

brahmins from abroad

**english expatriates
and spiritual consciousness
in modern america**

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One of the major intellectual and cultural dilemmas of the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s involved the quest for an adequate source of value in a world that had come to be understood as intrinsically valueless. Symptomatically, many Western intellectuals, academics, writers and artists evidenced a longing to believe in some transcendent idea or principle that would give structure and meaning to their experience. This longing, according to Franklin Baumer, was brought on by the failure to reconcile the “man-society” connection with the “man-universe” connection.¹ For some, this longing for belief was satisfied by either a kind of religious adherence to political and economic ideologies or by a return to traditional religious creeds. Others were led to an exploration of a broad combination of religious, scientific and psychological elements which together represented a new, modern syncretic spiritualism.

Arthur Koestler explored this dilemma in his 1946 collection of essays, *The Yogi and the Commissar*. Koestler likened the entire range of attitudes towards life to a physicist's light spectrum. On the infra-red end, he locates the commissar. This end of the spectrum encompasses the lowest vibrations which are also the hottest. The commissar, argues Koestler, believes in change from without; that all the ills of mankind from the unequal distribution of wealth to the elimination of Oedipus complex can be accomplished by the application of logical reasoning, social engineering and, if need be, violent revolution.

At the other end of the spectrum are the ultra-violet frequencies, a range where the beam of light becomes invisible to the naked eye. At this end is the Yogi, who believes that the ills of mankind can only be addressed by securing the proper internal disposition; a disposition which is oriented only towards the truth which is understood to be the "godhead."²

The underlying problem, Koestler suggests, is the fundamental opposition between the conception of change from without and change from within. These opposing notions of change help to explain periodic historical swings between the two extremes of the spectrum and offer a vehicle for understanding such mid-range combinations as political liberalism, Fabianism and the social gospel. Koestler believed that twentieth-century man was inexorably moving towards the Yogi end of the spectrum, sometimes consciously and at other times unconsciously. According to Koestler's diagnosis, the West was suffering from a bad case of anti-materialistic nostalgia which was repelled by logic, optimism and rationalism, and attracted to various forms of romantic mysticism.³

My concern is with a small group of English expatriates who, from the late 1930s through the 1960s, contributed to the spread of mystical religious ideas in America. This group included Aldous Huxley, who by the time of his emigration was a world-renowned novelist and essayist; Gerald Heard, a well-known BBC science commentator and man of letters; and Christopher Isherwood, the leading novelist in a group of young, leftist, interwar writers referred to as the Auden group. Collectively they created a minor literary movement that brought to the attention of American readers a wide variety of religious subjects including spiritualism and psychic phenomena, mysticism, pacifism, oriental philosophy, self-help therapies and consciousness-altering drugs. In addition to their importance as noteworthy twentieth-century authors, they represent facets of a more generalized religious awakening in the West. As a group, they helped to stimulate this religious awakening in America and shape its distinctive eclectic form. As case studies, they provide instructive examples of modern spiritual longing and help to elucidate the form and substance of contemporary divergent religious belief in America.

The reason for treating these three as a group has little to do with their age—a total of fifteen years separates Heard, the eldest, from Isherwood, the youngest. Even from a literary perspective, they represent different "generations." What these three did have in common was their experience of the interwar period—the disquieting knowledge that they had survived the Great War and a sense of foreboding about the inevitability of a second war. Each found himself ultimately frustrated with the England of the interwar years; each developed a commitment to pacifism which served as a catalyst for his interest in religion; each settled in America (more specifically, Los Angeles) where all three remained in constant contact for approximately twenty-five years; each explored in his personal life and writing the spiritual aspects of human existence; and each contributed to the nascent American interest in mysticism, spiritualism and Asian religions. Thus, as individuals and as a group, they are important in the

history of the twentieth century “religious renaissance” among Western intellectuals in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.

The very idea of a modern religious renaissance necessarily involves a variety of complex and arguable comparisons. Noting that, “One of the most significant tendencies of our time, especially in this decade, has been the new turn toward religion among intellectuals and the growing disfavor with which secular attitudes and perspectives are now regarded in not a few circles that lay claim to the leadership of culture,” the editors of the *Partisan Review* asked a group of prominent intellectuals in 1950 to comment on the notion of a religious renaissance.⁴ The responses were anything but unanimous. Nevertheless, the fact remained that a variety of individuals, generally regarded as intellectual and cultural leaders, had demonstrated an apparent reawakening of interest in spiritual matters. These included Carl Jung, Arnold Toynbee, Arthur Koestler, Pitirim Sorokin and Albert Einstein, just to name a few. Certainly Huxley’s unexpected spiritual turn generated much notoriety. As Ben Ray Redman wrote in 1944, “We shall do better to study the case of Huxley as an important case-history of our time . . . Such a study may shed light upon what is happening not only to Huxley but to many others of our generation, for his abdication is only one among many.”⁵

