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### Review of Daniel's "Russia's Uncommon Prophet: Father Aleksandr Men and His Times"

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**Wallace L. Daniel , *Russia's Uncommon Prophet: Father Aleksandr Men and His Times*, DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016, pp. xvii + 422, \$39.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-87580-733-1**

**Reviewed by: Michael Plekon, Department of Sociology/Anthropology and Program in Religion and Culture, Baruch College of the City University of New York.**

*Russia's Uncommon Prophet* is a magnificent, rich, careful study of Fr. Alexander Men, his life and writings, and the complex historical, ecclesial, and intellectual contexts that shaped him and his work. While there have been other books about him, Wallace Daniel's labor of research and love here is without parallel; it is, in fact, incomparably valuable. It is likely to become the standard work on Fr. Men for many years to come, in any language. For all I, myself, know about the background, the formative influences on Men, and the evolution of his perspectives, this was a profound learning experience. There was much I was learning for the first time, not just about historical details, but about texts with which I was familiar.

One of the leading characteristics of Fr. Men's personality, as well as his thinking, was his openness. He was open to other Christian churches, open to the literature, art, music and culture of his own Russia, but also that of the West, as well as Asia. One could say he was a globalist, as his many years of work crafting texts on the great religious traditions of the world offered Russians something denied them in their education during the Soviet era. It also showed the ways in which Christianity as a whole, not just Russian Orthodoxy, connected with the other great faith traditions and their communities, many of which, of course, were represented in the Soviet Union's many republics. In some respects, Men was not just years but centuries ahead of where Russia was in terms of religious toleration and understanding, either before or after the Revolution. Particularly with respect to the other Christian churches, Men stressed those core beliefs that, in fact, still united Christians despite the formal divisions, the separations of their churches. However, this openness would evoke enormous and dangerous opposition, given the history of xenophobia in Russia and the extreme sectarianism of its Orthodoxy. Men was completely orthodox and totally catholic, that is, very much rooted in the tradition of the Orthodox Church while at the same time aware of and eager to underscore all that the Russian and other Orthodox

churches really did share with Protestant and Catholic Christians. He was able, in texts he prepared, to explain the Eastern Church's history, liturgy, iconography and connections to the state and society. He especially emphasized, in writings as well as talks, the great contributions of Solovyov, Bukharev, later on Sergius Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky, Nicholas Berdyaev, the Trubetskoy brothers, and the later "Paris school" of émigré religious thinkers at the St. Sergius Theological Institute. Though not mentioned by Daniel, Fr. Men established a correspondence and kind of spiritual care in the 1980's for Sister Joanna Reitlinger, the gifted artist who was one of those who created a renaissance of iconography in the émigré Russian church and community in Paris, along with Fr. Gregory Krug and Leonid Ouspensky. She sent to Fr. Men the vestments of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, her mentor, inspiration and spiritual father. In turn, Fr. Men encouraged her to return to icon painting, which she did in the last years of her life.

It is no coincidence that among these mentioned by name, as well as others, he found resonance for the truly ecumenical perspective and the openness he also inherited from the Catacomb church, the laity and clergy named, all the way back to the Optino elders. He was a treasure trove of enlightenment on the great writers and thinkers and artists who created beauty and truth in Russia from the earliest days of Kyivan Rus' on through the Middle Ages and later in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. He was an inheritor of this rich legacy and, in turn, passed it on in his lectures, sermons, and many articles and books.

But he also specifically compared and contrasted the rites, doctrines, and even saints of the East with those of the West, celebrating, for example, great Western figures such as Francis of Assisi and Theresa of Avila. Daniel shows how the legacy of the elders of Optino monastery, the great bridge builders between the church and alienated artists and intellectuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, endured well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through the Fathers Metchev of St. Nicholas parish in Maroseika Street in Moscow, through nuns and priest in the "Catacomb" or underground Orthodox Church, to public figures like Sergei Averintsev Anatolii Vednerikov, Anatolii Krasnov-Levitin, and Fathers Golubtsov and Zheludkov, among others, the openness of the Optino elders was reinforced and encouraged by him. He knew well

Gleb Yakunin, who became an outspoken critic of the patriarchate's compliance with state and party. He met Fr. Dmitri Dudko, and Solzhenitsyn, as well.

Knowing the arc of Fr. Men's work and life already, one can see the terrible end coming long before he reached it on the morning of September 9, 1990—his death by blows to the back of his head on the way to the train station to his parish in Novaya Derevnia. It was an assassination whose perpetrators were never found despite an investigation, and whose motives remain a matter of conjecture still today, not unlike the much later assassination of the American editor of the Russian *Forbes Magazine*, Paul Klebnikov. Despite the protection and support of Metropolitan Yuvenaly of Krutitsky and Kolomna of the Moscow region, Fr. Men had been shadowed and trailed by several vehicles both in the city where he lectured, as well as by the train station near his home in Semkhoz, in the months leading up to September, 1990.

Both at the start of his writing and the end, Daniel brings the reader up to the present with an overview of continuing conferences held each September at the time of Fr. Men's death. He notes, as well, even the Moscow Patriarch Kyril's blessing of Fr. Men's books for sale in church kiosks and the now regular pilgrimages made to the new church in Novaya Derevnia commemorating Fr. Men's martyrdom there. He also describes the ongoing criticism of Men and the rejection of his ministry that began long ago, during his lifetime, which has never ceased. The more recent upsurge in neo-traditionalism and fundamentalism in the Russian church kept the delegation of the Moscow patriarchate from attending the Pan-Orthodox council in Crete in June, 2016. It also opposed the more open, ecumenical tendencies of the council document on the relationship of the Orthodox Churches to other, non-Orthodox churches. Some neo-traditionalists oppose using the term "churches" for non-Orthodox bodies, claiming that only the Orthodox constitute the church of Christ in the world, all others being heretics and schismatics. Such a point of view, needless to say, is also an outright rejection and condemnation of all that Fr. Men stood for in his life and writing.

So, the present is a most apt, relevant time for this thorough yet gripping study of Fr. Aleksandr Men, whom many regard already as a martyr and saint of renewal and healing in our time. Gratitude is due to Wallace Daniel for this brilliant work. It will be telling Fr. Men's story for a long time to come.