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ZAEHNER, ROBERT CHARLES

ZAEHNER, ROBERT CHARLES (b. Sevenoaks, Kent, 8 April 1913; d. Oxford, 24 November 1974), a scholar of Iranian and Indian studies, a historian of religions, Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford University, a British Intelligence officer stationed at the British Embassy in Tehran, and the major planner of the plot leading to the overthrow of Moḥammad Mosaddeq's government (see COUP D'ETAT OF 1332 Š./1953).

During his years as Spalding Professor at Oxford University, Zaehner wrote widely and often polemically, a circumstance which presented him as one of the protagonists in the field of comparative history of religions, though his fame proved to be much more short-lived than that of some of his contemporaries such as Mircea Eliade. His parents, originally from Switzerland, had immigrated to England, where Robert was born and received his education. He first went to the public school of Tonbridge, then, having won a scholarship, continued his education at Christ Church, a college of the University of Oxford. Once in Oxford, he first took Honour Moderations in Classics, but later on chose Oriental Studies, focusing on Iran. His main subject was Persian language, with Old Iranian as his minor. He took his first class in Persian in 1936, then studied Old and Middle Persian under Professor Harold W. Bailey, who became a key figure throughout Zaehner's academic life as well as an inspiring friend and a sure lead in the understanding of Middle Iranian texts.

During World War II, as part of his military service, he spent the years 1943-47 posted at the British Embassy in Tehran, where he worked as assistant press

attaché and then as press attaché. In 1946, while in Tehran, he converted to the Catholic faith, a faith that became an influencing factor i**n** much of his later life and academic research, although his allegiance went to mysticism and the contemplative tradition of this faith rather than to ecclesiastic hierarchy (Hughes, pp. 140-41). Later on, he moved back to Oxford, where in 1950 he began teaching as University Lecturer in Persian, but soon he was assigned back to Iran, where he served as acting counselor at the British Embassy in Tehran (1951-52), playing a major role in the plots for the overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadeq.

In 1952 he was elected Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford University and simultaneously became Fellow at All Souls. In 1956 he became a fellow of the British Academy. Once elected as the Spalding Chair in Eastern Religions and Ethics, Zaehner gradually shifted his interest to the religious history of the Indian subcontinent and to problems of general interest to the historian of religions. As a matter of fact, being selected for an Oxonian professorship as a successor to Sir Sarvepalli Radakrishnan came as a surprise to many, since the Spalding Chair was considered reserved for Asians and, besides, because he had not yet published any books, although his *Zurvan* had already been accepted for publication by Oxford University Press (Lambton; Morrison; Parrinder).

In the field of Oriental studies, Zaehner's first academic love was certainly Zoroastrianism, as well as the study of the languages needed to understand this ancient faith. His work on the Good Religion counts as the most original and scientifically inspiring in his whole career. In this field he contributed a powerful speculative book entitled *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, an interesting synthesis meant for the general public: *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (1961), and a popular anthology of Zoroastrian texts: *Teachings of the Magi: a Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs* (1956), as well as a number of articles. His most ponderous articles on Zoroastrianism all date to the pre-war period (1938a-1940b), investigating aspects of Zurvanism and related themes, thus providing the ground for his most important book, *Zurvan*. In his *Dawn and Twilight*, Zaehner synthetically spells out his ideas on Iran's pre-Islamic religion. The book is divided into two parts: "Dawn," where the author presents Zoroaster's character and thought, as well as the evolution of the Good Religion up to the end of the Achaemenid period, and "Twilight," spanning the years from the rise of the Sasanian dynasty to the onslaught of the Arabs.

Zaehner dates Zoroaster to 628-551 BCE, thus adhering to the traditional view put forward by Walter Bruno Henning, who, in 1949, dedicated his Ratanbai Katrak Lectures to a magisterial study on the Iranian prophet, later turned into a most thought-provoking volume, *Zoroaster: Politician or Witch-doctor?* Furthermore, Zaehner believed that Zoroaster's doctrine was proclaimed in ancient Chorasmia, a vast area to the south of the Aral Sea (Zaehner, 1961, p. 33), here again following Henning. According to him, Zoroaster was a religious reformer, fighting the traditional creed and knowing no compromise; for instance, in Zoroaster's doctrine, Asha, the "Truth," was pitted against Druj, the "Lie" (Wickedness, Disorder; see Zaehner, 1961, p. 36), and no compromise between the two was possible. Moreover, he thought "Free Will" to be an essential part of the Iranian prophet's theological doctrine (Zaehner, 1961, pp. 41-42). Creatures had been created free, and therefore Man, the most important of all created beings, was entirely responsible for his choice and for his destiny. In Zaehner's reconstruction, Zoroaster believed in one supreme god, immortal and creator of all things and immaterial (Zaehner, 1961, p. 60).