Whether it constitutes a religious renaissance or not, the twentieth century has witnessed a growing interest in the scientific study of religious phenomena coupled with a syncretic approach to human spirituality. This type of spiritual interest which is broad in focus, minimally religious in the traditional sense of the word and extensively known due to its diffusion in popular culture, consists of attempts empirically to validate spiritual experience by reconciling religious insights with scientific and psychological theories. Relying heavily on anthropological data, philosophical speculation and psychological observations, this empirical analysis of religion has occupied some of the more imaginative minds of our century. Applying analytical skills to traditional western religions and to the rediscovered Asian traditions, these scientific spiritualists have taken as their task the analysis of religious experience within a scientific-empirical framework. Abandoning religious vocabulary, the resulting scientific spiritualism has become one of the more appealing forms of religiosity for Western intellectuals who seek forms of spiritual belief compatible with their secular and scientific frames of mind. Many of these secularized spiritual orientations have stressed their separation from normative religious traditions by insisting that they are not religions at all but “alternative ways of knowing,” new metaphysical systems for a nuclear age or simply forms of psychological self-help. Regardless of the form, the last four decades have seen a notable growth in the West of divergent or *ad hoc* “religions” that have appealed to a highly educated and secular audience.

Franklin Baumer terms this modern spiritual interest a “layman’s religion.”⁶ According to Baumer, this layman’s religion is an individualized combination of beliefs and practices chosen from such diverse sources as Christianity, oriental religions, political ideology, psychological

theories and anthropological observations. As such, the layman's religion expresses a personal belief system rather than adherence to formal dogma or theology. Moreover, it exhibits at least two significant characteristics: it is polymorphic and anti-dogmatic.⁷

The polymorphic quality of modern spiritual belief is hardly surprising given the popularity of comparative religious studies, the vast treasure of ethnological literature about the role and function of religion in other societies and the interest in exploring the psychology of religious experience. Because intellectuals share at least a passing acquaintance with these subjects, their spiritual beliefs tend to incorporate, or at least acknowledge, the insights of all religions while avoiding the notion of privileged revelation. Individual modern believers are more likely to ponder these collected insights and reduce them to a set of common denominators so as to form what has been termed a "minimum working hypothesis."⁸

As an obvious corollary to these polymorphic qualities, Baumer suggests that a layman's religion would resist the tendency to dogmatize. Each individual believer understands himself or herself to be responsible for fixing in his or her own mind the limits of one's own belief system. Therefore, no attempt is made to seek common agreement on other than the most general articles of belief. At best, modern intellectuals may agree on a common ethical system or simple rules of behavior as opposed to more complex patterns of belief. For example, such behavioral rules may incorporate elements of vegetarianism, pacifism or communitarianism.

As a mode of life, the layman's religion, in whatever form, is composed of a number of beliefs, practices and disciplines—some disparate, some related—all of which together are used by the individual believer to mediate his own felt spiritual vacuums or psychological dead-ends. Because the individual believer feels that he has the latitude to piece together a belief system to meet his or her own unique set of individual needs, it is highly unlikely that his choice of elements would consist of those which are not compatible with his own personality and needs. As such, the process of constructing a layman's religion, inasmuch as it is a heterodox and individualistic process, is in the mainstream of modern intellectual life.⁹

Gerald Heard, now a largely obscure and forgotten figure, in the 1930s was a well-known science commentator for the BBC as well as a prolific writer. E. M. Forster's assessment of Heard as one of the "most penetrating minds in England"¹⁰ was shared by many including W. H. Auden, who in 1933 was at work on a poem that portrayed Heard as Virgil guiding Auden through the complexities of modern life.¹¹ But while Heard's admirers hailed him as a profound synthesizer of science and religion, his detractors excoriated him as an intellectual gadfly and philosophical raconteur. In reviewing Heard's thirty-five books and numerous articles and essays, one is immediately struck by the variety of genres he pursued. Heard the raconteur (writing under his real name, Henry Fitzgerald Heard) wrote a total of nine books including mysteries, science fiction and eerie short stories. However, it was as Gerald Heard the

mandarin that he wrote most of his twenty-six other books devoted to scientific, philosophical, historical and religious topics.

In spite of his copious literary canon, Heard essentially devoted his life to the rewriting of a single “book.” That “book” was a series of accounts of the modern dilemma, which Heard characterized as the dichotomy between humanity’s growing control over the material world and its corresponding lack of control over the spiritual or psychological world. Heard believed that the application of a scientifically validated form of contemplative or mystical spirituality, underscored by a teleological belief in the continuing evolution of human consciousness, would lead to the development of a more advanced form of intelligence capable of transcending the political, economic and social consequences of one’s individualized consciousness. Heard pursued this theme in each of his major works and, over time, as he was able to digest greater and greater amounts of historical, anthropological and psychological data, his expositions became more detailed and complex. The fundamental outline of Heard’s thesis, however, is contained in a trilogy of his early works: *The Ascent of Humanity* (1929), *The Social Substance of Religion* (1931) and *The Source of Civilization* (1935).

An ardent proponent of evolutionary theory, Heard believed that while physical evolution had come to a halt, the evolutionary process itself continued on in the realm of consciousness. As the result of his evolutionary investigations, Heard became convinced that it was always the less specialized forms of life that prevailed. Overspecialized species, by completely adapting to a single change in their environment, became incapable of subsequent adaptations to other inevitable changes. Therefore, these species remained locked in a static state of development and ruefully awaited the day of their extinction. Unspecialized species, on the other hand, were far better able to adapt to change and consequently survive for further evolutionary development. Just as behavioral overspecialization produced effects harmful to physical evolution, so conceptual overspecialization produced effects harmful to psychological evolution.

