

without advance knowledge. Then there was a kidnapping involving some Buddhist team-workers and some Government officials: the Buddhists were murdered, the Government officials returned alive, which just wouldn't happen with real Viet Cong. Finally, there were two team-workers who were kidnapped by real Communists, but came home safe and sound. They were treated rather roughly at first, I was told, but the interrogation changed as the picture clarified, and ended, to quote the words transmitted to me, as 'a friendly exchange of views'.

The people I met were not Communists, nor could they be accurately described as Communist sympathizers. My guide to District 8, a Catholic, could never, he said, identify himself with a movement which uses assassination as a policy (even if, I think I might add for him, its assassinations *do* amount to only a fraction of those credited to it by its enemies). The Buddhists are non-violent on principle. But the Vietnamese Vietnam which I have been privileged to glimpse, humane, generous, doggedly creative, seems open to possibilities of reconciliation which are simply not allowed to that un-Vietnamese Vietnam which is defined purely in terms of American aims and American legacies: the one led by a President who has publicly declared that no one who advocates a coalition Government will be allowed to offer that alternative to the voters in what are still called 'free' elections; the one that is to be kept in existence indefinitely if possible, it seems, by an irreducible army and, above all, air force presence of 100,000 Americans.

A Third Reformation?:

**R. C Zaehner and Charles Davis
on World Religions**

by Adrian Cunningham

'... the old certainties are gone, and so departments of religion are springing up like toadstools throughout our demented Anglo-Saxon world. The less we believe, the more we talk about what other people believed. Are we really interested, or are we just kidding ourselves?'

Thus, forcefully, the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics at Oxford.¹ Certainly the fashionable currency of quasi-religious mysticism, the resort to the private and aggressively anti-modern can, along with aestheticism and sexual liberation, remind one of the 1890s. Incense and beads abound; the lush, the

¹*Concordant Discord: The Interdependence of Faiths*, by R. C. Zaehner. Clarendon Press: Oxford University Press, 1970. 464 pp. £4.

exotic and the febrile. And Professor Zaehner reminds us that meditation takes time, and time takes unearned income, and is thus open to the same criticism as psycho-analysis. But it is not difficult to disengage from his testy remarks about washing machines and televisions, and his fine disdain for modern theology, matters which are of a substantial, complex and even hopeful contemporary relevance.

It has often been noted how imperialism helped produce anthropology and has left an abiding mark upon it. Imperialism also helped produce the enormous mass of philology, scholarship and translation which to this day means that a Hindu or Buddhist will probably turn to an European edition of, or critical commentary on, his own scripture. The study of religion shared also in the un-reflexive nature of anthropology. The very confidence of imperialism inhibited, with a few exceptions, the open evaluation of the subversive problem of other religions—except as utopias, chinoiserie, or, in the hands of critics, a means of dismissing all religion as primitive. It is a truism that for every fifty scholarly or descriptive works it would be difficult to find one that was genuinely comparative *vis-à-vis* Christianity or that seriously undertook a study of competing truth claims. But the situation is changing rapidly. The last ten years have seen a large number of philosophical and theological studies, admittedly of very uneven value, which suggest that there's some truth in Geoffrey Parrinder's thoughts of a third reformation following those of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Historicism

The sharpening of contemporary interest is, in part, linked with the extension of ecumenism in the face of 'secularization'. As Peter Berger wickedly remarked, in a declining market standardization of the product is quite compatible with marginal differentiation: concordant discord. . . . And there are sub-themes in this, from the appeal of an at least imagined positive experiential content in the East when Protestantism seems enervated, to the fairly mindless liberalism of much contemporary Christianity. The vagueness of the conciliar statements on this issue did, after all, have a suggestion of 'some of my best friends are . . .'. There are more serious roots: the decline of Barthianism, for example, with its absolute division of faith from religion, has released a good deal of Protestant energy. And again, the realization that, in many cases, people need to become religiously literate before they can even begin to be interested in specific religious commitments. The relative decomposition of existing ecclesiastical bodies may allow a more serious attention to religion as an aspect of human life—not necessarily as something to be believed or had recourse to, but not something to be easily or lightly dismissed.