Zaehner distinguished three distinct periods in the history of pre-Islamic Zoroastrianism: "primitive Zoroastrianism," that is, the prophet's own message and his reformed, monotheistic creed; "Catholic Zoroastrianism," appearing already in the *Yasna Haptaŋhaiti* and more clearly in the Younger Avesta, which saw other divinities readmitted in the cult, a religious trend attested in the Achaemenid period, probably already under Darius I and Xerxes I, certainly from Artaxerxes I onwards as shown by the calendar reform that he dates to about 441 BCE (Zaehner, 1961, p. 155); and finally the dualist orthodoxy of Sasanian times (Zaehner, 1961, p. 81). Although in the main Zaehner stuck to a traditional interpretation of the history of Zoroastrianism in the early period, his discussions of Haoma and its rite, which he considered to be the focal point of Zoroastrian cult, and on the other divinities worshipped by Iranians of those ancient times (Zaehner, 1961, pp. 97-153) provide food for thought. Most notable among these divinities is Mithra, whose worship, although in a deeply different form, was pervasive in the Roman empire (see MITHRAISM).

Zaehner's approach to Sasanian Zoroastrianism was much more original in both thought and method than his contribution to the study of the more ancient period. This was due to a number of factors, mainly the fact that, although not properly a philologist, he was much more at home with Middle Persian texts and later secondary sources than with the world of the Avesta,

the treatment of which required very different linguistic skills. He was able to understand better than many others the religious variety of Sasanian times.

His earlier book on Zoroastrianism (Zaehner, 1955a), postulates the existence of a widely spread Zoroastrian sect believing Ohrmazd and Ahriman to be the twin sons of Zurvan, the deity of Time. To do so, Zaehner translated and studied a vast number of primary and secondary sources included in the volume. Although he was more or less severely criticized (Molé, 1959; Shaked, 1992; Boyce, 1957 and 1990) both for his general reconstruction of the Zurvanite phenomena and for a tendency to force a meaning on the text (Cereti and MacKenzie), this theory still represents Zaehner's most original and well argued contribution to our knowledge of Iranian religion. He also theorized the existence of at least three Zoroastrian sects in Sasanian times: the "Mazdean" dualists, whose doctrine is recorded in Pahlavi literature dating from the early Islamic centuries; a group of monotheists who grew strong toward the end of the Sasanian empire, after the reforms by Ḵosrow I; and finally the Zurvanites. According to him, the latter was the dominant form of Zoroastrism in the late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, as shown by the fact that Christian and Manichean polemists mainly attack the beliefs of this sect. He further distinguished between three types of Zurvanism (Zaehner, 1961, 178-89, 205-10**).**

Zaehner's interpretation of Zurvanism is mainly based on reports attested in Christian polemical sources, ultimately going back to Sasanian times. These treatises convey a variant version of the cosmogonic myth in which Zurvan figures as the father of two twins, one, Ohrmazd, engendered by his wish to have a son, the other, Ahriman, by his doubt in the efficacy of his own sacrifice, a version confirmed by sporadic passages found in some Manichean texts (Zaehner, 1955a, pp. 419-29, 431-32, 439). Furthermore, Zaehner remarked that in Manichean Middle Persian texts the Father of Greatness is called Zurvan, demonstrating, in his opinion, that the divinity of time must have been the supreme deity in the then current pantheon of Persian Zoroastrians. Building on this evidence, he attempted to show that some Pahlavi texts, notwithstanding deliberate censorship by the Zoroastrian clergy, still preserved evident traces of the Zurvanite doctrine. Such were for certain the *Selections of Zādspram* and the *Iranian Bundahišn*, while the *Indian Bundahišn* kept more strictly to orthodox Mazdean doctrine.