History, for Heard, provided the record of man’s capacity for adaptation and change. Thus, in the tradition of Comte, Spengler and Toynbee, his major works consisted of impressionistic, metaphorical world histories in which he repeatedly honed his teleological theories. “The real advance,” wrote Heard, “. . . is in man’s spirit and can be disclosed through the evolution of his standards.”¹² Heard believed that man’s consciousness had evolved from a primitive, pre-individual group consciousness to a fully individualized form of consciousness. Unfortunately, the development of man’s intensified self-consciousness, which resulted in his obsession with material progress, overshadowed the need for social merger with his fellow beings—the essence of self-negating spiritual development. Heard feared that humanity was in danger of capsizing mentally because of the gross imbalance between man’s enormous material growth and his corresponding lack of spiritual growth. Moreover, Heard was convinced that modern ideologies such as capitalism, Marxism, nationalism and scientism were all

conceptual overspecializations of this individualized human consciousness that had arrested man's psychological evolution. By comparison, conceptual unspecialization consisted of man's capacity for adaptation, wonder, curiosity and all embracing love.

Because modern science provided evidence of man's developing capacity for curiosity and wonder, Heard enthusiastically reported on science in the broadest possible sense, describing the latest discoveries in physics, biology, psychology and anthropology, and speculating on their implications for the future.¹³ These implications, asserted Heard, pointed to the underlying development of a new consciousness which, he believed, would be a transcendent super-consciousness. Further, this emerging consciousness, in combination with new discoveries in physics and psychology, could lead to the integration of scientific cosmology with the free and benevolent political and economic orders necessary for constructive social action.¹⁴

Convinced that religion was the expression of man's capacity for love and proof of the historical quest for psychological wholeness, Heard penned nine books and countless articles on spiritual themes. Consistent with his negative view on the effects of individualized consciousness, he argued in *The Social Substance of Religion* (1931) that the growth of individual consciousness occurs in inverse proportion to the intensity of the psychic field which a social group is able to create. Traditional religion was no longer able to create the necessary psychic field because, equally affected by individualized consciousness, it had become "increasingly intellectual, the approach of a creature who thinks of itself as being nothing but a self-conscious individual to an equally defined self-conscious individual creator, a relationship of bargaining or conversation, almost never of union."¹⁵

Because traditional religion and the social forces created out of man's individualized consciousness were inappropriate for achieving further progress in the evolution of human consciousness, a new source of creative power had to be tapped. Heard believed that this new source of power, which lay in the subconscious mind and could be awakened by deliberate techniques, was a kind of mysticism or yoga found in religion but also accessible through psychological understanding and conditioning.¹⁶

Heard's concern for improvement in the human condition was more than academic. As a leading figure in the British interwar peace movement he was increasingly disheartened by the seemingly inevitable drift towards war and the failure of the pacifist movement to capture the mass imagination. From Heard's point of view, war was simply the crudest expression of individual consciousness—the pitting of one's individuality against another's with the provision that only one survive. Thus, if war was essentially a "symptom of a diseased individualized civilization,"¹⁷ the most efficacious preventative required the transformation of individual consciousness. This transformation, or "new pacifism," as Heard called it,¹⁸ began with proper individual conditioning as prescribed in his book *The Third Morality*; a blend of asceticism, meditation and good works which

Heard termed a “new athleticism.”¹⁹ Unfortunately, while many found Heard’s approach novel, few seemed willing to follow the required regimen. Ultimately frustrated with the general European situation and his inability to influence its outcome, Heard emigrated to America in 1937 and took up residence in Southern California.

Heard was entranced with the cosmopolitan diversity of the Los Angeles area partly because he was convinced that mankind’s greatest advances were nourished by the social and psychological alchemy of such melting pots. Writing of Los Angeles, his thoughts drifted back two millenia to another similar place.

There was once a coast curiously like this, when the world went through its last world crisis. On the Levant, the palestinian coast in the senescence of the Classical Age, crank religions and fraud cults proliferated. But there also had risen Stoicism and Christianity and there amid all the charlantry, emerged the new chemistry. . . . Indeed, it may be that only out of such a welter of conflicting credulity that profound creation can arise.²⁰

Scoff as we might, there is ample evidence to suggest that Heard envisioned Southern California as a potential modern Holy Land and, as he began to attract his own personal following, he increasingly saw himself as a kind of guru or “neo-brahmin,” as he called his version of the modern spiritual leader.²¹ In 1943, with donated funds, Heard purchased a small ranch at Trabuco Canyon some miles inland from Laguna Beach. Renovated to look much like a small monastery complete with courtyard, cloisters, cells, library, refectory and meditation hall, Heard ensconced himself with a small group of followers for the purpose of training a cohort of neo-brahmins who would be equipped to reenter the world as modern spiritual mediators or guides for the perplexed.²² Heard maintained Trabuco College (as it was called) until 1949, at which time he reentered the world as a writer, essayist, lecturer and radio personality. Heard found his audiences on college campuses, in the congregations of liberal Protestant churches and among the urbane and cosmopolitan as well as among the troubled and the disaffected. For the rest of his life, Heard criss-crossed the country winning friends and outraging others. His audiences were consistently curious, if not always enthusiastic. Admittedly, his influence was diffuse. Over time, as biographical detail is fleshed out by additional research, we may learn more about this intriguing figure. What we do know is sketchy but suggestive. As Eckard Toy reported some years ago, Heard captured the spiritual imagination of a number of prominent conservatives such as William C. Mullendore, Chairman of the Board of Southern California Edison Company, Henry and Clare Booth Luce and Robert Greenleaf of AT&T.²³ There is evidence that Heard not only provided spiritual guidance to such individuals but also introduced some of them (under his guidance) to the effects of hallucinogenic drugs. With the personal and financial support of these followers, Heard devoted the remainder of his life to what he called “growing edge” research into such

