of Belur Math and Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Order. A reviewer tells us:

The book under review is a very readable and impressive account of Swami



Swami Premananda

Premananda whose words, proceeding directly from the heart, speak for themselves and so deserve to be immortalized in print.... The short biographical introduction in the book contains fascinating details which give us peeps into the Swami's profundity. The section containing his teachings is indeed a guidebook of immense value to seekers on the path. The Swami's instructions and exhortations and admonitions are such as to be of unfailing assistance in the process of character-building and personality-developing. The selection on Selected Memories by various devotees is an enjoyable collection of reminiscences by persons who were privileged to meet and to be powerfully influenced by Swami Premananda.... It is a pleasure and a profit to study this book (Vedanta Kesari, April 1969).

Excerpts from the biography and teachings include:

One day he happened to notice a Christian missionary standing before the Jagannath temple, strongly upbraiding Hinduism. The Swami's ire became aroused. He began to loudly chant, "Hari bol, Hari bol!" [Chant the name of the Lord], and he soon had the crowd of more than a hundred persons chanting along with him. The missionary could not make himself heard above the insistent rhythm of the chant, and he was forced to leave.... That night he had a dream of Sri Ramakrishna. The master said to him: "Why did you break up that gathering? He too was spreading my name and teachings. Tomorrow you must find the missionary and beg to be forgiven." Early the next day Premananda set out in search of him. After considerable difficulty, he found the man and humbly entreated his forgiveness (p. 18).

(4) **General** (6): *Dynamic Religion* (1927); *Vedic Religion and Philosophy* under the supervision of P. Houston (1938); *Vilwamangal: A Play in Five Acts* with F. Manchester (1956); *The Spiritual Heritage of India* with F. Manchester (1963); *Religion in Practice* (1968); and *Yoga and Mysticism: Four Lectures* (1969).

The devotionally-oriented Bengali play *Vilwamangal: A Play in Five Acts* was originally written by Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912), the famous Indian dramatist-actor and lay disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Vilwamangal was a fourteenth century saint who loved Krishna, the divine cowherd and flute-player of Vrindavan. A reviewer states, "The translators have done their work with competence and their prefatory notes are informative and instructive" (*Aryan Path*, November 1956).

The *Spiritual Heritage of India* (1963) was written by Swami Prabhavananda with the assistance of Frederick Manchester. They worked on the manuscript in the 1930s. Strangely, the manuscript was lost for over twenty years and not published until the 1960s. The unpublished manuscript was discovered in an unused cupboard during some remodeling.<sup>6</sup> This work became a textbook in several universities in India and the United States. Its subject matter covers the message of the primary Indian scriptures such as the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, the salient features of the traditional six systems of Indian philosophy, and the great teachers and exponents of Hinduism. Emphasis is placed on the spiritual rather than the philosophical, and on Vedanta from the time of Gaudapada and Shankara down to Sri Ramakrishna. In the Preface the swami explains:

I speak always as one born to the religious tradition of India, convinced of the profound truth of its essential message and familiar with its manifestations in the life of my people.... I have dwelt in close association with most of the monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, each of whom had attained that ultimate and blessed experience; and I have seen one of them, my spiritual master, Swami Brahmananda, living almost constantly—as a direct result of that experience—in a state of ecstatic communion with God (p. v).

Madhav P. Pandit (b. 1918) a prolific writer of numerous books, particularly on Sri Aurobindo, indicates:

It is an ennobling experience to go through this fascinating work of Swami Prabhavananda. Unlike most books on the subject which are tomes of philosophy with little appeal outside academic circles, this book is a work of spiritual worth. Swamiji makes the ancient tradition of Indian religion and philosophy alive with his own touch of hallowed Grace and Sadhana....

This is a book which must be prescribed in all universities, not only for courses in philosophy but also for students of Indian culture. There is not a page that is dry, not a line that is obscure. We are grateful to Swamiji for demonstrating how even philosophy can be leavened with yogic experience (*Vedanta Kesari*, July 1962).

Two Western reviewers add:

Here in one compact yet comprehensive volume is a lucid, penetrating analysis of Indian philosophy. Since the author is a well-known scholar and swami, he is able to write with authority.... The author brilliantly synthesizes these various scriptures and systems into four unchangeable, fundamental ideas.... The author's tone is never dogmatic, biased, or smug. Instead it projects the calm and confidence of one possessing knowledge of absolutes.... Immensely informative, readable, and moving, this book is an excellent introduction to Vedanta for the layman as well as an outstanding reference work for the scholar. Highly recommended as a basic book for every library (James R. Paris, Seton Hall University, *Library Journal*, May 1, 1963).

[According to another assessment:] For these days this book is uncommonly good value. It is beautifully printed and produced and remarkably lucid and well-organized.... One would not wish to end without commending its author for his learning and good intentions and congratulating him for covering so much ground so lucidly and for bringing to a Western reader so much of the beauty and profundity of Indian thought. He writes within a tradition which has claimed to experience the transcendent consciousness which is repeatedly discussed. This gives the book an authority very different from the rather external and arid works on Indian philosophy generally offered to the students. This book should be read by anyone visiting India or wishing to serve her people (Leonard M. Schiff, *Christian Quarterly Review*, January-March 1963).

*Religion in Practice* (1968), with an Introduction by Christopher Isherwood, is a collection of twenty-five insightful lectures delivered at the Vedanta Society. Emphasis is placed on God-realization and on the universality of all religions, rather than on abstract philosophical problems.

Amnuay Tapingkae, a Buddhist commentator from Chiang Mai University, Thailand writes:

The book is not meant for intellectual exercise, but for practical application by those wishing to discover meaning in life through religion in general, and Vedanta (Hinduism) in particular. Man is urged to look up to God, since man's nature is essentially divine. With convincing illustrations, the author explains the problems, goals, and means of religious living, dealing with such issues as the relationship of man and God, mysticism and samadhi (transcendental consciousness).... *Religion in Practice* speaks eloquently of the author's grasp of many religions and his belief in the universality of all religions (*The South East Asia Journal of Theology*, Autumn 1969).

*Yoga and Mysticism: Four Lectures* (1969), deals with: how to attain "Peace and Holiness;" "Yoga—True and False," which emphasizes the importance of being under the guidance of a competent guru; "Mysticism—True and False," which stresses replacing ego-consciousness with divine consciousness; and "Know Thy Self" which is realizing one's divine nature.

