

Christopher Isherwood & the Monastery Part 2

"How delightful religion used to be—in the days when I wasn't doing anything particular about it!" Christopher Isherwood, September 1943¹

To Be or Not

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. 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 had himself gone through a dry period where he, by his own recounting, had 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. Beside fame, critical acclaim as a serious writer, and commercial success as a working screen writer, he was a first son and heir, handsome, outgoing, popular, and most importantly, a favorite of Swami. Chris had a lot to renounce.

Being around Prabhavananda made God Realization seem like the simplest, most natural thing in the world and that it could happen at any moment. But Isherwood's optimism gave way and his 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

¹Christopher Isherwood, Diaries, Volume One, (henceforth V1) ed. Katherine Bucknell, (Harper Flamingo), 1997, 305

² V1 306

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 had 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

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 Isherwood 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 non-Western group, 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 way⁷ to the very end? 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

We must recall Isherwood's statement referred to a "synthesis of East and West," not a swallowing whole of one culture by the other. This conflict regarding the proper cultivation of a transplant (Vedanta) in alien ground (the West), where to distinguish

³ V1 317

⁴ 308

⁵ 305

⁶ 302

⁷ Reference to the poem Up-Hill by Christina Rossetti

⁸ 305

between essential religion and non-essential local culture, would continue to play itself out for the rest of Swami Prabhavananda's life.

However, the face of Isherwood's major adversary was not culture, but lust. Swami, while recognizing the disruptive quality of lust, never set out to make 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..."

With the benefit of hindsight, Isherwood has recognized in *My Guru* that this necessary paradigm shift on what constitutes a "sin" is laid out clearly at his first appointment with Swami.

From that moment on, I began to understand that Swami did not think in terms of sins, as most Christians do. Certainly he regarded my lust for Vernon as an obstacle to my spiritual progress—but no more and no less of an obstacle than lust for a woman, even for a lawfully wedded wife would have been. Christian Sins are offenses against God...The obstacles which the Swami recognized are offenses against yourself...In fact, the Swami's attitude was like that of a coach who tells his athletes that they must give up smoking, alcohol, and certain kinds of food, not because these are inherently evil, but because they may prevent the athlete from getting something he wants much more—an Olympic medal, for instance.¹⁰

Swami also told him, "Do you know what purity is, Chris? Purity is telling the truth." As many times as Swami tried to instill this attitude toward purity, and as naturally honest as Chris was, 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."

⁹ 344

¹⁰ MG 26

One's first reaction to all this is the world's reaction: mustn't there be something radically wrong with this place, if everybody is so hysterical? But that objection arises from the fallacy that the aim of religion is to make you happy in a worldly sense. It isn't. The death of the ego was never supposed to be pleasant, and this misery may really mean that we are getting ahead with it. So let the squeezing process go on, as long as we can take it.

The other struggling 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 enough curiosity about her to get past his reservations, even though Sister was humble and accessible.

I...felt a distance between myself and Sister Lalita. This wasn't so much because of her age. She was an intelligent and active old lady who read radical magazines and loved gardening...our relations were inhibited by her extreme politeness. It seemed to me that she thought of herself as our hostess, with obligations toward us as guests. And, in addition to this, she often inspired me with awe. She had actually known Vivekananda! This fact came home to me with special force and strangeness when I watched her in the shrine room. She had an air of unobtrusiveness which was somehow majestic. She made me think of Holy Mother as Swami had described her to us, sitting quietly by the roadside, in front of the inn.¹¹

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.

TRANSITION

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

¹¹ My Guru 110

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. 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 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 again illustrates the unusually wide range of choices available to Isherwood and Williams was to be Isherwood's playmate on this getaway.

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

¹² V1 353

¹³ V1 343

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

We find in this description of Williams spiritual references. First in comparing Williams' manner to that of a meditative sage, and later in the paragraph "he works till he's tired, eats when he feels like it, sleeps when he feels inclined," which echoes an to the question of how to practice Zen: "When hungry, eat, when tired, sleep."¹⁵ To quote Sri Ramakrishna, "A man belches what he eats." That Isherwood's impression of Williams inspires sacred imagery indicates that, struggles notwithstanding, his mind is soaked in spirituality.

It was on this break, at the six 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.¹⁶

In 1943, Chris had become infatuated from a distance with a young man he called "X.", the pseudonym rendering "X" glamorous.¹⁷ 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 was to become a stable, but for X, casual relationship. And while being a critical mass for leaving the monastery, the relationship fell apart, as a result of Chris' jealousy, at around the time Chris left the monastery. Given the timeline, it seems reasonable to question whether the essential purpose of the affair was the fulfillment of lust or an impetus to leave 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.

¹⁴ V1 311

¹⁵ Popularized by D.T Suzuki

¹⁶ V1 314

¹⁷ Years later, Isherwood rechristened X "Alfred" in *My Guru*, saying that "Alfred" was humdrum a name as he could come up with.[]

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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

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. Isherwood is certainly intelligent and self-aware enough to see this contradiction in logic, but his journal style is to lay out the entire process–thesis, antithesis–rather than only the neatly-wrapped synthesis.

An ex-partner, Vernon, has finished his military obligation and will soon become available to rejoin Chris. The relationship had not worked out the first time around.

Isherwood, plan in hand, 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."

¹⁸ V1 349

¹⁹ V1 316

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?”²⁰

When Vernon²¹ 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 again had other plan: absorbing Vernon into the Family. 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 having folded 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.”²²

It didn't take long before tensions developed between Chris and Vernon. The relationship split along the same fault lines that broke it their first time around.

Montecito

That summer of 1944, Mr. Kellogg donated the Montecito 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

²⁰ V1 352

²¹ In the journal, Isherwood is nonspecific about relationships and uses pseudonyms for his associates, so we only go as far as he mentions as to their nature when quoting from them. However, My Guru, written decades later is more explicit and we know from it that Vernon was an intimate companion at the time when Chris met Swami. He is mentioned in Chris' depiction of the first interview.

²² V1 363

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.²³

While living at the Montecito property and as his relationship with Chris was unraveling, Vernon had wanted a dog to keep him company. This hurt Chris' feelings. However, Vernon's wish wasn't granted because when Swami's party, which included Sister, came north, Sister wanted Dhruva, her "ill-tempered collie," to come as well because she believed Dhruva loved to attend the classes. But, as Chris put it, Dhruva "fought everything on four legs," not what you'd expect from a holy dog. While perfection is the aspiration, it was not a prerequisite for Swami's society.

²³ Gopal Stavig, Ramakrishna-Vedanta in Southern California <http://www.vedantawritings.com/HVS3.pdf>
Page 19 (See entire work at <http://www.vedantawritings.com/RKVTOC.htm>)