areas as psychotherapy, hallucinogenic drugs and parapsychology. Perhaps not surprisingly, Heard's work brought him to the attention of Michael Murphy and Richard Price, co-founders of the Esalen Institute. Not only was Heard apparently involved in the early formulation of Esalen's unique brand of psychosomatic hygiene, but he occasionally served as an early Esalen seminar leader. Heard's involvement with Esalen was indicative of his interest in a theology of human transformation and in propounding a kind of religious knowledge that was grounded in psychotherapeutic techniques. Although his bombastic style often obscured his message, the core of Heard's belief centered on the notion that a universal religion embracing both the traditions of the East and the West offered the best hope for revitalizing man's evolutionary progress.

In all probability, Heard will be remembered less for his own work than for his influence on other more talented writers, especially Aldous Huxley, whose deserved literary reputation as the preeminent satirist of the 1920s is based on a series of stingingly funny and irreverent early works: *Chrome Yellow* (1922), *Those Barren Leaves* (1925), *Point Counter Point* (1928) and *Antic Hay* (1929). The publication of *Brave New World* in 1932 underscored his growing international stature. For the next four years, however, Huxley published little, travelled much, underwent treatments for a variety of physical and psychological ailments and struggled fitfully with his next novel. When *Eyeless in Gaza* finally appeared in 1936, Huxley's readers were puzzled to find a clumsily constructed but nevertheless serious novel about personal morality, spiritual cause and effect, pacifism and mysticism. This was followed by several pacifist works including a widely publicized pamphlet entitled *What Are You Going to do About It?* (1936), *The Encyclopedia of Pacifism* (1936), a full-length pacifist manifesto, *Ends and Means* (1937) and a host of later works on religious and spiritual topics. Huxley critics have since decried this transformation and, in one degree or another, have denounced it as a betrayal, an example of the wages of cynicism turned cowardly, or worse, a modern intellectual loss of nerve.²⁴ In general, the portrait of Huxley as a cowardly crank conveniently ignores the mystical elements that are apparent in his early works, especially *Those Barren Leaves*, and appears to be partly based on some degree of nonapproval or displeasure with his later philosophical positions.

Huxley had been introduced to pacifism, as he was to so many other things, by Heard. Initially, his pacifism was a kind of personal humanitarian response to the worsening worldwide political situation. As such, Huxley's early pacifism was largely concerned with customary and pragmatic approaches to peace, including the use of diplomacy and power politics, embargoes and even military intervention on a limited scale. However, as the possibility of war loomed larger each year, the pacifist movement was unable to sustain its support by the use of arguments appealing to practical common sense alone. Soon pacifism became for Huxley, as it did for many others, a kind of creedal position which required an almost religious adherence.²⁵ In November of 1935 Huxley wrote that pacifism "finally resolves itself into a religious problem—an uncomfort-

able fact that one must be prepared to face. . . .”²⁶ A major contributing factor to the change in Huxley’s pacifism may have been his exposure to Mahatma Gandhi’s principles of nonviolent living. Although Englishmen were well aware of Gandhi and his movement, the acceptance of his principles was effectively impeded by an ingrained British contempt for subject native races.²⁷ For this reason, the application of Gandhi’s nonviolent philosophy to British pacifism had to await reintroduction by two American pacifists, Devere Allen and Richard Gregg. Ironically, Gregg’s work on Gandhi became so influential that the integration of spiritual nonviolent principles with British pacifism came to be known as “Greggism” rather than “Gandhi-ism.”²⁸ Although the transcendental principles of “Greggism” were oriental, the optimistic belief that such principles could be used to transform Western culture may have owed some small debt to this American distillation.

Evidence suggests that the exposure to Gandhi’s principles of nonviolent living was a contributing factor in Huxley’s spiritual transformation. Two of Huxley’s pacifist works, the *Encyclopedia of Pacifism* and *Ends and Means*, are filled with descriptions of nonviolent living and examples of nonviolent resistance to evil—what Gregg termed “moral jiu-jitsu” and what Huxley referred to as the “moral equivalent of war.” The end results of a life lived in accordance with these principles and practices, Huxley asserted, were the development of the “non-attached” man (as described in *Ends and Means*) and the achievement of a kind of social rejuvenation based on Gandhi’s theories of village-scale economic and political activity (Khadar) as advocated by the character of William Propter in *After Many Summer Dies the Swan* (1939).

Like Heard, Huxley undoubtedly found the deteriorating European situation less than conducive to the development of his ideal “non-attached” man. Thus, in company with Heard, he embarked on an extended lecture tour of America in 1937. Finding the intellectual and cultural eclecticism of southern California much to his liking, he stayed and focused his energies on the further exploration of spiritual and social transformations.