**(5) Anthology** (1): *Prayers and Meditations from the Scriptures of India* with Cliff Johnson (1967).

The success of these books was aided by the support of certain key publishers. A major promoter of Ramakrishna-Vedanta literature was the publisher Allen and Unwin in London, England. Between 1948 and 1968 they published Prabhavananda's *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta*, and *Religion in Practice*, together with *Vedanta for the Western World*, and *Vedanta for Modern Man*; and John Yale's *Yankee and the Swamis*. This exceptional publisher also came out with books by Swamis Akhilananda, Nikhilananda, and Satprakashananda.<sup>7</sup>

Another important advocate for Prabhavananda books was the New American Library (now Penguin Random House). The company originated in 1948 in New York City, for the purpose of providing affordable paperback books. Between 1951

and 1970 they published the *Bhagavad-Gita*, *The Upanishads*, *Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta*, *How to Know God*, *the Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali*, and *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*. Prabhavananda was the only swami they published, and they were still selling his books as of 2015.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Ida Ansell (Ujjvala)



Ida Ansell (Ujjvala)

After the turn of the century, at Shanti Ashrama, Ida Ansell (Ujjvala, 1877-1955) made the acquaintance of Cornelius Heijblom (the future Swami Atulananda). They became lifelong friends, maintaining a twice-monthly exchange of letters. After her passing they discovered the correspondence sent from Atulananda to Ujjvala, excerpts of which are printed in *With the Swamis in America and India* (1988). Altogether two hundred and fifty letters from Atulananda were found in her personal belongings, spanning a half-century from 1901 to 1954. Pravrajika Brahma-prana said, "His letters, which are full of reminiscences, reflections, and observations, provide us with an eye-witness account of this early period." In years following, Ujjvala met and kept in touch with many of the second-generation swamis who came to the West.<sup>9</sup>

Swami Ashokananda had encouraged Ujjvala to transcribe her shorthand lecture notes of Swami Vivekananda's lectures. Beginning in 1945, she mailed each transcription from Los Angeles to Ashokananda in San Francisco. Swami Prabhavananda also encouraged her to become a prolific writer. Four of these lectures were published in the *Voice of India*. When she moved to the Hollywood Center in 1950, the remainder of her rough lecture notes had not been transcribed. Swami Vidyatmananda explains, "Then in her seventies, Ujjvala realized that she possessed much valuable material in the accumulation of notes she had taken at the time she had known Swamiji and Swami Turiyananda." She often spoke about Swamiji, and mentioned that that she possessed many unpublished lectures of Swami Vivekananda, which she had taken down in shorthand in the San Francisco area. Unfortunately, she was a procrastinator. Ujjvala tried to overcome her shortcoming by adorning her wall and filling her notebooks with mottos that stressed energy and action. To get things moving, Vidyatmananda (then John Yale) reached an agreement with her. Only after she had devoted at least two hours to Swamiji's transcriptions, would he allow her to work in the office. She came to understand that it was her obligation to give this material to the public. In doing so her lifetime desire to be an author was fulfilled. Ujjvala came to the conclusion that, "Swamiji was a special messenger of God and ... every word he said was full of significance. So even though my notes were somewhat fragmentary, I have yielded to the opinion that their contents are precious and must be given for publication."<sup>10</sup>

Ujjvala had always cherished the desire to be an author, but her desire was not fulfilled until she was in her seventies. At that time she transcribed a number of lectures originally recorded in shorthand, which are now part of the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Looking over Marie Louise Burke's fifth and six volumes, it appears (though not conclusively) that overall, Ujjvala contributed twenty Swamiji lectures, totaling 221 pages, to the *Complete Works* (CW, I:437-84, 489-521; II:463-74; IV:218-49; VI: 48-78; VII:430-37; VIII:92-141, 244-49; IX: 272-73).

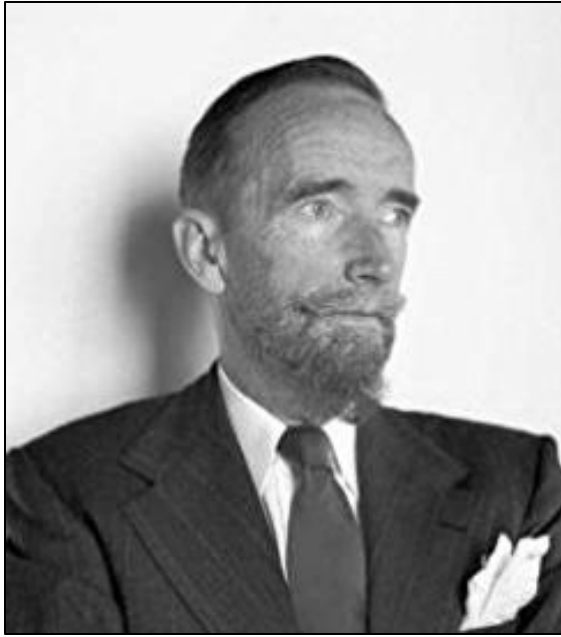
In addition, the now highly-motivated Ujjvala wrote a memoir about her experiences with Swami Vivekananda that became a chapter in the Advaita Ashrama's *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda* (1961). She submitted her reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Turiyananda, originally published in *Vedanta and the West* and titled "Memories of Swami Turiyananda," to the *Prabuddha Bharata* (January 1954). It was translated into several Indian languages. In addition, Turiyananda's published translation of Sankara's *Vivekachudamani* is based on a shorthand rendering taken by Ujjvala when she attended his classes at the turn of the century.<sup>11</sup>

## 3. Gerald Heard

During the 1950s, Gerald Heard published eleven articles in *Vedanta and the West*, three in the *Prabuddha Bharata*, and added six pieces to *Vedanta and Modern Man*. In addition, he wrote the Introduction for *Toward the Goal Supreme: Paramartha Prasanga* (1950) written by Swami Virajananda, President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission (1938-1951). The

book is a compilation of spiritual instructions written by a swami who actually experienced what he taught. Heard also served as an editorial advisor to *Vedanta and the West* from 1951 to 1962.<sup>12</sup>

Gerald Heard was a renowned orator and was asked to speak once or twice a month at the Vedanta Temple when Prabhavananda was not present. In all, he delivered eighty-eight scheduled lectures at the Vedanta Society in Hollywood



*Gerald Heard*

between October 1948 and September 1953. Occasionally, he alternated with Prabhavananda to give the Sunday lecture at the Santa Barbara Temple, and he would also take a leave of absence for months to lecture at Washington University in St. Louis, as well as other Eastern venues, in 1951 and 1952.<sup>13</sup>

Somerset Maugham described Gerald as a “scintillating talker.” In Hollywood he drew large audiences that filled the Hollywood Temple. Loudspeakers were set up in other buildings and on the lawn. Sometimes fifty to a hundred people would sit on folding chairs on an outside patio to listen to the lecture through loudspeakers.

Swami Vidyatmananda (then John Yale) was there and described Heard’s talks:

What Gerald was interested in was traditional Christianity modernized through concepts drawn from the sciences, and the whole made operational by the blending in of techniques borrowed from yoga psychology. Exposition of this interesting system by one who was a fascinating speaker drew enormous audiences.... Gerald, shabbily dressed, would come in, stand tall in the pulpit, look off into the distance ... and begin. Out of his mouth poured a flow of eloquence, laced with references

to obscure but highly significant scientific findings and fascinating hypotheses, the whole decorated with quotations from scripture, poetry, and sayings of world mystics. The audience listened with bated-breath attention, some even uttering muted sighs of appreciation.

