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GREAT SOULS

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How Christopher Isherwood's destiny lay in penning Indian scripture in eloquent English

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For many Westerners, their introduction to Hinduism came not from yoga or a respected guru, but from a boyish British author, Christopher Isherwood, a Renaissance man of letters, writing plays, short stories, screenplays, poems, novels and nonfiction. Though he is perhaps best known as the author of such works as *The Berlin Stories* (later made into the hit play and movie, "Cabaret"), his involvement in the Vedanta movement in California from the 1940s through the 1980s left a permanent imprint on the cultural landscape and helped raise the profile of Hinduism in the West. *Song of God: Bhagavad Gita*, his collaborative effort with Swami Prabhavananda, first published in 1944, has sold more than a million copies.

Christopher Isherwood was born in 1904 to an upper-middle-class family in Cheshire, England, was educated at Cambridge and lived in Southern California from 1939 until his death in 1986. A pacifist strongly opposed to the war in

Europe, he settled in Los Angeles to be close to fellow British expatriates Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard. Huxley was the famed author of *Brave New World* and other noted novels. Heard was an Irish mystic and historian who meditated six hours a day and founded his own monastery at Trabuco Canyon (later donated to the Vedanta Society). Isherwood was already an established author when he left Europe, and he had no trouble finding work writing for films in Hollywood.

In the summer of 1939, Heard introduced Isherwood to Swami Prabhavananda. The Swami, who founded the Vedanta Society of Southern California, had been involved in the independence movement in India, and Isherwood was drawn to this charismatic and sophisticated holy man. The association of prominent writers such as Isherwood and Huxley, and philosophers like Heard and J. Krishnamurti, gave a high profile to Vedanta in Southern California in the 40s and 50s, long before the influx of Eastern teachers in the 1960s.

Swami Prabhavananda initiated Isherwood into Vedanta in November of 1940, giving him a mantram and the traditional Ramakrishna Order rudraksha mala (prayer beads). The author took to the religion wholeheartedly, attending lectures at the Vedanta Center in Los Angeles, practicing yoga and learning the power of the sacred Om. Three years later, he moved into the Vedanta Center, taking a small room in the house the Swami called Brahmananda Cottage. For a while he contemplated undertaking the rigorous 12-year training to become a Ramakrishna swami, but ultimately decided to continue his "writing dharma."

Isherwood continued to write screenplays and secular books such as *Prater Violet* and *The Berlin Stories*. He later referred to his writing studio as "just an office I visit in the daytime, a spectacular example of the world of maya, one might say." He found a much deeper fulfillment when Swami Prabhavananda requested his help with Swami's translations of Hindu scripture. For *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali*, he wrote commentary and smoothed out the Swami's rough translation. Isherwood was intimidated by Swami's next project: translating Shankara's *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, which again called for the author to put his guru's English into readable prose. Isherwood felt unworthy to the task, and his progress was slow. Yet as with Patanjali's classic work, Isherwood's editing resulted in a clear and very readable translation.

The English version of the *Song of God: Bhagavad Gita* was Isherwood's crowning achievement. The book was almost unknown to readers in the US at the time, and Isherwood was pleased to play a part in its translation, although he struggled to put the Swami's interpretation into words that did justice to the Gita. His first draft was in prose form, but Isherwood found it lacking--he could not see that his version was any better than those that came before. He was suddenly inspired when he remembered that the *Bhagavad Gita* was part of an even larger epic poem. Why not transform his "creaky antiquated prose," as he put it, into lines of verse? The resulting mixture of poetry and prose is alive with alliteration and imagery.

In his introduction to the Gita translation, Aldous Huxley, also a disciple of the Swami, wrote: "We should be grateful to Swami Prabhavananda and Mr. Isherwood for having given us this

new version of the book--a version which can be read, not merely without that dull aesthetic pain inflicted by all too many English translations from the Sanskrit, but positively with enjoyment." Perhaps the most telling endorsement of their translation is that it is still in print, more than 50 years after it was first published.

"Christopher Isherwood had a great impact on the spread of Vedanta in the West through his wonderful writing ability," said Pravrajika Vrajaprana of the Vedanta Society of Southern California in Santa Barbara. "He and Swami were an incomparable writing team; their Song of God: Bhagavad Gita has sold over a million copies. Swami Prabhavananda would translate the Sanskrit and Chris would put it into his inimitable poetry and prose. Their teamwork was magic. Chris was also the editor of our now-defunct magazine, Vedanta and the West. Not only did he regularly contribute articles, but he also brought in other noted writers." "Many people first heard about Vedanta from reading Isherwood's books," added John Schlenck of the Vedanta Society of New York, "and some of those afterward became devotees."

In his later years, Isherwood undertook research for Ramakrishna and His Disciples. He traveled to India and visited Ramakrishna's birthplace at Kamarpukur and the temple at Dakshineswar where the saint spent most of his adult life. He had a vivid dream of Ramakrishna which Swami Prabhavananda told him "was a great grace." Isherwood began the book: "This is the story of a phenomenon. I will begin by calling him simply that, rather than holy man, mystic, saint, or avatar; all emotive words with mixed associations which may attract some readers, repel others. A phenomenon is often

something extraordinary and mysterious. Ramakrishna was extraordinary and mysterious; most of all to those who were best fitted to understand him." Isherwood was not fully satisfied with this book, though it remains quite popular. Privately he wished that he "could have sucked some of the sanctity out of it and dimmed the light," in favor of more realistic portrayals.

Swami Prabhavananda died on July 4, 1976. Isherwood recounted their friendship in *A Meeting by the River*. It is a story of two brothers, one worldly, one contemplative who becomes a Hindu swami, and their relationship with an elder swami who eventually dies. Isherwood crafted the book into a successful stage play. Isherwood's memoir, *My Guru and His Disciple*, directly chronicled his relationship with Prabhavananda and was published in 1980, four years after the swami's passing.

When author W. Somerset Maugham needed to translate a particular passage of the *Katha Upanishad* for his 1944 novel *The Razor's Edge*, he sought help from Isherwood. The book became a hit, and Christopher Isherwood was regarded by many as Maugham's model for Larry Darrell, the novel's protagonist who gives up a privileged life and converts to Vedanta. Maugham, well known for bringing his friends and foes to life on the printed page, said the character was based on several people. Larry Darrell's charm, simplicity, liveliness and devotion to Vedanta are certainly characteristics shared by Isherwood, but he emphatically denied he was the character's source.

Isherwood's complete literary collection has now found a home at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, one of the largest research libraries in the United States. "The archive itself is spectacular," states library director David Zeidberg, "a rich resource of literary drafts, diaries, notes, correspondence files, photographs and annotated books that will support scholarly research for years." Among the collection of more than 2,000 pieces are articles Isherwood wrote for Vedanta and the West magazine. 1Ã4

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