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REFLECTIONS ON THE LIFE OF FATHER ALEKSANDR MEN

By Mark R. Elliott


In August 1990, while leading a Wheaton College student exchange with Moscow State University, I was invited by a Russian friend to worship at Father Aleksandr Men’s parish at Novaia Derevnia on the outskirts of the capital. Following the Divine Liturgy, I was introduced to Father Men, who surprised me with an invitation to sit in on an editorial meeting of his journal, *Mir biblii [World of the Bible]*. What surprised me in this meeting even further was the editorial board itself, consisting of Protestant and Catholic as well as Orthodox members. Here in microcosm is an illustration of what has endeared many to Father Men—his personal warmth and acceptance of believers of other confessions—and what others have found provocative—his refusal to endorse a narrow, nationalistic, triumphalist Orthodoxy.

In *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet* Wallace L. Daniel, Baptist scholar and retired provost of Mercer University, Macon, Georgia, joins Jane Ellis and Nathaniel Davis as authors of the

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2 *The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History, 1986*, and *The Russian Orthodox Church: Triumphalism and Defensiveness, 1996*.

3 *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy, 1995*. 
most significant English-language accounts of the post-World War II Russian Orthodox Church. Daniel’s rendering of Fr. Men and his times is much more than a biography of one Russian Orthodox priest. It parallels in its expansive scope Oliver Bullough’s poignant *The Last Man in Russia; The Struggle to Save a Dying Nation* (2013), the tragic life of Father Dmitry Dudko, alongside the national tragedy of societal ills that continue to plague Russia.

For many years the standard English-language biography—and still a moving tribute—has been *Alexander Men: A Witness for Contemporary Russia* by French diplomat Yves Hamant (Oakwood Press, 1995). Since that publication much new relevant material has become available, including two Russian-language biographies of Men by members of his Novaia Derevnia parish, a host of the author’s interviews of Men’s family and friends, and a wealth of primary and secondary sources in the collections of or published by Moscow’s Library of Foreign Literature and the Aleksandr Men Foundation headed by Father Men’s brother Pavel.

Aleksandr Vladimirovich Men was born in Moscow in 1935, the son of Vladimir Grigorevich Men, a textile engineer and nominal atheist, and Elena Semenovna Vasilevskaiia, a Jewish convert to Orthodoxy. Deeply involved in the Russian Orthodox underground church, Men’s mother fostered a home circle of like-minded family and friends. This remarkable array of accomplished academics and courageous catacomb church adherents included Elena’s cousin, Vera Iakovlevna Vasilevskaiia, Moscow University graduate and respected child psychologist; Boris Aleksandrovich Vasil’ev, Academy of Sciences ethnographer and secret catacomb priest; and other underground church faithful.

This gifted and devout coterie encouraged the young Aleksandr’s voracious reading across a wide spectrum of West European and Russian humanities and sciences (Dante, Goethe,
Kant, Isaac Newton, Descartes, Kepler, Planck, Lomonosov) and theology (the Church Fathers, Soloviev, Berdiaev, Pascal, Renan, Christopher Dawson, and Teilhard de Chardin).

Bright and unusually well-read for someone living through the xenophobia and paranoia of late Stalinism, Men nevertheless had no possibility of matriculating at Moscow University, which was closed to Jews. In 1953, as an alternative, he entered the Institute of Fur, which was moved to Irkutsk, Siberia, in 1955. Here Men developed a friendship with another future Orthodox dissident, Gleb Yakunin. Irkutsk exposed Men to great ethnic and religious diversity which did not undermine his Orthodox faith, but which did expand his horizons. In Siberia he rubbed shoulders with Cossacks, Buddhist Buryats, and Old Believers, and out of curiosity he attended Catholic and Protestant as well as Orthodox services. His course of study, his communing with nature, especially awe-inspiring Lake Baikal, and his serious forays into the writings of philosopher-theologians Pavel Florensky and Vladimir Soloviev, all sharpened his opposition to the Soviet notion of the incompatibility of science and religion.

In spring 1958 in their last semester of study, Institute of Fur students were required to take a new course in “scientific atheism.” Men’s open challenges to his instructor’s anti-religious dogmas led to his dismissal just days before graduation. Daniel notes that while Men returned to Moscow without a diploma, his time in Irkutsk, nevertheless, contributed to his facing the future with “a wider vision of Orthodoxy,” “personal…exposure to other religious perspectives,” and recognition of “the importance of dialogue, the need to learn from one another,” attitudes at sharp variance, not only with an atheist state, but with an insular and politically compromised Orthodoxy (p. 87).

In 1958, upon the recommendation of his mentor, Anatolii Vasil’evich Vedernikov, editor of the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, Metropolitan Nikolai ordained the diploma-
less Aleksandr a deacon, just on the basis of his personal history and self-taught theology. (He would complete a two-year Leningrad Theological Academy correspondence course in 1960, leading to his ordination to the priesthood that same year.) Thus, Father Men commenced 32 years of ministry in four parishes, all suburbs of or in the near vicinity of Moscow: Akulovo (1958-60), Alabino (1960-64), Tarasovka (1964-70), and Novaia Derevnia (1970-90).