During this period, Gerald spelled out his conception of “What Vedanta Means to Me.” Among other things, he stated:

The definition given in Vedantic literature seems to me satisfactory: the threefold statement that man’s nature is divine, that it is the aim of man’s life here on earth to unfold the divine nature within him, and that this basic truth is universal—that is, that every religion that has inspired mankind has been trying to state these facts.<sup>14</sup>

England’s renowned actor Laurence Olivier (1907-1989), his wife, Indian-born Vivien Leigh (1913-1967), and Gladys Cooper (1888-1971) attended Heard’s lectures. Olivier and Leigh were also present for at least one Prabhavananda lecture. Laurence Olivier received nine Academy Award nominations, winning Best Actor for *Hamlet* in 1946. Vivien Leigh twice won the coveted Academy Award for Best Actress as Scarlet O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind* in 1939, and as Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1951. Gladys Cooper was nominated three times for Best Supporting Actress between 1943 and 1964.<sup>15</sup>

After this period Gerald remained as a member of the Vedanta Society, but he worked mainly as a visiting lecturer at Washington University in St. Louis 1955-1956. His time was devoted to writing and lecturing before a wide assortment of university and religious groups, and making numerous radio and television appearances.<sup>16</sup> Heard and Swami Prabhavananda shared a mutual respect and affection for one another that they maintained through the years. According to Christopher Isherwood:



Swami told how Gerald [Heard], shortly before his illness, had a dream in which he was at Belur Math, and Ramakrishna was also there, surrounded by his disciples. As Gerald walked past them, Ramakrishna pointed to him and said, “That one belongs to me.” Swami had heard this from Jay Michael Barrie.

The biographical section of “The Gerald Heard Official Website” was written by J. M. Barrie (1912-2001), an initiate of Swami Prabhavananda. His son, John Roger Barrie, originated and presently maintains the website.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki



Aldous Huxley

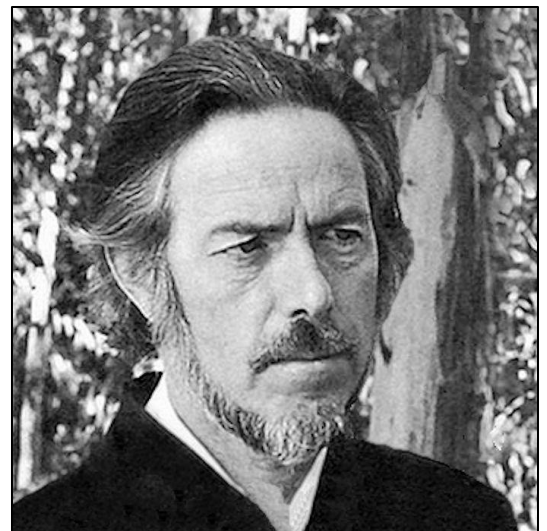
Aldous Huxley contributed ten articles to *Vedanta and the West* between 1950 and 1960. He served as an editorial advisor for the magazine 1951-1962, and he wrote ten essays for *Vedanta for Modern Man* (1951). He also appeared as a speaker at the Vedanta Society in Hollywood and Santa Barbara in 1951 and 1955-1956. On April 3, 1955 Huxley spoke on the subject “Who Are We?” at the Hollywood Center before an audience of 350 to 400 people. According to a Trabuco monk:

He was relaxed, cogent, fascinating, very human, and most charming. This made the lecture an excellent one.... he tried to ... tell us what kind of meditation he favored. It was the Benoit system, of course, in which no concentration is attempted, no visualizing of forms—or even the Formless, but just a simple watching of the trivialities of the mind.<sup>18</sup>

As early as 1940, Isherwood realized that Huxley’s temperament was more akin to the approach of Huxley’s close friend Krishnamurti than to devotion and ritual. And as time went on, Huxley’s attention gradually turned to other interests. He always, however, maintained a cordial attitude toward the Vedanta Society. Until the mid-1950s, Huxley occasionally came to the center to visit the swami and monastics for a social tea gathering. B. S. Gupta of the Department of English at Kurukshetra University in India inquired about Huxley’s involvement with the Vedanta movement. Prabhavananda responded on September 18, 1969, “After Huxley wrote *Doors of Perception* [1954], I had little contact with him, but he knew that I did not approve of his interest in drugs.”<sup>19</sup>

Alan Watts (1915-1973), the popular Zen Buddhist teacher, became a close friend of Aldous Huxley in 1943. Watts wrote an essay, “The Negative Way,” for *Vedanta and the West* (1951). It also appeared in *Vedanta for Modern Man* in 1951. That same year Huxley took Watts to the Vedanta Society to meet Swami Prabhavananda, and they entered into a group discussion with Swami Asehananda, Christopher Isherwood, author Sir Stephen Spender and Franz (Frank) Dispeker. Because of Watts’ emphasis on sensuality rather than renunciation, Swami was not enthusiastic about his inclusion in the group. Swami Vidyatmananda explains, “Swami showed his disapproval of easy Zen at this tea party by engaging Watts in a conversation meant to lay bare the error of Watts’ doctrine.” To no avail, Prabhavananda tried to explain to Watts that one must undergo spiritual disciplines to reach self-realization, and that there is a big difference between an intellectual understanding and spiritual awareness of our Atman nature.<sup>20</sup>

We are fortunate that in his autobiography Watts describes their interesting debate. He quotes Swami as saying, “... [that] teaching is very misleading. I mean, he seems to be saying that one can attain realization without any kind of yoga or spiritual method, and of course that isn’t true.” Watts countered, “Your *Upanishads* say very plainly, *Tat twam asi*, ‘You are



Alan Watts

That,' so what is there to attain?" Swami replied, "There's all the difference in the world between being merely informed, in words, that this is so and realizing it truly, between understanding it intellectually and really knowing it. It takes a great deal of work to go from one state to the other." Watts retorted, "The self, *atman*, is the Godhead, Brahman. It has always been so from the very beginning, so that your very trying to realize it is pushing it away, refusing the gift, ignoring the fact." Swami responded, "But this is ridiculous. That amounts to saying that an ordinary ignorant and deluded person is just as good, or just as realized, as an advanced yogi." Watts countered, "Doesn't he [an advanced yogi] see the Brahman everywhere, and in all people, all beings?" Swami then said, "You are saying that you yourself, or just any other person, can realize that you are the Brahman just as you are, without any spiritual effort or discipline at all!" Then Watts replied, "According to your own doctrine, what else is there, what else is real other than Brahman?" Swami explained, "There was someone who came to Sri Ramakrishna with such talk. He said, 'If that is your Brahman, I spit on it!' Don't fool me. If you were truly one with the Brahman and truly in samadhi, you would be beyond suffering."<sup>21</sup>