The key to Huxley’s brand of social rejuvenation was the ability to live a “non-attached” spiritual life, first described in *Ends and Means* and given further novelistic treatment through characters such as William Propter in *After Many Summer Dies the Swan* (1939) and Bruno Rontini in *Time Must Have a Stop* (1944). In essence, Huxley insisted that truly good works could only be performed by truly good people. Thus, although he never completely abandoned his interest in spiritually based social transformations, Huxley became increasingly concerned with personal sanctification. This new insistence on a proper internal disposition seemed naive to many. Coupled with his perceived aloofness, his ironic sense of humor and his residence in Los Angeles, some critics came to the conclusion that he had become just another Hollywood spiritual huckster.

The seriousness of Huxley’s quest and the quality of his spiritual acuity were vindicated by two insightful religious biographies, *Grey Eminence*

(1941) and *The Devils of Loudin* (1952). *Grey Eminence* was the spiritual biography of Francois Leclerc du Tremblay, a seventeenth-century French mystic who served as Richelieu's secretary of state and whose machinations, Huxley asserted, were responsible for unnecessarily prolonging the Thirty Years War. While the book serves as a general warning against all political action, it expressly cautions against combining religious devotion with exterior political ends. *The Devils of Loudin*, which recounts a documented case of seventeenth-century demonic possession resulting in the *auto-da-fey* of a town priest who was probably guilty of nothing more than being roundly disliked, served to warn of the dangers inherent in practicing intense spiritual disciplines without possessing an adequate psychology. Just as worldly action was likely to be harmful without the proper prerequisite spiritual disposition, so a self-absorbed spiritualism limited by an overly dogmatic world view was equally dangerous.

Perhaps Huxley's most lasting contributions to modern American religious belief revolve around his attempts to explicate the experience of direct awareness of the Godhead. Huxley wrote *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945) not as a coherent statement of his mystical beliefs but as an anthology of mystical thought. Mysticism, or direct intuitive experience of the Godhead, was the only religious approach for those, like himself, whom Huxley described in his novel, *Time Must Have a Stop*, as "not congenitally the members of any organized church, who have found that humanism and blue-domeism are not enough, who are not content to remain in the darkness of spiritual ignorance, the squalor of vice or that other squalor of mere respectability. . . ."29

The Perennial Philosophy reportedly sold 23,000 copies within weeks of its American publication.³⁰ Gai Eaton, who gave the book a negative review, nevertheless noted that the publication of *The Perennial Philosophy* "must have doubled, in the course of a few weeks, the number of people in England and the United States who have some slight interest in Oriental doctrines. . . ."31 In the Collected Works Edition of Huxley's books, published in England in 1968, sales of *The Perennial Philosophy* were second only to *Brave New World*.³²

The Perennial Philosophy was distasteful to many critics because of the apparent self-confidence with which Huxley picked and chose among those bits and pieces of historically disparate religious traditions which fit his criteria of significance. Huxley, himself, appeared to have been conscious of the pick and choose nature of his approach.

The construction of an all-embracing system of metaphysics, ethics and psychology is a task that can never be accomplished by any single individual, for the sufficient reason that he is an individual with one particular kind of constitution and temperament and therefore capable of knowing only according to the mode of his own being. Hence the advantages inherent in what may be called the anthological approach to truth.³³

By asserting that the anthological approach to truth was advantageous in understanding mystical experiences, Huxley also implied that different

mystical experiences might be equally valid. In fact, he came to recognize any number of trans-personal experiences as potential spiritual aids. Moreover, his long held belief that individual temperament and thought were related to physical traits was reinforced by new physiological discoveries suggesting that thought processes and emotional states were, in part, chemically based. Dietary controls or drugs could be used to correct emotional imbalances as well as to stimulate desirable psychological states. Thus, Huxley concluded, there might be little physiological or psychological difference between drug-induced visions or those of the religious ascetic. It is not my intention to chronicle Huxley's involvement with mind-altering drugs which spanned the last ten years of his life. Taken as a whole, evidence suggests that his involvement was more theoretical than actual.³⁴ However, Huxley was careful to point out that drug-induced visionary experiences alone constituted an insufficient insight into true mystical wisdom because spiritual knowledge was incomplete unless it was translated into a will to act for good in the world. Perhaps as his final statement on the relationship between spiritual insight and social transformation, he wrote in his last novel, *Island* (1962), that spiritually transformed action could be made to serve as a kind of looking glass through which the unenlightened might begin to perceive a higher level of being.

Huxley was particularly fond of a phrase attributed to the artist Goya, *Aun Apprendo*, "I am still learning." The phrase was characteristic of Huxley's basic intellectual restlessness. Huxley tended to treat religion as a profound curiosity, the value of which lay in its latent ability to transform human existence. The ultimate transformation was the experience of an intuitive mystical union with the Godhead. However, because this transformation itself transcended religion, knowledge and understanding of it could be obtained through any number of ways. Perhaps not surprisingly, several hours before his death, in what was undoubtedly the final experiment in a life of research into the human condition, Huxley, at his own request, was administered a small dosage of LSD.