Men developed a reputation as a shepherd who could relate as easily to the unschooled as to the intelligentsia, and to students as easily as pensioners. In addition, he somehow managed to find time to put to pen both simple, fresh retellings of the gospel, such as *Son of Man*, and erudite, multi-volume tomes, such as his massive *History of Religion*.

Given Soviet anti-religious strictures, none of his works could pass state censorship. However, many were published abroad and secreted back into the U.S.S.R. Between 1959 and 1966 he also managed to publish 21 articles anonymously in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*. Otherwise, his writings had to await the last years of the Soviet Union (1990-91) to find legal publication in his native land.

In *Son of Man* (1968), written for a popular audience, Men rebutted the anti-religious dogma that the person of Jesus never existed, a notion of Lenin’s derived from, among others, Arthur Drews’ *The Christ Myth* (1909). By far Men’s most ambitious project, his six-volume *History of Religion*, was produced under a pseudonym by Zhizn Bogom, a Belgian-Catholic publishing house sympathetic to Orthodoxy. The first edition of this ambitious work – volume six alone runs more than 800 pages – appeared from 1970 to 1982. Under constant revision over decades, Men finished the third edition just before his death in 1990, with its first legal printing in 100,000 copies in Moscow in 1991.
An overarching theme in this History is the complementary relationship of science and religion, which, he argued, Marxist materialists had falsely deemed incompatible. To buttress his argument, Men drew upon writings of scientists at odds with a purely materialist conception, including Roger Bacon, Etienne Pascal, Rene Descartes, Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler, and Max Planck, with extended reference to philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev, Jesuit geologist and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and English historian Christopher Dawson.

Closer to home, the Soviet claim was that Mikhail Lomonosov, founder of Moscow University (1755) and Russia’s preeminent Enlightenment scientist, was “the forefather of Russian materialism” who “played a leading role in the history of atheist thought” (p. 186). To the contrary, Men could not find “one atheistic statement” in Lomonosov’s corpus; but he did find this revered scientist stating, “Truth and faith are two native sisters emanating from one Great Father” (p. 187).

In addition to Daniel’s insightful and comprehensive coverage of Father Men’s pastoral ministry and theological writings is his detailed treatment of the increasing pressures Men faced from Soviet security forces. Father Aleksandr’s friendship with a host of leading lights of his country’s dissident movement, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Father Nikolai Eshliman, Father Gleb Yakunin, Father Dmitrii Dudko, Mikhail Aksenov-Meerson, Anatolii Krasnov-Levitin, and Nadezhda Mandelstam, predictably drew the attention of the KGB. His first secret police interrogation occurred in 1964, with harassment particularly intense in the late 1970s and throughout much of the 1980s. The overall campaign against him involved surveillance, police informants in his parish, press attacks, and interrogations that included intimidation, demands for his confession of anti-Soviet activity, and threats of arrest. At points in 1980, 1984, and 1986, Men feared his arrest was eminent, as befell Yakunin and Dudko.
Security services undoubtedly sought a public television “confession” of wrongdoing similar to the one wrested from a broken Father Dmitrii Dudko, but it was not forthcoming. Instead, by the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika were finally taking hold such that Father Men found himself in high demand in public forums to reintroduce Russians to their spiritual heritage. In taxing rounds of lectures, press interviews, and television appearances—as many as six to seven a week by 1989—he called for his church’s repentance for its moral compromises and collusion with an atheist state. He also decried what he argued were his church’s wrongheaded attempts to retrieve its pre-Soviet privileges, power, and property. Reform-minded believers saw in Men an antidote to the Moscow Patriarchate’s spiritual chauvinism and triumphalism. Much more numerous, however, were his detractors, within and without the church, who read him as a dangerous liberal and cosmopolitan, the latter a code word for westward-leaning Jews whose Russian patriotism was suspect.

Besides Daniel’s able treatment of Men’s formative influences, career, and writings, the author expertly guides his readers through the facts of Men’s murder, the botched investigation, the likely motives and suspects, and the legacy of this revered – and despised – parish priest. Men gave his last lecture at Moscow’s Library of Foreign Literature the evening of September 8, 1990. In it he completed a series, distilling in effect the essence of his History of Religion: “And so together we have reached the end of our journey, which has taken us through the ages,… and we have come to the summit, to that sparkling mountain spring wherein the sun is reflected, which is called Christianity” (p. 295). The next morning, Sunday, September 9, before seven a.m., on a dark forested path between his home and the train that was to take him to his church, Father Alexander Men was clubbed to death from behind by an axe-wielding perpetrator. In just three days the initial criminal investigation concluded the motive was robbery and the culprit was
a not-so-upstanding neighbor, but the case against him quickly unraveled. Father Men’s murder remains unsolved, and as Daniel notes, it may never be solved short of “the opening of KGB archives” (p. 311). The same will be the case for the 40-plus unsolved murders of investigative journalists, who likewise threatened old-line forces of repression. Nevertheless, speculation has abounded as to groups with motives, which Daniel summarizes under four headings: anti-Semites, ultra-nationalists, ultra-conservative Orthodox, and the KGB.