As a young man, English-born Alan Wilson Watts (1915-1973) wrote *The Spirit of Zen* (1936). The manuscript interprets Zen Buddhism for Westerners with a clarity of style that requires no prior knowledge of the subject. At the 1937-1939 World Congress of Faiths, he met several spiritual leaders, including J. Krishnamurti and D. T. Suzuki, who would subsequently inspire him in his own work. Ordained an Anglican priest in 1944, Watts served as religious counselor at Northwestern University 1944-1950. Dissatisfied with mainline Christianity, he left the church and soon became a leading figure in the popularization of Eastern religious philosophy in the U.S. In his university and television discourses and in his writings, Watts advocated an eclectic spiritual background that included Zen Buddhism, Taoism, Yoga, and other Eastern practices. His teachings on these subjects found an audience among young, disaffected Americans in the 1950s and 1960s, including the "beat generation." One of Watts' most important works is *The Way of Zen* (1957), a popular introduction to Buddhism that had a widespread mass appeal.<sup>22</sup>

An outstanding poet, Sir Stephen Spender (1909-1995), visited the Vedanta Center for the Alan Watts tea party. Like Isherwood, Huxley, Heard, van Druten, Felix Greene and Alan Watts, Spender was an English writer who emigrated to the U.S., though he also spent many years in England. Each of them was deeply interested in the betterment of human society. Their idealistic involvement in Vedanta, mysticism, pacifism, the Trabuco College community, gay liberation, and the use of drugs each reflect an attempt, though in some cases misguided, to improve society.<sup>23</sup>

On January 14, 1952 the Japanese Zen Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki, accompanied by Jeannette Griggs, visited the Trabuco monastery. He was very gentle of manner and possessed a lively curiosity and very alert manner. The monks found the octogenarian to be a delight to talk to, as well as to hear. Dr. Suzuki asked a number of questions about monastic life at Trabuco, how they meditate, and the Order and its vows. Afterwards, he meditated in the Trabuco shrine room until the worship was over. A monastic adds:



D.T. Suzuki

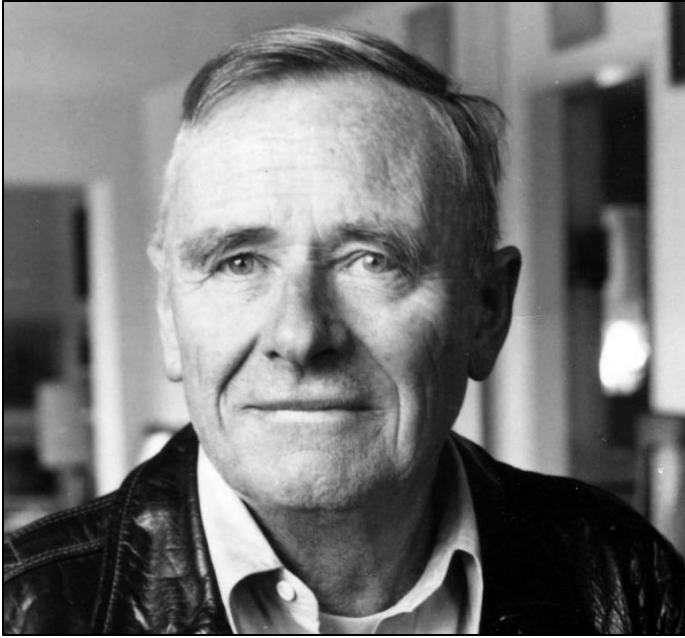
Then followed dinner, Suzuki having been introduced to Swami Prabhavananda. They had a great time at the table, talking Zen and Vedanta, agreeing very largely, and noting differences in emphasis merely. Suzuki felt that probably Zen was deficient in emphasis on worship, but on the other hand is strong for meditation, and the "koan" technique. Back in the library, we sang a couple of songs for them, and they prepared to leave. He seemed to have a thoroughly good time, and we much enjoyed having him.<sup>24</sup>

Prabhavananda asked:

"Doctor, don't you believe in spiritual disciplines and meditation?" "Of course we do," he answered. Then I told him that one of his disciples [Alan Watts], who was a great student of his writings, was preaching that it was not necessary to practice any disciplines. "I wish I could burn all my books," Dr. Suzuki said with a sigh.<sup>25</sup>

Early in his life, Suzuki (1870-1966) translated into English the speech of his teacher, Soyen Shaku, the Zen Buddhist representative at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. During the Second World War, he criticized Japanese militarism. In the 1950s and 1960s, Suzuki was the foremost exponent of Zen Buddhism in the Western world. Through personal associations and many writings, he influenced several leading European thinkers, including: psychologists Erich Fromm, Karen Horney and Carl Jung; theologian Paul Tillich; Buddhists Alan Watts and Christmas Humphreys; and authors such as Aldous Huxley.

## 5. Christopher Isherwood



Christopher Isherwood

Christopher Isherwood's (1904-1986) semi-autobiographical *The Berlin Stories* (1946) was so popular that it was first adapted by John van Druten into his play *I am a Camera* (1951), followed by a film version in 1955, then as the Broadway musical hit *Cabaret* (1966), and finally as the movie sensation *Cabaret* in 1972. The stage and motion picture versions of the story won seven Tony Awards, a Grammy Award, and eight Oscar Awards. Isherwood's other activities in the 1960s include working as a visiting professor in the English Department at California State College (now University), Los Angeles, at the University of California at Los Angeles, Riverside, and Santa Barbara. Isherwood wrote many successful novels, and was the co-writer of the screenplay for the very popular 1965 film *The Loved One*.<sup>26</sup>

A deeply loyal disciple of Prabhavananda, between 1950 and 1981 Isherwood on occasion delivered the Sunday lecture at the VSSC. In most cases, rather than preparing his own sermon, he devoted the hour to reading from the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. A weekly *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* class was held on Wednesday nights at the Society. For many years Isherwood, a

very articulate speaker, read from the Gospel and Prabhavananda made comments for the first half-hour. The second half was a question and answer session with the audience.

Isherwood possessed an immense charm that allowed him to acquire a vast number of friends, many from the literary and film world. Swami Vidyatmananda relates:

From the first moment we met, I reacted agreeably to Chris' charm. He gave me the immediate sensation that he liked me. He had the ability to make everyone he came in contact with feel easy in his presence, that you held a privileged position in his estimation, that he found you interesting as a person.... Chris was intensely curious as to how human nature manifested itself in its multifarious fashions.... there was in Chris the devoted disciple, who maintained an intense loyalty to his guru, and a readiness, during the guru's life and after his death, to further his guru's objectives. Through books, articles, and speeches Chris did much to inform the public about Vedanta.... Chris would make his weekly appearance of an hour or so and all would turn gala. Prabhavananda would become joyous and there would be an atmosphere of fun.<sup>27</sup>

Christopher Isherwood summarized his devotional philosophy this way:

[The guru-disciple relationship] is the one reality of which I am never in doubt, the one guarantee that I shall ultimately surmount my own weakness and find knowledge of eternal peace and joy. If, having known this relationship, I could in some terrible way be deprived of it again, then my life would become a nightmare of guilt, boredom and self-disgust.<sup>28</sup> I

do believe it—that It is a tremendous privilege to set eyes on Swami even once and that a single meeting might have incalculable effects upon an individual throughout the rest of his life.... If I had not met him, my life would have been nothing.... I am your disciple, not a member of the Ramakrishna Order.