Zaehner identified two forms of Zurvanism, one materialistic, the other ethical (1955a, p. 269), underlining that in Zurvanism fate prevails over free will,

while in "orthodox" Zoroastrianism free will had the upper hand (1955a, p. 255). Furthermore, he tried hard to prove that Zurvan was a quadripartite god, following Henrik Samuel Nyberg (1931, pp. 84-91). He identified seven possible divine tetrads characterizing Zurvanite theological doctrine (1955a, p. 231). Āz, the female demon of greed plays a major role in Zurvanism as reconstructed by Zaehner, proving in the end to be more powerful than Ahriman himself, although both were bound to succumb to Ohrmazd. Zaehner considers Zurvanism to have had a tendency toward ascetic life, quite unnatural in Zoroastrianism, which had a very positive opinion of worldly activities (1955a, p. 271).

Many scholars, active both earlier and later than Zaehner (e.g., Boyce, 1957, pp. 304-5), considered Zurvanism to be a heresy of Zoroastrianism mainly based on a new interpretation of *Yasna* 30.3-5, the Gathic passage mentioning two twin spirits, one of whom chose the good, the other the bad. Zaehner's book on Zurvan, ultimately based on Nyberg's articles on Zoroastrian cosmogony (Nyberg, 1929, 1931, and 1938; see also Schaeder, 1927 and 1941) brought new life into this ancient debate (see further Shaked, 1992, p. 220, n. 3**).** Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin appreciated Zaehner's work and considered Zurvanism a current heresy of Zoroastrianism of Greek derivation (1953, pp. 123-24; 1962, pp. 184-89, 302-307; 1956, see also, 1956, for his positive review of Zaehner's *Zurvan*), while Mary Boyce (1957, 1990), though sharing the idea that Zurvanism was a diverging form of the Zoroastrian religion, considered it to be current and majoritarian in southwestern Iran in the Sasanian period and thought that it was a syncretism between Iranian and Babylonian concepts. Both authors considered it to have been later marginalized in the Pahlavi books because of deliberate censorship by the clergy, but never went as far as to believe it to be an independent cult, entirely separated from Mazdean Zoroastrianism.

Other scholars, such as Marijan Molé (1959, 1961, 1963, pp. 8-14), Ugo Bianchi (1958) and later Shaul Shaked (1992) disagreed with Zaehner, believing that Zurvanism had never been a "heresy" on its own, much less a different or independent faith, rather, at the most a variant version of the cosmogonic myth to be understood in the frame of religious variety in ancient Iran. Interestingly, in Pahlavi literature we find no explicit reference to Zurvanism, with the possible exception of a single quotation in *Dēnkard* VIII—a Middle Persian rendering of the stanza of the twins found in *Yasna* 30 (Zaehner, 1955a, pp. 429-31; see Shaked, 1992, p. 226). Zaehner's *Zurvan* should be read

together with his "Postscript to Zurvan" (1955b), in which the author improves on various aspects of the book (on scholarly debate on Zurvanism, see Rezania, pp. 13-31).

Zaehner's marked interest in Indian religious thought, together with his duties as Spalding Professor, led him to become one of the leading specialists of Hindu theology and philosophy. In 1962, he published a popular compendium of Hindu docrines with the title *Hinduism* and later he added other important works, such as the popular edition of religious texts, *Hindu Scriptures* (1966), which included a valuable translation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā,* later independently republished (1969), and a challenging comparative book on *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (1960).

Even in his more scholarly books, Zaehner was prone to be influenced by his personal beliefs when analyzing religious phenomena. This was all the more true for a group of books that may be aptly defined as apologetic and polemical, arguing as they do in favor of his own Christian and ethical beliefs—works such as *Christianity and Other Religions* (1964), *The Convergent Spirit* (1963), *Evolution in Religion* (1971), and *Dialectical Christianity and Christian Materialism* (1971; Parrinder, p. 69). More complex and intellectually stimulating are two other impassioned works, *At Sundry Times* (1958) based on his Owen Evans lectures, and *Concordant Discord* (1970), deriving from his Gifford Lectures (Parrinder, pp. 69-70).

