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LAMBTON, A.K.S. Robert Charles Zaehner.
BSOAS 38(1975), pp. 623-624.

A. Hourani, V. Brown, Oxford 1972. This books contains a list of R. Walzer's publications, and a biographical account by Sir Alan Bullock.

Professor R.C. Zaehner (1913-1974)

Editor's Note: Professor Robert Charles Zaehner, F.B.A., died suddenly on 24 November 1974. At the time of his death he was a Fellow of All Souls College and Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics in the University of Oxford. In his 1975 Presidential Address Mr Hourani devoted some space to an appreciation of both Professor Zaehner and Dr Walzer (preceding obituary), whose deaths occurred during his period of office (see this Bulletin II, 2 (1975), pp.65 f.: cf. p.68).

The interests of the late Robin Zaehner extended far beyond the bounds of the Middle East. It is true that, at the time of his election to the Spalding Chair in Eastern Religion and Ethics, he was known only as a specialist in later Zoroastrianism and that, of the other great religions, he was then reasonably familiar only with Islam. But all this changed with his appointment to the Spalding Professorship. 'It would have been easy', so he tells us in the first of his Gifford Lectures, 'to have plodded along in the old Zoroastrian-Islamic rut without paying more than a nodding attention to the great religions of India. It would have been easy; but it would have been dishonest'. And so he 'proceeded to delve deep into the Hindu classics and discovered a whole new world....' with the result that we know from the stream of works that continued to flow from his pen until his ultimate death.

His election to the Spalding Chair seems to have had a catalytic effect enabling him to 'shake off the tyranny of his books' and join the happy band of 'pure readers who read for the sake of reading, not to educate themselves, not to work...' The very vastness of his subject released him from the restrictions imposed upon the narrow specialist; for the subject covered the whole world and there was a limit to the number of books that a single individual *could* read. The task is indeed a formidable, if not an impossible one: 'for each of the great world religions, treated as a historical study alone, would fully occupy the lifetime of any one man, however long-lived'. Working in such a field the 'teacher of the comparative study of religions is bound to be accused of being at many points superficial and to that extent a charlatan'. Another difficulty that confronted Zaehner at the time of his appointment was the third function of the Chair as foreseen by Spalding, viz. to bring the great religious systems of the world together in closer understanding, harmony, and friendship. This objective seemed to him at the time 'absurdly starry-eyed', and in his inaugural lecture he protested against it in words which gave rise to some criticism: 'Nor do I think that it can be a legitimate function of a university professor to attempt to induce harmony among elements as disparate as the great religions of mankind appear to be, if, as seems inevitable, the resultant harmony is only to be apparent, verbal, and therefore fictitious. Such a procedure may well be commendable in a statesman. In a profession that concerns itself with the pursuit of truth it is damnable'. He was afterwards willing to modify the tone of this statement, but stuck to his main position, viz. 'that the basic principles of Eastern and Western...thought are, I will not say irreconcilably opposed; they are simply not starting from the same premisses... The great religions are talking at cross purposes'. In time, however, he

became more sanguine as to the ultimate realization of Spalding's third objective. A 'discordant concord' could perhaps 'be extracted from the confusing pattern the world religions present' through a creative evolution of Catholic Christianity' in which each of the world religions has or will have its distinctive and individual part to play'. His quest for that 'discordant concord' has been prematurely broken off; but in his numerous writings we can still appreciate his wit and learning and, above all, his intellectual honesty.

John A. Boyle

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ZAEHNER, R. C. (1913–1974), English Orientalist and historian of religions. Robert Charles Zaehner, born 8 April 1913, began studies in Persian while on a scholarship in classics at Oxford and received a master's degree in Oriental languages. After leaving his position as research lecturer at Christ Church, Oxford, in 1939, he entered government service and was attached to the British embassy in Tehran during World War II. He accepted appointment as lecturer in Persian at Oxford in 1950; and, after serving briefly as acting counselor in the British embassy in Tehran, he was designated to succeed Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan as Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford in 1952, a professorship he held until his death on 24 November 1974. ~

At the least, Zaehner was a controversial figure during his remarkably productive two-decade career as Spalding Professor, and an altogether equitable assessment of his substantial publications on mysticism, the religions of India, Islam, and the comparative study of religions is difficult. If a historian of religion should be thoroughly grounded as a specialist in at least one major religious tradition, then Zaehner's credentials, in this respect, can scarcely be criticized: his primary research on Zoroastrianism, especially evident in his invaluable *Zurvan* (1955), unquestionably demonstrated his specialist's knowledge. If, too, a historian of religions may be expected to learn the original language or languages of primary sources in traditions that have special significance for his research, then Zaehner's study of Sanskrit in order to read classical Hindu sources again adds to his credentials. And, if an unwavering concern to allow source materials to speak in

their own voices is essential to the prospering of serious primary and comparative investigations of religions, then Zaehner served his field of study well.

But if it is supposed that proper comparative history of religions must be so conducted as almost to render invisible the interpreter's presence, then Zaehner poses a problem. He is neither bland nor unobtrusive. In an age of increasingly "objective" and almost anonymous scholarship, Zaehner seldom left his readers uncertain of his position. He lauded, lamented, scolded, praised, and condemned. Unquestionably, he took seriously the materials he studied. Above all, he seems to have wanted the sources to present themselves fully and authentically and not partially or tendentiously. What Zaehner himself took to be authentic, of course, was disputed on more than one occasion. Thus, for example, Zaehner's struggle with the specter of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's happy Neo-Hindu universalism provoked counterassertions from Zaehner about the theistic dimension of Hindu thought that have been found extreme by many specialists.

For Zaehner, his source documents and what they represented were alive and not safely dead or distant. Misunderstood, his attitude could appear to be no more than a throwback to apologetic comparative studies of an earlier day. And it often was misunderstood. But in fact it seems that—his conversion to Roman Catholicism in the mid-1940s notwithstanding—Zaehner conceived his own "mission" to be the pursuit of comparative religious studies in ways that would not violate the uniqueness and integrity of the individual religions he studied. Unshakably convinced of the authenticity of his own youthful mystical experiences and the truth of his