One time Isherwood referred to his next lifetime. The Swami exclaimed indignantly: “What do you mean—next lifetime? You will not be reborn! You will go straight to the Ramakrishna loka!”

[Isherwood] “I personally am a devotee first and a Vedantist second.... My religion is almost entirely what I glimpse of Swami’s spiritual experience.” In a personal letter to Swami Prabhavananda, Isherwood wrote, “When I met you, something changed in me, and it will never change back again, despite all outward appearances. Please remember that I am thinking of you constantly and trusting in your blessings and prayers, and finding help in the certainty of your love.”<sup>29</sup>

Isherwood applied his literary talent to writing eight Vedanta books that can be arranged into three categories: three religious scriptural translations, two editing’s of collections of Vedanta articles and essays, and three original historical works. First, as a translator of scripture he acted as second author to Prabhavananda in the English rendering of the original Sanskrit, *The Song of God: Bhagavad Gita* (1944), *Shankara’s Crest Jewel of Discrimination (Viveka-Chudamani)* (1947), and on the translation and commentary of *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (1953). In the latter translation Isherwood, “would think of illustrations, examples, things that would appeal to Western readers, or make comparisons with things said in other literatures on the same subject.”<sup>30</sup>

Second, Isherwood, with the help of Swami Prabhavananda, edited and composed an Introduction for the two volumes, *Vedanta for the Western World* (1945) and *Vedanta for Modern Man* (1951). These two books introduced Vedanta to a broad public and brought many devotees to Vedanta Centers throughout the country. The second volume, drawn from the bimonthly magazine *Vedanta and the West* (1945-1950), included essays written by over thirty well-known European, American, and Indian authors. The essays attempt to answer the question, “Has Vedanta Philosophy a specific contribution to make to the religious thinking of the West?”<sup>31</sup>

Edgar Brightman (1884-1953), an elder of the Methodist Episcopal Church and a distinguished philosopher at Boston University, wrote in *Vedanta for Modern Man*:

There can be no question about the genuineness and depth of the religious experience which is being described, and from which the West has much to learn. The book is fascinating and authoritative. It is written by distinguished men and women who know by experience what they are talking about. It is both a source for scholarly knowledge and a manual for devotional growth. I regard the book, both from the standpoint of religion and from that of philosophy, as one of the most valuable documents in its field.

According to Alan Hull Watson who reviewed the book for *The Spectator*, a weekly conservative British magazine first published in 1828:

[The book is] a rare garland of priceless jewels, gathered together in exposition and interpretation of Vedanta.... With Isherwood and Prabhavananda as editors nobody need doubt the quality of the contributions, the scholarship, the insights, or the lucidity of the prose—which, throughout, is excellent. In fact it might be said that anyone coming to this subject for the first time would experience no difficulty whatever in gaining a reliable understanding of its implications (*Spectator*, September 8, 1973).

Vergilius Ferm, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, said, “Church people in the Christian tradition should read and ponder this book. They would find in it—as the bearer of the thought of the East—much that would cast light upon their own faith.”<sup>32</sup>

In addition, Isherwood wrote three original historical Vedantic works of great value. His autobiographical manuscript, *An Approach to Vedanta* (1963), describes his background and early experiences with Swami Prabhavananda, Gerald Heard, Aldous Huxley and Sister Lalita over the years 1939-1942. Robert Kirsch, book reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* for over twenty-five years and author of a biography of Aldous Huxley, told his readers on December 23, 1963:

This brief but revealing work not only defines the teachings of Vedanta but is in its deepest sense a spiritual autobiography.... [It is] a log of the voyage of a Western intellectual and writer in search of some meaning and pattern of experience.

By 1953, Swami Prabhavananda began encouraging Isherwood to write a biography of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Vidyatmananda informs us:

Swami Prabhavananda had always hoped to inspire Chris to write the life of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami said that realizing this project was to be the culminating accomplishment of his life. The entire text was submitted chapter by chapter to the then General Secretary in India, Swami Madhavananda [President of the Ramakrishna Order 1962-1965], who often made corrections of fact and even of language.

The result was *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (1965) which, in part, is a selective editing, rewriting, and chronologicalizing of the English translation of Swami Saradananda's *Sri Ramakrishna The Great Master* (1911-1918, 1952), and to a lesser extent of M's *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1942). These two first-hand accounts, written by two saints who knew Sri Ramakrishna well, are the most important sources of *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*. The monumental work strives to present the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna to the Western reader in a vivid, yet restrained, manner. Contained in the narrative are the lives of Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda and the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. The *New York Herald Tribune* listed the book as one of the five most notable "Philosophy and Religion" volumes of the year. Isherwood donated "the complete financial returns from this book to the Society, as he had done in the case of all his other Vedanta writings in the past."<sup>33</sup>

The book was well received by Belur Math. When Isherwood traveled in India 1963-1964, he was treated with great respect as a literary personality who had worked with Swami Prabhavananda.<sup>34</sup>

Swami Gambhirananda (1899-1988), who was initiated into sannyas by Swami Shivananda, later becoming the eleventh President of the Ramakrishna Order (1985-1988), said:

This magnificent biography of Sri Ramakrishna ... faithfully recounts in his own charming, lucid, and succinct style the absorbing story of God-realization lived by Sri Ramakrishna. All the important details of Sri Ramakrishna's life have been stringed [sic] together beautifully so as to give us a vivid picture of the different facets of his wonderful life, and the total effect is marvelous. He approaches the subject with devotion, candour, objectivity, and a scientific spirit.... The book is a must to all seekers of Truth, and the author has laid them under a deep debt of gratitude by this monumental work (Prabuddha Bharata, August 1965).

Alan Watts concluded that Isherwood "has now presented us with a biography which tries, valiantly, to interpret this fantastic paradox of a person to our own culture. He has written a thoroughly absorbing and profound book" (*Book Week*, July 4, 1965). Nancy Wilson Ross, an author of volumes on Buddhism and Hinduism, writes that Christopher Isherwood "unfolds a fantastic story with a calm finesse.... a fresh and important contribution to the history of religious mysticism, a subject of ever-increasing interest in a psychology-conscious age" (*New York Times Book Review*, November 15, 1965). Harry Oldmeadow, Coordinator of Philosophy and Religious Studies at La Trobe University in Australia, added, "Whilst clearly written by an adherent, is informative, judicious and sensible as well as being finely attuned to the spiritual modalities in which Ramakrishna's religious genius expressed itself."<sup>35</sup>

In his diary, Isherwood wrote about Swami Prabhavananda:

To him, spiritual truths are unanswerable facts, like the facts of geography. You don't have to get excited about them, or argue or defend. You just state them [1940]. [Isherwood asked Swami when he had begun to feel certain that God existed. Swami answered:] When I met Maharaj. Then I knew that one could know God. He even made it seem easy.... And now I feel God's presence every day. But it's only very seldom that I see him.... Swami told me that he feels the presence of the Lord continuously; he no longer has to make much of an effort.... Sometimes it is Ramakrishna,

sometimes Holy Mother, Maharaj or Swamiji [1958]. Swami Prabhavananda would like to stop giving lectures, but if he tries to shrink any duty, he finds that he loses touch with Brahmananda: “I can’t find him; then I know he is displeased” [1961].<sup>36</sup>