Heard's and Huxley's role in the pacifist conversion of Christopher Isherwood provided a postscript to their own spiritual transformation. Isherwood had become one of the brightest novelists in a group of young, leftist writers and poets that had come to prominence in the 1930s. In his novels and in several plays (written in collaboration with W. H. Auden) Isherwood captured the literary imagination of the political left by framing his works from the viewpoint of the weak and victimized—those living on the fringes of normal existence. An early advocate of an armed popular front against fascism, Isherwood's pacifist conversion was precipitated by his 1938 trip to China, with Auden, to gather material for a book on the Sino-Japanese War which was later published as *Journey to a War* (1939).

Although the journey to China had been Isherwood's first experience of people actually involved in war, it was the Munich Crisis (occurring exactly at the time of his return) that demonstrated the real possibility that war might actually involve him. By the end of 1938, Isherwood felt a growing disillusionment with politics and acknowledged that he was groping

towards some sort of self-realization he could not define but which was, nevertheless, a rejection of power, force and the tyranny of majorities.³⁵ This realization led to the abandonment of organized political movements and the search for a new set of personal values. Isherwood began his search by leaving England in January 1939, again with Auden. After spending a few months in New York, he headed for Hollywood. As he explained to John Lehmann in London:

I myself am in the most Goddamawful mess. I have discovered what I didn't realize before, or what I wasn't till now, that I am a pacifist. That's one reason why I am going out to Hollywood, to talk with Gerald Heard and Huxley. Maybe I'll flatly disagree with them, but I have to hear their case, stated as expertly as possible. . . .³⁶

Isherwood was initially attracted to Heard's brand of "new pacifism" because of its notion that all pacifists should become psychologically sound, study medicine and practice actual forms of healing in opposition to all the destructive forces loose in the world. Such notions appealed to Isherwood who desperately felt the need for self-discipline and an active style of pacifism.³⁷ From May through June of 1939, Isherwood met rather intensively with Heard who expounded on the practice of yoga, on the need for spiritual discipline, on mysticism and on God. Heard's spiritual instruction proved to be exciting and provoked Isherwood's curiosity with its non-dualistic view of morality, its non-dogmatic approach to knowledge and its "try it for yourself" attitude towards spiritual discipline. "[W]hat Gerald recommended was a practical mysticism, a do-it-yourself religion which was experimental and empirical. You were on your own, setting forth to find things out for yourself in your individual way."³⁸

Finally, Isherwood asked to be introduced to Swami Prabhavananda, of whom both Heard and Huxley had spoken highly. As a result, Isherwood came into contact with the Vedanta Society and the individual who was to have the greatest lasting influence on his subsequent spiritual development. Isherwood's thirty-seven year association with Prabhavananda has been chronicled in his autobiographical memoir, *My Guru and His Disciple* (1980), a remarkable portrayal of a deep, mutually enriching relationship and a testament to Isherwood's fundamental belief in the saving power of human relationships.

Although Isherwood applied for and received conscientious objector status, by the time America entered the war his age disqualified him from any alternative service and left him at loose ends. At Prabhavananda's suggestion, he moved into the Vedanta Center and from 1943 through the end of the war assumed the role of what Isherwood called a "demi-monk." During this time, Isherwood devoted his energy to editing the Vedanta Center's small magazine and assisting Prabhavananda with several English translations of Hindu scriptures including the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

It was during this same period that Somerset Maugham published *The Razor's Edge* (1944), which portrayed a young American's search for enlightenment through Vedanta. After his enlightenment, the hero of the

story, Larry, becomes a cab-driving neo-brahmin dispensing transcendental wisdom to all who will listen. It was rumored that Maugham, who had consulted with Isherwood on several aspects of Vedantic philosophy, had also used him as a model for Larry. The fact that Isherwood denied this did nothing to lessen speculation.³⁹ Public interest was further stimulated by the film version of the book which appeared in 1946, starring Tyrone Power as Larry.⁴⁰

A no less worldly publication than *Time* magazine featured an extended article on Heard, Huxley and Isherwood in its review of Isherwood's translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Featuring a photo of Isherwood with Prabhavananda on the steps of the Vedanta temple in Hollywood, the review observed that Heard, Huxley and Isherwood in company with Maugham and American playwright John van Druten, had created a spiritually-oriented "minor but noteworthy literary movement."⁴¹

As a novelist, Isherwood tended to view the world in terms of individual perceptions and human interactions. Admittedly less intellectual than Heard or Huxley, Isherwood's beliefs were generally formulated in response to particular persons. Thus his conversion to Vedanta was largely a matter of intuition and feelings, which resulted from his contact and experiences with Huxley, Heard and of course Prabhavananda. Because of these human attachments, Isherwood's conversion was more emotional and tended to focus almost exclusively on the specific belief system that Prabhavananda represented.