Mysticism was another important field of study for Zaehner. Not only did he investigate Hindu and Muslim mysticism, but he also took part in the debate on the use of psychedelic drugs to have mystic visions, which was to become so fashionable for the Beat Generation and those that followed. In his *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (1957) he vehemently criticized Aldous Huxley's advocacy of the use of mescaline to obtain religious insights, which is found in the latter's *The Door of Perception*. In another work, *Drugs, Mysticism and Make-Believe* (1972), derived from three talks aired on the BBC in 1970, he again attacked those who, like psychologist Timothy Leary (d. 1996), promoted the use of drugs (Parrinder, pp. 70-71). His last book, *Our Savage God* (1974), written on the emotional wave following the murder of the actress Sharon Tate and some of her friends by members of a cult led by Charles Manson, is an emotionally tense, passionate protest against religious, ethical, and moral indifferentism (Parrinder, p. 71).

However, as stated above, Zaehner was more than just a scholar. In the years

of Moḥammad Mossadeq's government, he played an important role serving his government in Iran. During World War II, Zaehner was posted at the British Embassy in Tehran, where he worked under Ann K. S. Lambton, who, as press attaché, was in charge of British propaganda. In postwar years, Lambton moved back to London to work at the School of Oriental and African Studies, where she served as Professor of Persian. Nonetheless, she kept on being a very influential adviser to the British government on Iranian matters. When in 1951 Mossadeq nationalized the oil industry and started a political confrontation with Great Britain, Lambton advised that his government should be overthrown and suggested that Zaehner be sent to Tehran to run undercover operations. Acting on Lambton's suggestion, the newly elected Foreign Secretary, Herbert Morrison, appointed Robin (i.e., Robert) Zaehner as acting counselor in the British Embassy in Tehran. He was thus to play a major role in the events that followed. Officially, his task was to promote Mosaddeq's overthrow through legal means, although he often crossed the thin line into a gray area of intrigue (Louis, 2004, pp. 130-35).

Once he was back in Iran, Zaehner revitalized the network of anglophile Iranians that he had built in the years of his first posting, and started exerting pressure against that country's legitimate government. He had a close relationship with the three Rašidiān brothers (Sayf-Allāh, Qodrat-Allāh and Asad-Allāh), members of a wealthy and influential family, through whom he bribed members of parliament, political activists, and other affluent champions of Tehran's civil society to throw Mossadeq out of power. The Rašidiān brothers received large sums of money for their anglophile network, but they also showed commitment to the British cause when in 1953 they played a major role in the coup that ousted Mosaddeq. Lacking direct British support, they proved ready to spend out of their own pocket to overthrow Mosaddeq. In those years Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) provided Zaehner with all the money he needed to fight his battle against the aging prime minister through legal or quasi-legal means (Azimi, p. 43). He distributed large sums of money, and his habit of giving bribes hidden in tin biscuit cans was described by many of the writers who traced the history of those years (e.g., Azimi, p. 43; de Bellaigue, p. 194). This same practice was continued by another British civil servant, Sam Falle, Zaehner's former collaborator. On 16 July 1952, Mosaddeq resigned, and the shah appointed Aḥmad Qawām-al-Solṭana prime minister.

Remarkably, the British, either by miscalculation or lack of political will, failed

to provide full support for Qawām, whose government lasted only a few days and who was ousted by vehement popular opposition already on July 21. In October 1953, the British diplomatic mission was forced to leave Iran; Zaehner himself had left a few months earlier. Notwithstanding all his efforts and nationalistic dedication, when he returned to Oxford in the summer of 1952, his action had not yet led to any concrete results. At that time, Zaehner himself was quite disillusioned about the possibility for Great Britain to gain the upper hand in Iran (de Bellaigue, pp. 193-95). However, things were eventually to evolve in the direction he had hoped for, and on 19 August 1953 Mosaddeq's democratic government was ousted in a coup orchestrated by foreign powers.

Robert Charles Zaehner's years in Teheran after World War II were characterized by many achievements, first of all his determinant role in forging the Rašidiān's network into an effective political tool at the service of the British, as well as his establishing a good relationship with Ernest Perron, the shah's Swiss favorite, who granted him a good insight into court affairs. However, there were also a few political misjudgements, such as in the case of Qawām-al-Salṭana's ill-fated government. His command of the Persian language, his actions and his lifestyle turned him into somewhat of a legend in post-war Iran: flamboyant, bon-vivant, well introduced in local society, a hard drinker, an opium smoker, he was regarded by many of his colleagues as unfit for his operational job (Louis, 2004, p. 146) and this also proved to be a limit for his activities.

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