Isherwood heard Prabhavananda say:

Ramakrishna chose you, all of you. He led you to this place [1940].... If you have a friend and do good things for him for years and years, and then do one bad thing—he’ll never forgive you. But if you do bad things to God for years and years, and only one good thing—*that* He never forgets [1952].... Enlightenment is not loss of individuality but enlargement of individuality, because you realize you are everything.... What was the use of reasoning and philosophy, when all that mattered was love of God [1958].<sup>37</sup>

## 6. Swami Vidyatmananda (John Yale, Prema Chaitanya)

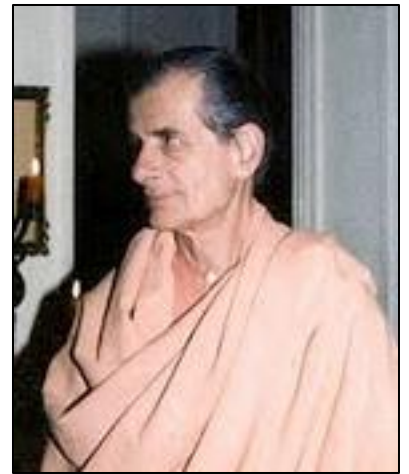
John Yale (1915-2000), a successful Chicago book publisher, joined the Vedanta Society in Hollywood after his religious faith was renewed when he read the Swami Prabhavananda-Isherwood translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. “It was an experience that changed everything.” Irrevocably, his life was altered. He liquidated his share in the publishing company and moved to California to study for a doctorate degree. After meeting Prabhavananda, he joined the monastic family at the Vedanta Society in Hollywood in April of 1950. John Yale did a remarkable job in building up the bookshop and catalog. He indicated:

I thought of this as my mission, my form of karma yoga, and I worked at this task for the next dozen years or so. Schedules were organized and more or less followed, work was planned and supervised, publications were issued in good form and on time, direct and mail order book sales were expanded, and finances were strengthened. I felt that I was serving my guru in a way which pleased him.

In August 1955, Yale received brahmacharya vows at the Ramakrishna Monastery in Trabuco and was given the Sanskrit name Prema Chaitanya. In January 1964, at Belur Math, he received sannyas from Swami Madhavananda and received the name Swami Vidyatmananda. He remained there for nearly a year.<sup>38</sup>

In rapid-fire succession, Prema Chaitanya published three Vedanta books in three years. As an editor, he put together *What Vedanta Means to Me* (1960), which consists of a collection of sixteen first-person testimonials by a wide assortment of Westerners drawn primarily from the magazine *Vedanta and the West*. Each explained how he or she awoke to the problems of life, but could find no solace in traditional Western modes of thinking. Vedantic concepts like the divinity of men and women and the law of karma and reincarnation offered these seekers the explanations they were seeking. The Vedantic ideology gave them a better understanding of the meaning of life, which they needed for their own personal transformation. Chad Walsh (1914-1991), an ordained priest of the Episcopal Church and the Chairman of the English Department at Beloit College, commented:

It is difficult to be affronted by the universal goodwill expressed through so many personalities and pens. And there is much here for the Christian to learn. He can discover for instance, why many people seem to have found in Vedanta what they could not discover in Christianity.... The tone here is introspective and quietistic, each man working out his salvation.... while filled with benevolent good will toward spiritual pilgrims of every tradition (*New York Times Book Review*, January 22, 1961).



Swami Vidyatmananda (John Yale,  
Prema Chaitanya)

The Foreword to the book was written by Vincent Sheean (1899-1975), author of a book on Mahatma Gandhi (*Lead, Kindly Light*, 1949) and considered to be one of the most outstanding foreign correspondents of the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup>

The book gives us some idea of why the Vedanta philosophy appealed to Heard, Huxley, Isherwood, van Druten, and their contemporaries. The seven most mentioned factors are that Vedanta:

- (1) Affirms that one can progress spiritually and know God in this very life: “Ramakrishna and his disciples actually journeyed to that realm. It is their enthusiastic reports that made the idea of traveling there myself conceivable and desirable.... Vedanta tells us that the true nature of man is divine, and the goal of life is to realize this divine nature....
- (2) Religion is essentially a matter of direct, personal experience” (Pravrajika Saradaprana).
- (3) Provides an empirical approach to spiritual development that can be tested: “Vedanta made me understand, for the first time, that a practical working religion is experimental and empirical. You are always on your own, finding things out for yourself in your individual way” (Christopher Isherwood).
- (4) Emphasizes the importance of the guru-disciple relationship: “The guru, the teacher, transmits his teachings on two different levels. It is a combination of what he says and what he is.... I only know that, as far as I am concerned, the guru-disciple relationship is at the center of everything that religion means to me. It is the one reality of which I am never in doubt” (Christopher Isherwood).
- (5) Provides therapeutic power to remove internal and external tensions and conflicts, and to reintegrate the personality: “I have seen far more drastic and desirable personality changes effected through the practice of yogic meditation than I have through psychoanalysis” (Joan Rayne).
- (6) Is a rational religion: “Vedanta appealed to me because it is attractive rationally.... Its tenets square with reason and with the discoveries of modern science” (John Yale).
- (7) Teaches universal toleration that reconciles religious differences: “I think that this, to me, is the greatest significance of Vedanta: its all-embracingness, and its assertion that all religions are paths, some more and some less direct, to the same end” (John van Druten).
- (8) Leads to a better understanding of Christianity: “It was reading the teachings of the Bible and the lives of the Christian saints in the context of Vedanta that made them meaningful to me” (Pravrajika Saradaprana).<sup>40</sup>

Prema Chaitanya (Swami Vidyatmananda) also authored *A Yankee and the Swamis* (1961), an enlightening and popular travelogue about his pilgrimage to thirty-eight Vedanta Centers, and his interaction with the holy men in India during 1952-1953. He met the elder monastics who had received direct initiation and/or inspiration from the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. His goal was not to be a mere observer, but to be a participant in the inner meaning of the Hindu religious culture. He wore the dress, ate the food, and lived as far as possible the life of an Indian monastic.

A reviewer wrote, “richly descriptive, humorous, and, at times, deeply penetrating examination of an experience.... a book to be pondered over by all who are concerned with India” (*Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission of Culture*, October 1961). M. P. Pandit described it as “a frank, readable and interesting account of his travels. ... He has given a work not only of documentary value but equally of a spiritually educative content” (*Vedanta Kesari*, December 1961).