But, in all this, the most important factor is often overlooked. The

problem of religions is result of, analogue, and possible response to the major intellectual force in secularization: historicism, the time-bomb of romanticism whose graded reverberations have still to be properly conceptualized. *Result*, in the direct sense that a large part of comparative religion drew on nineteenth-century philological studies which were themselves very much a product of the post-enlightenment awareness that philosophical reason may not be universal, that cultures, beliefs and languages may be irreconcilably diverse. *Analogue*, in that the historical problems within Christianity which have dominated the modern period are equally true of any one or all Christian traditions and any one or all of the other religions. *Response*, in that the very turning to new and wider contexts may produce some new thought in what, over more than a century, have become increasingly repetitive and stereotyped arguments. The relativizing effects of historicism seem to force us back on to statements of human nature of a far more demanding and comprehensive kind than any in the past, and the demand cannot in any substantial way be met by ethnocentric categories. The theological challenge of religions could also be the basis for that new natural theology which we desperately lack.

Ethnocentric radicalism?

This question of historicism also reveals an irony in the present state of studies. The challenge of historicism was in the main taken by Protestantism and, as the final classical Barthian defences crumble, those in the Protestant tradition are setting the pace in the study of religions. On the face of it, the Catholics are better placed to be positive and sympathetic in this field; they have had the tradition of the early church fathers, a natural theology, and possible doctrines of the pre-existent Christ to bring into play. But at present their energies seem consumed in scrambling, with touching enthusiasm, into the positions already abandoned by increasing numbers of more alert Protestants from Schleiermacher to Troeltsch and Tillich. (As witness the long efforts of Catholics in this country to obtain Catholic theology at the university level when the Protestants are busy turning their theological faculties into something else.)

And the irony is an internal matter as well. Zaehner and also, for example, Mary Douglas, are definitely pre-conciliar in many of their attitudes—though notably more liberal than those earlier Catholics influenced by what one might call the Eranos school (Jung, Coomaraswamy, Eliade *et al.*) or those who worked from a patristic basis like Daniélou. In a deeply conservative Church those interested in religions were something of an *avant-garde*, complementing an arid Thomism by recourse to Indian medieval philosophy, or deepening liturgy and sacramental theology by means of archetypal rhythms and patterns. In a Church whose emphasis is shifting away from ritual and the supernatural to

scripture and eschatology, they risk being *passé*. But at the same time, the progressives and radicals have achieved their vantage point by becoming more European-centred; as if, paradoxically, in order to be politically anti-imperialist, for example, they had to adopt a *more* ethnocentric theology with exclusively Western and modern categories. Despite the conservative heritage of the anthropological and history-of-religions approaches, the problems they raise are genuine. Genuine, in the specific sense that it is still far from clear what an adequate diachronic, let alone Marxist, account of societies who see themselves as outside time would be like, if it were to avoid reductionism. Genuine, too, in the wider and possibly more disturbing sense, if one goes beyond the comparison of religious phenomena, doctrines and practices to raise the question—which is unavoidable—of revelation. Charles Davis¹ is surely right when he says:

I can see no reason . . . why a religious tradition based upon prophetic revelation should in principle exclude the occurrence of prophetic revelation in other traditions. What, however, is required, is that all acknowledged instances of prophetic revelation should be mutually compatible and capable of being brought into some relationship. (p. 123)

—a requirement which is difficult enough within Christianity alone. It is inevitable that such a process would demand changes within our tradition, changes which might be more profound than any experienced up till now.

Yet, one reflects that a current specialized theological education might well include Heidegger and Laing, but a bare literacy in, say, Islam would still be thought of as decidedly odd, *recherché*. Or, problems of racial discrimination and their causes might well be dealt with but a real attempt to enter the religious culture of immigrants is less likely. The reversal of interest is certainly intelligible and welcome: the vague phenomenological entry into alien beliefs has too often been an excuse for paternalism and traditionalism; where, in the face of technical society, hankerings for neo-feudal corporatism can be validated by appeals to the organic nature of 'real' caste systems, the eternal rhythm of the seasons, etc. In some periods such a reversal could be wholly healthy, but the last ten years alone show that the spacious days have passed. The crisis associated, though not identical, with the Council revealed the experiential waste of contemporary Christianity at least in the more advanced nations. At a time when political and experiential demands are so high, it is not clear that this crisis can be met by the Christian tradition as it stands, even on a selective reading, or by supplementation by more cultural and political theological approaches. In this sense the problem of religions may also be a hope; not an escapist hope (for the Christian that should be a contradic-

¹*Christ and the World Religions*, by Charles Davis. Hodder and Stoughton, 1970. 158 pp. £1.50.

tion) but an access of energy, demanding work at a very basic experiential level. Christians may well be committed, in a suitably nuanced way, of course, to the universality of Christ but it is increasingly dubious whether this commitment can be sustained by the tightening of an already parochial and ethnocentric reading of Christianity. At this level the experiential viability of Christian belief may well depend upon access to non-Christian religious worlds. The hope is a precarious one, And let me not be misunderstood, I am not suggesting that an acquaintance with, for example, the Gita will solve our problems within the Church, but, more minimally, that a confidently complacent ignorance of it simply cannot.