In a short article entitled, "Hypothesis and Belief," Isherwood attempted to answer the skeptical remonstrances of his more intellectual friends.⁴² In this essay, he observes that when any member of the intellectual class becomes affiliated with a set of religious beliefs, he is immediately forced to deal with his skeptical friends who either mock him, express curiosity or open hostility or sympathetically mourn the new believer's loss of all critical faculties. The convert, rather self-consciously, either becomes quietly retiring, openly evangelical or remains as he always has been and thereby shocks his friends who expect a demonstration of virtue equal to that of the greatest saint. In any case, the convert must always expect his friends to ask, "Do you really believe all that?" and the answer will always be, "No, not yet." He will answer this way, Isherwood wrote, because the very meaning of "belief" involves its validation through experience. Until any convert reaches this point, all of his new found religious teachings are merely hypotheses. In this way, the intellectual convert retains the same degree of skepticism and discrimination as his more "scientific" friends. While the scientist validates his hypotheses via the testimony of his instruments and laboratory findings, the convert verifies his hypotheses via the testimony of all the great religious figures in history. Just as you would assent to your doctor's remedy, argued Isherwood, so you should at least attempt to follow the hypotheses of the world's great religious teachers. If at the end of three or four years no improvement has been realized, then you are entitled to discard it all as a worthless placebo.

Despite his discomfort with the more Indian aspects of the Vedanta Society, Isherwood never found reason to cast off his new beliefs. Vedanta appealed to Isherwood because it was morally nondualistic and theologically nonexclusive. Isherwood characterized Vedanta as a kind of “algebra,” a way of grouping religions in general, of isolating their variables and relating them to each other.⁴³ That algebra was the key to its nonexclusiveness. Vedanta offered its adherents a choice of paths to choose from in order to realize one’s true self. Echoing Huxley, Isherwood wrote that it was all “a matter of psycho-physical type . . . more than anything else, which religion you choose.”⁴⁴

Having chosen Vedanta, Isherwood found himself engaged in the attempt to merge his religious beliefs with his fiction. His results with the religious novel were mixed. On several occasions, he portrayed his own spiritual dilemmas. These appear in his more autobiographical works such as *Prater Violet* (1945), *Down There on a Visit* (1962) and most recently, *My Guru and His Disciple* (1980). In addition to these, he also completed three “constructed” novels, *The World in the Evening* (1954), *A Single Man* (1964) and *A Meeting By the River* (1967), which made its way to the stage. Of these, *A Single Man* may be Isherwood’s best.

A Single Man is about a day in the life of George, an aged, homosexual Anglo-American literature professor. George is fighting desperately to retain his physical, intellectual and emotional vitality in the face of his own aging and inevitable mortality. In spite of his fear of death, George is determined to cling to life and to transcend the loneliness that is the consequence of individualized consciousness. George does this by attempting to establish a deep personal link with one of his students. At the end of the day, in a dream sequence, George experiences a kind of mystical consciousness which he taps in sleep. “[O]ver George and the others in sleep come the waters of that other ocean—that consciousness which is no one in particular but which contains everyone and everything, past, present and future, and extends unbroken beyond the uttermost stars.”⁴⁵ The success of the book lies in that George’s dilemmas are not only real but also modern; and in a modern age which allows little time for contemplation, the suggestion that spiritual insights are purely intuitive, perhaps even dreamlike, lends a sense of credibility to the work.

Much of the interest in the religious thought of Heard, Huxley and Isherwood was undoubtedly due to its unique blending of mystical and modern empirical elements. Like modern researchers, the three men approached their religious investigations with a good deal of skepticism. Religious experiences and spiritual claims were continuously subjected to rational or scientific validation. Thus metaphysics and cosmology were measured against the discoveries of modern physics and astronomy; religious institutions and symbol systems were analyzed in the light of modern anthropological findings; and personal religious experiences were understood in psychological terms. This blend of the religious and the empirical was as attractive to many as it was repellent to others.

It will always be difficult to assess adequately the influence exerted on

modern American spiritual belief by Heard, Huxley and Isherwood. The very meaning of the word "influence" denotes the power to effect change through indirect or imperceptible means. Thus the evidence of influence is more often than not merely suggestive and seldom conclusive. Perhaps the volume of skeptical and sometimes virulent attacks on the work of the three has been indicative (albeit in a negative way) of the influence they were perceived to have exerted on American thought and culture. Because Isherwood was primarily concerned with the novel, he was spared much of the ideological criticism that was directed at Heard and Huxley. Nevertheless, the non-Western religious themes woven into Isherwood's novels have tempted some to dismiss his work as merely curious. Huxley, in particular, has been criticized both for his oversimplification of mystical and oriental doctrines and for his alleged popular advocacy of psychedelic drugs. Ironically, both Huxley and Heard ultimately advocated a kind of spiritual aristocracy that reserved the most intense spiritual experiences for those who were intelligent and well-bred enough to truly benefit from them.

It is becoming increasingly clear that significant numbers of Americans now exhibit religious preferences and beliefs that incorporate many elements of the "layman's religion." The impetus for this modern spiritual eclecticism can be traced to several sources, including increased exposure to Asian culture and philosophy. But in the early part of the latter half of the twentieth century, the work of Gerald Heard, Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood played a noteworthy role in introducing American reading audiences to the problems of modern spiritual belief and the possibility of constructing a highly individualized and syncretic religious response.