The following year Prema Chaitanya’s third work, *What Religion Is: In the Words of Swami Vivekananda* (1962), attempted to reduce the then eight volumes of the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* down to a condensed 224-page edition. Vedanta Press published it in conjunction with the Vivekananda Centenary birthday held on January 17, 1963. While Swamiji’s words were not altered, contemporary paragraphing, spelling, and punctuation were applied. His compact one-volume Vivekananda was meant to be, “of agreeable size and modest price.”

This seven-chapter book with a biographical introduction by Christopher Isherwood consists of a limited, specially-selected and representative collection of Swamiji’s writings, specifically edited for the Western reader. Letters, poems, repetition, and writing on reforms in India were omitted. Emphasis was on universal religion, the principles and practice of Vedanta, the four yogas, and four avatars as great world teachers. A commentator stated, “The work has been skillfully organized and a careful perusal of the selections will enable the reader to grasp the essence of the Swami’s teachings” (*Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission of Culture*, September 1963). It is an indication of Vidyatmananda’s good judgment that after over forty years, this volume and *A Yankee and the Swamis* are still in print.<sup>41</sup>

After receiving sannyas (January 1964), Swami Vidyatmananda left Hollywood (1966) and became Swami Ritajananda (1906-1994) assistant at the Centre Védantique Ramakrishna in Gretz, France, east of Paris. He held the position for the rest of his life, until the year 2000, assisting Swamis Ritajananda and Veetamohananda. Vidyatmananda held the rare distinction of being the first American swami to become an assistant minister at a Vedanta Center. The VSSC and France received a valuable historical legacy in Vidyatmananda's currently unpublished autobiography, *The Making of a Devotee* (1993). Material from his autobiography has been utilized in this document and is presented in its entirety on the Internet. At Vidyatmananda's memorial service for him, Swami Veetamohananda gave the following tribute:

Swami Vidyatmananda ... will remain a brilliant example in the history of the Ramakrishna Order for generations to come. His untiring service to this center remains ... an outstanding example to all the followers of Vedanta. Swami Vivekananda wanted all to have profound sincerity. It is no exaggeration to say that Swami Vidyatmananda served the cause of the teachings of the great Swami with extreme sincerity and total devotion.

His everyday life was guided by wholehearted prayer, meditation and service to the center and its members. He was a role model in the path of work.... Forbearance, a quality much esteemed by the scriptures, was highlighted in the life of the swami. No matter what insult or nastily aggressive treatment was inflicted upon him, he easily ignored for the cause of Vedanta. His dauntless affection and his veneration for his guru, Swami Prabhavananda, were noticeable in all his actions, his devotion, and in all his daily endeavors.<sup>42</sup>

## 7. Public Speakers and Film Personalities

During the 1950s and 1960s, most of the swamis stationed in the West, as well as many visiting swamis from India, addressed the congregation at the VSSC. The list includes: Swamis Akhilananda, Ashokananda, Bhashyananda, Devatmananda, Gaurishwarananda, Madhavananda, Nikhilananda, Nirvanananda, Nityaswarupananda, Nityatmananda, Pavitrananda, Ranganathananda, Sambuddhananda, Sarvagatananda, Satprakashananda, Shanta-swarupananda, Swahananda, Vishwananda, and Vividishananda, a close personal friend of Prabhavananda who had founded the Seattle Center. He made many visits to the center over the years.

During the 1950's; the impressive array of lay guest speakers included: Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar (Iyer); Ida Ansell (Ujjvala); Gerald Heard; Aldous Huxley; Christopher Isherwood; Joseph Kaplan, Head of the UCLA Physics Department; Stella Kramrisch from the University of Pennsylvania and the foremost Western authority on Indian art, architecture, and sculpture; Charles A. Moore from the University of Hawaii and founder of the premier journal of Eastern thought, *Philosophy East and West*; actress Erin O'Brien-Moore; Floyd H. Ross, Head of the Department of Religion at U.S.C.; Dilip Kumar Roy, writer of many volumes on India; Boshi Sen, a boyhood friend of Swami Prabhavananda, a disciple of Swami Sadananda, and the botanist who produced hybrid seeds of maize, jowar, bajra, and onion to increase the food supply; Gertrude Emerson Sen, author of four volumes on India; Hari K. Sen, an astrophysicist; Bharati Krishna Tirtha, the originator of Vedic mathematics; John van Druten; and Alan Watts.

### Film Personalities

Swami Prabhavananda had a special rapport with people in the film industry. Janet Gaynor (1906-1984) and her husband Gilbert Adrian (1903-1959) were both initiated by the swami. Pravrajika Prabhaprana said that Janet Gaynor:

was adorable! And she told me, "You know, I just love my beads. When I go out in the evening to a party, I keep them with me and I take them and feel them and hold them and it makes me feel so good." She was very devoted to Swami and had a sweet rapport with him. We just loved her. She was like one of us here, no put-on with her at all.<sup>43</sup>

Janet Gaynor was the first woman to win an Academy Award as Best Actress for her role in *Seventh Heaven* and two other movies in 1929.<sup>44</sup> Gilbert Adrian, known professionally by his last name only, designed the costumes for such movies as the



1939 film classic *The Wizard of Oz*. As the chief designer and head of the wardrobe department at MGM, he was considered to be one of the two top designers in the movie industry.<sup>45</sup>

Pravrajika Prabhaprana tells us that in September 1954, Swami Prabhavananda “went to dinner at Merle Oberon’s [house] and Marlon Brando was there and Swami said he was so polite and asked interesting questions. Swami had a little flurry there with movie actors!”<sup>46</sup> Merle Oberon (1911-1979) was raised by her mother who was a Christian Eurasian of Irish and Sri Lankan descent in Calcutta, India. Her most memorable performance was as the lead actress in *Wuthering Heights* (1939), playing opposite Laurence Olivier’s Heathcliff.<sup>47</sup> Marlon Brando (1924-2004), one of the most acclaimed cinema stars of the century, won two Academy Awards for best actor.<sup>48</sup> Another actor who for many years became a regular attending member of the Vedanta Society and of the monthly vigil was Kirk Alyn (1910-1999). The devotees knew him as a positive and cheerful individual. He is known today by movie buffs as being the first person to play the title role in two multiple fifteen-segment *Superman* movie serials during 1948-1950.<sup>49</sup>

Jennifer Jones, who won the Academy Award as lead actress for her role as the French Saint Bernadette in the *Song of Bernadette* (1943), came to see Swami Prabhavananda a couple of times in 1958. She asked Prabhavananda if she should make a return trip to India and he replied, “Why? You won’t get anything out of India unless you have reached something inside yourself.”<sup>50</sup> She later became President of the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, in 1989.<sup>51</sup> William Demarest (1892-1983) and his wife Lucille Thayer Demarest were long-time regular devotees of Swami Prabhavananda. As a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Demarest, Prabhavananda stayed in their Palm Springs, California home. Demarest was nominated for both an Academy Award for his supporting role in *The Jolson Story* and an Emmy Award for his portrayal of Uncle Charley in the long-running sitcom *My Three Sons*.<sup>52</sup>

Christopher Isherwood invited Swami Prabhavananda, Satprakashananda, Krishnananda, and the future Swami Vidyatmananda, to a tea party hosted by the actress Paulette Goddard (1911-1990) and the novelist Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1970). Goddard, an Academy Award nominee of the 1930s and 1940s, starred in two Charlie Chaplin classics, *Modern Times* in 1936 and *The Great Dictator* in 1940, both rated in the top one hundred films of all time.<sup>53</sup> As a novelist, Remarque is best remembered for *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928), his most enduring work. His life as a German soldier on the Western front during the First World War is the subject of this semi-autobiographical novel. The antiwar neorealistic work has been translated into more than forty languages and sold over thirty million copies.<sup>54</sup>

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## VI. Literary Works (1950-1976)

The word meanings for the abbreviations used in the endnotes can be found at the end of the eBook in the “[Bibliography Alphabetized by Abbreviation](#)” Section.