The solitary and the solidary

It is a major feature of Zaehner's work that he is one of the few in so-called 'comparative religion', who actually attempts the comparative task, thus putting himself in a relatively exposed position *vis-à-vis* other specialists. His Gifford Lectures are, in part, a re-working and more extensive affirmation of his earlier writings, with the important addition of Chinese materials; the Teilhardian emphasis becoming even more explicit.

The book is a rather uneven one; it takes the author a good fifty pages to get into his stride, and the connectedness of his argument here may be a little hard for those unacquainted with his earlier preoccupations. The bulk then recapitulates and deepens his general thesis of an opposition, or at least tension, between Indian and Semitic, solitary and solidary, immanentist and theistic systems. His primary focus is the contradiction between a mysticism of the pure spirit and ethical, social, and material concerns; the contradiction he claims, for example, between the Buddhist denial of individuality and personality to 'that which' enters Nirvana and the Buddha's compassion—'Life is transitory and worthless and yet sacrosanct' (174). These tensions are partially resolved in, say, the theistic developments of later Hinduism but only in Christianity can 'Nirvana be fructified, matter sanctified'. The command of diverse material and detailed exegesis are, as always, masterly and illuminating. Unfortunately, though, there is no clear answer to those who have criticized Zaehner's rigid separation of monistic and theistic mysticisms as distinct types rather than different interpretations of a common experience according to tradition and environment.

These expository and critical sections are enlivened by the author's waspish discriminations. He makes it quite clear what he does not like; Protestantism, modern theology, feckless ecumenism, the grubby paws of the higher criticism. It is his positive connections that give one pause for thought, however. To take a minor but possibly revealing instance, his passing remark that the creation hymns in the Rig Veda 'see in matter the first cause: they are dialectically

materialist' (74). It is not clear if the last phrase is merely neutral description or an implicit reference to Marxist dialectics. Presuming that, in the context of the final sections of the book, it is the latter, then this short-hand reference is insufficient. The possible similarity between Indian and Marxist materialisms, opened up by Edward Conze many years ago, is an interesting one, but it needs substantial rather than allusive argument to make it plausible and useful. It is one of those instances in the book where one feels that Zaehner's acknowledged subjectivity in the context of these 'popular' lectures can be suspicious, and where his preference for a textual approach alone, without the supplementary objectivity of a more sociological concentration on tradition and context is weakening to his case.

The resurrection of fallen nature

The Marxist reference is worth pursuing for I think it illumines some of the puzzles of the concluding sections where, with a rather violent shift of key, the major problems are resolved (via a fascinating discussion of Genesis, Job and Satan) in a Teilhardian evolutionary process. Here, as elsewhere, Zaehner has some interesting things to say about Marxist dialectical materialism, though he does tend to take this as the whole of, or most essential element of, Marxism, very much reading this back from de Chardin. Even if one were more sympathetic to Teilhard than I find possible, the disproportionate weight he is made to bear in the context of world religions would still, I think, seem strained. In my own view the only really valuable part of de Chardin is his covert reintroduction of Romantic and Hegelian themes into contemporary thinking; to centre on him alone is to weaken the breadth and significance of this tradition and of any case which one may wish to draw for Teilhard himself. In this connexion it may be that the author's hostility to Protestantism and his low estimate of mystical trends in Judaism lead him to miss an important, though admittedly esoteric, tradition. That is, the theme of 'the resurrection of fallen nature' which deriving in the main from cabbalism one will find in Paracelsus and most importantly in Boehme (who occurs in a passage of Marx the author quotes several times) and which forms a significant element in romantic idealism, especially in Schelling. Strains of it occur also, deriving again from Boehme, in Russian thinkers as diverse as Herzen and Berdyaev. It is an essential part of such modern Marxist thinking as that of Ernst Bloch, Marcuse and the Frankfurt school generally. The following through of this issue would take us a long way from the author's major concerns, but it might also put some of his wider aspirations in a stronger context.