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notes

1. Baumer, *Religion and the Rise of Skepticism* (New York, 1960), 225. Baumer credits Arthur Koestler with coining these two terms.
2. Arthur Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar and Other Essays* (New York, 1946), 4.
3. *Ibid.*, 13.
4. See the editorial statement, "Religion and the Intellectuals," *Partisan Review*, 27 (February, 1950), 103. The resulting written symposium appeared in the February, March, April and May-June issues of 1950.
5. "From Time into Eternity," *The Saturday Review* (September 2, 1944), 8.
6. See Baumer's *Religion and the Rise of Skepticism*, especially Chapter 5, "A Layman's Religion."
7. *Ibid.*, 273.
8. The phrase was used by Aldous Huxley as the title of an article in 1944 and formed the basis of his 1945 study of mysticism, *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945; rpt. New York, 1970).
9. Use of the terms "heterodox" and "individualistic" in characterizing the main thrust of modern intellectual thought is found in Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation* (New York, 1977).
10. Nigel Nicolson, ed., *Diaries and Letters of Harold Nicolson* (New York, 1967), II, 87.
11. *Ibid.*, 153.
12. Gerald Heard, *The Ascent of Humanity* (New York, 1929), 9.
13. In addition to his role as a scientific commentator with the BBC, Heard wrote several books of popular science including: *This Surprising World, A Journalist Looks at Science* (1932), *Science in the Making* (1935), *Science Front, 1936* (1936), *Exploring the Stratosphere* (1936) and *Is Another World Watching? The Riddle of the Flying Saucers* (1951).
14. Gerald Heard, *The Emergence of Man* (London, 1931), 298.
15. Gerald Heard, *The Source of Civilization* (London, 1935), 17.
16. *Ibid.*, 18-20.

17. Gerald Heard, "The Significance of the New Pacifism," in Gerald K. Hibbert, ed., *The New Pacifism* (1935; rpt. New York, 1972), 17.
18. *Ibid.*, 22.
19. (New York, 1937), 295.
20. Gerald Heard, "California," *Enquiry* (April, 1950), 29.
21. For a full discussion of the "neo-brahmin" see Gerald Heard, *Pain, Sex and Time* (New York, 1939).
22. Much more remains to be learned about Heard's associations during this period. Significantly, Alan Watts, a popularizer of oriental philosophy in his own right, received an early introduction to the subject in the 1940s from Heard, Huxley, Isherwood and Prabhavananda. Watts also spent some time with Heard at Trabuco College. See Alan Watts, *In My Own Way* (New York, 1973), 208.
23. Toy, "The Conservative Connection: The Chairman of the Board Took LSD Before Timothy Leary," *American Studies*, 21 (Fall, 1980), 65-77.
24. See Donald Watt, ed., *Aldous Huxley, The Critical Heritage* (London, 1976), and Jerome Meckier, "Mysticism or Misty Schism? Huxley Studies Since World War II," *The British Studies Monitor*, 5 (1974), 165-177. Meckier notes that most Huxley critics have relied on some form of the "two Huxley theory" which is based on the notion that the Huxley of the early novels and the Huxley of the later spiritual works are irreconcilable. Huxley's harshest critics have charged that his fall was attributable to a failure of nerve, to his aloofness and to his gullibility.
25. There are two excellent studies of the religious overtones in the pacifist movement: Joyce Berkman, "Transformations in Pacifist Consciousness in England, 1914-1939," in W. Warren Wagar, ed., *The Secular Mind: Transformations of Faith in Modern Europe* (New York, 1982); and Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford, 1980).
26. "To Victoria Ocampo," 19 November 1935, Letter 389, Grover Smith, ed., *Letters of Aldous Huxley* (London, 1969), 398.
27. Isherwood recognized this same feeling in himself when he first became attracted to Vedantic religion. See Christopher Isherwood, *An Approach to Vedanta* (Hollywood, California, 1963), 35.
28. Martin Ceadel provides an excellent history of the British pacifist movement in *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945*.
29. Aldous Huxley, *Time Must Have a Stop* (New York, 1944), 294.
30. This figure is reported by Sybille Bedford in *Aldous Huxley, A Biography* (New York, 1974), 446.
31. *The Richest Vein* (London, 1949), 167.
32. Watt, 478-479.
33. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, 153.
34. According to Huxley's second wife Laura Archera Huxley, he had only about ten or twelve drug-induced psychedelic experiences over the ten-year period of his experimentation. Huxley critics have charged that Huxley's published works *The Doors of Perception* (New York, 1954), and "Drugs That Shape Men's Minds," *Saturday Evening Post*, 18 October, 1958, were irresponsible and had a pernicious effect on impressionable young readers.
35. Isherwood, *An Approach to Vedanta*, 11-12.
36. Quoted by John Lehmann, *The Whispering Gallery* (New York, 1955), 330.
37. Isherwood, *An Approach to Vedanta*, 16.
38. *Ibid.*, 23.
39. Isherwood's denial was contained in a letter to the editor, *Time*, 17 December, 1945, 4.
40. Several years later, Power met with Gerald Heard to discuss his own interest in Vedanta which had been stimulated by his research for the role of Larry in the film. "Mrs. Fritz to Gerald Heard," 13 August, 1951. Box 29, Folder 1. Gerald Heard Papers. University of California at Los Angeles.
41. "Universal Cult," *Time*, 12 February, 1945, 96.
42. Christopher Isherwood, "Hypothesis and Belief," *Vedanta and the West*, 7 (1944), 87-91.
43. Christopher Isherwood, "Discovering Vedanta," *Twentieth Century* (Fall, 1961), 70.
44. *Ibid.*
45. Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (New York, 1964), 155-156.