
CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD & VEDANTA

PART 1

As is customary, we open with a prayer:

Oh, source of my inspiration, teach me to extend toward all living beings that fascinated, unsentimental, loving and all-pardoning interest which I feel for the characters I create. May I become identified with all humanity, as I identify myself with these imaginary persons. May my art become my life, and my life my art. Deliver me from snootiness, and from the Pulitzer Prize. Teach me to practice true anonymity. Help me to forgive my agents and publishers. Make me attentive to my critics and patient with my fans. For yours is the conception and execution. Amen.

The Prayer for Writers
Christopher Isherwood, July 14, 1940



Christopher Isherwood & Swami Prabhavananda,
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Christopher Isherwood is a multifaceted character, each facet with its own fan base. While most popularly known as a celebrated writer, the creator of the source materials for some blockbuster Broadway musicals and films, and a vanguard of gay rights activism, he was also a Leftist, a pacifist and conscientious objector; a self-professed “connoisseur of people” who, as host, mixed disparate people with the skill of a master chemist; a professional screenwriter; an

international travel writer; increasingly obsessed with his weight; one who called plants by their proper names; an attendee of world class celebrity parties—drinks were had, renounced, had again; a Mexican food fan; a Hans Christian Andersen fan; Graham Greene’s cousin; a beach enthusiast whose “lifelong urge” was to “plunge into” the breakers; and a college drop-out who became a distinguished lecturer and teacher of literature and writing and generously mentored aspiring writers.

Less prominent to the world at large, and the only facet that concerns us here, is his role as an early practitioner of Vedanta in America and his dedicated work in the service of that cause. Jeffery Paine writes of Isherwood’s place in the emergence of Vedanta in the West:

In regard to religion, Isherwood felt like the awkward guest who arrives during the last hour of a party, knowing no one else there or what's gone on before. Only little by little did he realize he had arrived not during the last but nearer to the first hour, that he was in fact participating in one of the larger religious reinterpretations in history. Something unprecedented was being given birth to, and he was, so to speak, part of the labor pains.¹

And within Vedanta circles, while he is recognized for his literary contributions and intellectual achievements, his exceptional guru-bhakti; his life as one of the original Vedanta Society of Southern California monks; and his reverence for the shrine, the ritual worship, and the relics may come as a complete surprise. Learning about his role is made easy by the tremendous cache of self-revelatory works he has left behind including essays, lectures, novels, and most importantly his diaries and the autobiographical *My Guru and His Disciple*. These works afford us the luxury of gathering information from masterfully written firsthand accounts.

While, as we have set out, we limit ourselves to Isherwood the Vedantist, we likewise don't aim to either present a comprehensive exposition of Vedanta philosophy and/or Ramakrishna-Vedanta² or a complete biography of Isherwood's guru, Swami Prabhavananda. We only concern ourselves with Isherwood's Vedanta and Isherwood's Prabhavananda as Isherwood has himself eloquently portrayed them.

The Backstory³

Christopher Isherwood was born in 1904 to an upper middle class family, the grandson and heir of an English squire. His mother's family was descended from John Bradshaw, who presided over the trial that ordered the execution of King Charles I. He was born into privilege; and we will see that this “privilege karma” followed him into several roles, including that of disciple. Chris' father, being a second son, had to earn a living; he became a career officer in the military. Chris was sent to boarding school at the age of eight. His father, whom Isherwood described as a gentle,

¹ Jeffery Paine, *Father India: Westerners under the Spell of an Ancient Culture*. (HarperCollins, 1998), 180.

² *Ramakrishna*, A lecture by Swami Prabhavananda https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx7ZVMjih_w
Who Is Ramakrishna? A lecture by Christopher Isherwood <http://www.vedantavideo.com/dev.htm>

³ Much of the early biographical information (up to 1930) in this section comes from IF (The Isherwood Foundation website www.isherwoodfoundation.org), the Film *Chris & Don: A Love Story*, and Katherine Bucknell's introduction to *Diaries*, Volume 1. Both Katherine Bucknell and Don Bachardy, Isherwood's life partner, are or were principals in IF at the time of this writing.

artistic man, was killed in World War I in the Battle of Ypres. It seems reasonable to assume that this loss contributed to Chris' later pacifist convictions. Moreover, his father took an interest in Buddhism; and his mother, Kathleen Bradshaw Isherwood, an avid diarist herself, was enthusiastic about Indian culture and had attended lectures by Jiddu Krishnamurti long before Chris encountered Vedanta.⁴ [4] Kathleen wanted Chris to become an Oxford don. But early on, he soured towards academia (as well as polite society, secular or sacred). Eventually, after his mother's death in 1960, he was to find teaching surprisingly fulfilling.

He was a gifted student and was awarded a top scholarship to attend Cambridge. However, after an academically successfully performed but disillusioning first year, he sabotaged his second year exams by writing joke answers, which got him invited to leave the university and ended his mother's ambitions for him. But as we'll see, he embraced teaching after her death in 1960. The young Isherwood wanted to explore life, including coming to terms with his homosexuality, in a more socially liberal environment than England's, which he found constraining.

He discovered that Berlin, Germany in the early 1930s was just the place to do that. His experiences in Berlin became the subject for some of his earliest successful writings, including *The Berlin Stories*, which after the war were adapted as a very successful play by John Van Druten and movie entitled, *I Am a Camera*, which in turn morphed into the lavishly awarded Broadway and screen musical, *Cabaret*. Each iteration of the original stories took further liberties, which is to say one mustn't watch *Cabaret* and feel one knows Isherwood's history. *Christopher and His Kind* is Isherwood's later, more straightforward rewrite of that period.



Early travel document stamped for Berlin

⁴ *The Isherwood Century, Portrait of the Artist as Companion: Interviews with Don Bachardy, Niladri R. Chatterjee*, p. 99. Chatterjee had access to Kathleen Isherwood's journals at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas.

As Germany was preparing for World War II, Isherwood's anti-war feelings grew stronger. During that same time in England, Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxley were participating in an anti-war movement called the Peace Pledge Union, which argued that war was avoidable if the major powers worked to prevent it—which they didn't. The election of Adolph Hitler as Chancellor made the war inevitable.

As the situation in mainland Europe became more treacherous, Heard and Huxley left England for America; and Isherwood and his companion, W.H. Auden, left Germany for the Far East to write about the emerging war between China and Japan. In 1939, after having returned to England, where they lectured on the situation in Asia, Isherwood felt stuck, so he and Auden also left England for the United States. Auden stayed on the East Coast and Isherwood eventually drifted to Hollywood, where Heard and Huxley had settled. Isherwood hoped to get work writing for the movie studios, as Huxley had done. It must be mentioned that while all three were literary and/or intellectual celebrities when they arrived in the States, they were far from wealthy. They needed bread-winning occupations. While most writers disparaged their studio work, Isherwood freely admitted that the script writing had sharpened his craft, teaching him compactness of expression and he enjoyed the camaraderie. He also had always loved the movies and had previously been working in the film industry in Europe.

Isherwood was particularly hoping to connect with Heard to learn more about his involvement with the pacifist movement, but when he got to Hollywood, he found that both Heard and Huxley had shifted their focus from politics to religion, specifically Vedanta, under the guidance of Swami Prabhavananda.

In a letter, Huxley expressed the opinion that religion, rather than the traditional anti-war movement, had the only chance of succeeding in the elimination of the root cause of war: "...the thing finally resolves itself into a religious problem—an uncomfortable fact which one must be prepared to face and which I have come during the last year to find it easier to face."