- <sup>1</sup> Catalog.
- <sup>2</sup> “Book Reviews,” VSSC Archives.
- <sup>3</sup> Theosophical Society. [www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sunrise/50-00-1/af-ebt.htm](http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sunrise/50-00-1/af-ebt.htm)
- <sup>4</sup> (Haworth Press, 2006), p. 325.
- <sup>5</sup> (Rodopi, 2008), pp. 107, 109.
- <sup>6</sup> Anandaprana, pp. 113-14.
- <sup>7</sup> UCLC.
- <sup>8</sup> UCLC; Bob Adjemia, Annual Member’s Meeting (April 28, 1977; April 26, 1979).
- <sup>9</sup> WWSV, p. 171; Gargi, pp. 125, 164-67; Burke, V, pp. 371-73; VI, pp. 36-37, 97, 149- 59; Vidyatmananda6; Atulananda, p. xxiii.
- <sup>10</sup> WWSV, pp. 170-72; Vidyatmananda6; Vidyatmananda3; Brahmaprana (July 1991), pp. 270-71; Burke, V, p. 373; *Vedanta* pp. 44-45; *WARHD*, p. 275.
- <sup>11</sup> Burke, V, pp. 384, 400, 404; VI, pp. 53, 59, 67-68, 108-09, 123, 204, 208, 216; WWSV, pp. 171-72.
- <sup>12</sup> Catalog.
- <sup>13</sup> Vidyatmananda2
- <sup>14</sup> Vidyatmananda2; Yale, pp. 36-37.
- <sup>15</sup> “The Gerald Heard Official Website.” [www.geraldheard.com/index.htm](http://www.geraldheard.com/index.htm); Vidyatmananda2; Prabhaprana, p. 19; Amiya, p. 145.
- <sup>16</sup> *CA* (1978), II, pp. 246-47.
- <sup>17</sup> Isherwood4, p. 310.
- <sup>18</sup> Diary (April 3, 1955).
- <sup>19</sup> Isherwood4, p. 50; “Letter from Swami Prabhavananda to B. S. Gupta” (Sept. 18, 1969), VSSC Archives.
- <sup>20</sup> Isherwood1, pp. 277-78, 360-61; Vidyatmananda2.
- <sup>21</sup> Alan Watts, *In My Own Way* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 238-40.
- <sup>22</sup> *CA* (1991), New Revision Ser., XXXII, pp. 453-55.
- <sup>23</sup> *CA* (1997), New Revision Ser., LIV, pp. 379-85.
- <sup>24</sup> Diary (Jan. 14, 1952).
- <sup>25</sup> Swami Prabhavananda *Yoga and Mysticism* (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1969), p. 23; Vidyatmananda2.
- <sup>26</sup> *CA* (1992), New Revision Ser., XXXV, pp. 238-42.
- <sup>27</sup> Vidyatmananda2.
- <sup>28</sup> Yale, p. 58.
- <sup>29</sup> Isherwood4, pp. 309, 318, 328.
- <sup>30</sup> Isherwood6, p. 133; WC.
- <sup>31</sup> Member’s Letter (April 13, 1951).
- <sup>32</sup> *Vedanta for Modern Man* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 1; Member’s Letter (Sept. 1, 1951).
- <sup>33</sup> Vidyatmananda2; Member’s Letter (April 8, 1961).
- <sup>34</sup> Vidyatmananda2; Isherwood4, pp. 249, 262-84; *WARHD*, p. 163.
- <sup>35</sup> Robert Funk, *Christopher Isherwood: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979), pp. 109, 111, 114, 191; Isherwood4, p. 249; Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East* (World Wisdom, 2004), p. 82.
- <sup>36</sup> Isherwood4, pp. 48, 232, 240.
- <sup>37</sup> Isherwood4, pp. 67, 206-07, 232-33.
- <sup>38</sup> Isherwood2, p. 984; Vidyatmananda1.
- <sup>39</sup> Isherwood2, p. 984; *Book Review Digest* (1964), p. 546; Member’s Letter (Sept. 8, 1961).
- <sup>40</sup> Yale, pp. 53, 58-59, 164-65, 195, 206-07; this analysis relies heavily on Jackson, pp. 99-103.
- <sup>41</sup> Vidyatmananda3.

<sup>42</sup> *GV* (Summer 2000), p. 28; Vidyatmananda5.

<sup>43</sup> *Diary* (Nov. 30; Dec. 1-2, 1952); Prabhaprana, pp. 18-19; Isherwood2, pp. 688-89, 749, 765-66.

<sup>44</sup> *Scribner*, I, pp. 313-15; IMDB. "Janet Gaynor."

<sup>45</sup> *DAB* (1980), Sup. VI, pp. 9-10; IMDB. "Adrian I."

<sup>46</sup> Prabhaprana, p. 19; Isherwood2, p. 466.

<sup>47</sup> *Films*, III, pp. 916-18; Charles Higham and Roy Moseley, *Merle* (Kent, England, New English Library, 1983), pp. x-xi, 3, 6-14; Web: "Merle Oberon." [www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Hills/2440/oberon.html](http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Hills/2440/oberon.html); IMDB. "Merle Oberon."

<sup>48</sup> *Films*, III, pp. 146-49; "Marlon Brando." Web: [http:// awardsdatabase.oscars.org/ampas\\_awards/BasicSearchInput.jsp](http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/ampas_awards/BasicSearchInput.jsp)

<sup>49</sup> Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia* (New York: Harper Resource, 2001), pp. 30-31; *Voices* (May 1999); "Kirk Alyn." [www.briansdriveintheater.com/kirkalyn.html](http://www.briansdriveintheater.com/kirkalyn.html)

<sup>50</sup> Isherwood2, pp. 749-50, 758-59, 773, 959-60; Isherwood4, p. 233.

<sup>51</sup> *WWA* 1999 (1998), p. 2257; *Films* III, pp. 622-23.

<sup>52</sup> Ronald Smith, *Who's Who in Comedy* (New York: Facts on File, 1992), p. 135; IMDB. "William Demarest."

<sup>53</sup> *Films*, III, pp. 494-96; *Scribner*, II, pp. 331-33.

<sup>54</sup> *CA* (1979), LXXVII-LXXX, pp. 449-50.