But the appeal of de Chardin to Zaehner is not just that, as a mystic of matter, he corrects the over-spiritual emphasis of much Christian mysticism and helps resolve the opposition between solitary and solidary traditions in an incarnational perspective. He

also offers a hope that that concordant discord which Marx talks of, where the development of all depends upon the free development of each, will ultimately come off, and also offers a response to the problem of evil which greatly concerns the author. Professor Zaehner believes in the reality of Satan; a truly pre-conciliar belief, but then the problem of radical evil has been rather lost sight of, despite the state of the world, in these progressive days. Given the author's powerful evocation of its reality via Bernanos, a belief in Satan is at least intelligible. Though I wish he was more specific; for the Zoroastrian thesis, for which he admits personal sympathy, of evil as the dark side of God (cf., in different form, Timothy McDermott's articles in *New Blackfriars*¹) is hard to reconcile with the finally alien force depicted in his use of Bernanos. This 'Zoroastrian solution' is again something which I find more clearly and profoundly investigated in Boehme and Berdyaev than in de Chardin. However, there will be critics enough of his use of Marxism. It is partial and academic, but he does point to an element which is there in Marx and the Marxist tradition, and he is one of the very few people to attempt to relate any part of Marx to the study of religions (rather than just to Christianity). In this light, it would at present be ungenerous to expect a great deal more.

One further point, which is less a criticism than a definition of the limits of this important book. Zaehner is principally an exegete, expositor and critic of religious texts, a brilliant one, covering a great range of materials, but it would be a pity if his book confirmed the Western myth that Eastern religions are somehow purer and more wholly intellectual than our own. Forster's depiction of the Hindu festival in *A Passage to India* is still as good a corrective as any to this misleading view. The old division of higher and lower religions lives on; religions with literary materials are the subject of the exegete, those without of the anthropologist; in both cases the separation can be damaging. When talking of self-transcendence, Zaehner comments that 'Both sex and mysticism are manifestations of this instinct, endemic to the human race, to merge into a greater whole' (163); besides querying whether self-transcendence always means that, one hopes for some counter to the obvious reduction of both simply to that instinct, à la Feuerbach or Durkheim. As an exegete the author may not be required to give it, but as one seeking a coherent pattern in religious history he cannot really evade that challenge. The matter is enormously tricky but I should be interested in the possible expansion of Swanson's revised Durkheimian statistical method to the 'higher' religions; that such an expansion is impossible or inappropriate is a matter for demonstration.

¹'The Devil and his Angels' (October 1966). 'Hell' (January 1967).

Intractable symbols

Charles Davis's book is obviously of a quite different kind and purpose, an initial assay of the material, a summation of, presumably, no more than two years' intensive introductory study. This clearly sets its limits (but what a lot Davis has done in a short time) and simultaneously makes it a useful text for the beginner. The main forms of current argument on the relation between Christianity and the world religions are briefly spelled out, and tidied up by the application of Neibuhr's categories for the relation between Christianity and culture. Davis rightly insists that the subject matter of the study of religion is the relation between two different dynamic factors, an historical cumulative tradition and the personal faith of men and women—faith here being understood as ultimate concern with what is, in fact, ultimate. Thus,

My contention is that religious faith precisely as openness to the transcendent in a movement of self-transcendence may, however variously, inadequately or indeed wrongly objectified in doctrines, be interpreted by the Christian as based in reality upon God's immanent presence by grace in men (86).

And perhaps just because he is a theologian he is careful to set the problem of relationship in terms of the traditions and not just the faiths or doctrines; 'as long as religion is conceived as centred upon a set of beliefs it is possible to suppose that religious differences may be overcome by discussion, mutual correction, striving for a wider perspective and so on. Symbols and myths are, however, intractable. Despite the recurrence of archetypal patterns, particular concrete symbols are transferable only to a very limited degree from one culture to another' (111-112). It is one thing to harmonize Buddhist and Christian doctrines, another to think of combining Buddha and Christ as the symbolic centre of a religious life.

This dual insistence on true revelation in non-Christian traditions and on the obstinate plurality of faiths is important, but it is not clear that Davis has, at least here, brought off the dual roles of theologian and student of religions. On the one hand his focus on faith as ultimate concern and self-transcendence does not really take account of an at least initially plausible non-religious description like that offered by Luckmann—it may be too easy to switch to the 'of course, as a theologian . . .' tack. On the other hand, his account of Christ as symbolic focus for Christian faith as person, event, presence and word is, from a theologian, on the whole, brief and thin. But it is early days yet.

Taken consecutively, Davis and Zaehner offer both a guide to the major problems and detailed exposition and comparison of some of the most important material; an excellent introduction for those interested in the possibility of a new natural theology and even of a third reformation.