The forged anti-Semitic Protocols of the Elders of Zion, purporting a Jewish conspiracy aimed at world domination, circulated widely in the Soviet Union, at one point even in one of Father Aleksandr’s own parishes. Russian anti-Semites believe national unity and survival depend upon the defeat of ideas that Jews, including Father Men, were alleged to hold: “ecumenism in religion, globalization in economics, and world government in politics” (p. 308). In that spirit, an activist in the racist Pamiat’ movement could declare that Men’s murder was “divine retribution” (p. 316).

Ultra-nationalists and ultra-conservative Orthodox, best described together because of their closely overlapping views, also saw Men as a threat to Russian national identity, the underpinnings of which were to be “a closed religious order, linking the authoritarian state to a tightly controlled church” (p. 310). To that end, political and Orthodox fundamentalists opposed Men as the proponent of Western-style democracy, human rights, freedom of conscience, tolerance, dialogue, and an Orthodoxy confident enough of its basic truths to tolerate coexistence with its fellow citizens of other persuasions.

Even as Gorbachev’s glasnost permitted late Soviet culture to move in a democratic direction, ultra-conservative Orthodox and “Russian patriots” attacked Men directly in insulting letters, charging him with perverting Orthodoxy and being an advocate of Catholic and
Protestant teachings. *On the Theology of Archpriest Aleksandr Men*, published in the 1990s, is just one of myriad attacks by churchmen repeating such charges (pp. 195, 313, 316, and 318). The year after Men’s murder one Russian publication warned, “May his death be a lesson to all those in the church who flirt with Satanic forces” (p. 316).

Finally, the KGB had ample motive to wish Father Men dead for besting its protracted but unsuccessful campaign against him. A police detective privy to the details of Men’s case told his son Mikhail, “This was not a common murder,” but rather, the work of “skilled professionals” (p. 311). “I have absolutely no doubt,” Men’s brother Pavel believes, “the KGB planned and executed his death” (p. 313). As Daniel aptly summarized, the secret police had the motive, the means, and “the support within the official investigating agencies to cover it up effectively” (p. 313).

In closing the brief on Father Men’s murder, the author makes clear that groups hostile to Men were not mutually exclusive. For one, anti-Semitic currents were--and are--present in Russian nationalist movements, in the Russian Orthodox Church, and in the secret police. Similarly, in 1990, anti-Western, xenophobic nationalism was--and still is--at home in the Russian Orthodox Church, in the KGB, and in its FSB successor.

As for Father Men’s legacy, Daniel, while not ignoring detractors, clearly sees it as significant and enduring. He notes the sale of over five million copies of Father Aleksandr’s books, sermons, and lectures, over one million of *Son of Man* alone. He notes that Patriarch Kyrill, elected in 2009, has come to express a positive view of Men’s contributions. He notes the priests and parishes positively influenced by Men’s winsome witness, preaching, and teaching, the annual scholarly conference in his honor, foundations in Moscow and Riga, Latvia, named for Men, and the Library of Foreign Literature Reading Room dedicated to him. Daniel, as well,
credits Men with discipling church newcomers through small groups devoted to prayer, gospel readings, and fellowship, gatherings that were courageous undertakings because they were, in fact, illegal.

For Daniel, two questions regarding Father Men are paramount: To what extent is his legacy likely to be lasting? And to what extent is his understanding of Christianity faithful to Orthodoxy (the chief concern of Russia’s majority confession) and faithful to Scripture (the chief concern of Russia’s Evangelicals)? Daniel clearly argues that Men’s influence remains substantial. Still, he does concede that respected academicians of religion can differ on this point. For example, Dmitrii Furman and Sergei Filatov, both members of the Russian Academy of Sciences, reject and support Daniel’s claim respectively. Judith Kornblatt, University of Wisconsin Russian religion specialist, appears to split the difference: Men’s influence, she contends, is very deep among those devoted to his memory, but that influence is demographically sparse across the vast expanses of the Russian Republic (“Is Father Alexander Men’ a Saint? The Jews, the Intelligentsia, and the Russian Orthodox Church,” Toronto Slavic Quarterly, 2005; sites.utoronto.ca/tsq/12/kornblatt12.shtml).

The question of Men’s fidelity to the Orthodox faith and Scripture is an even more contentious issue. Again, Daniel unreservedly places Men in the historic mainstream of the best Orthodox teachings. Certainly, Men should not be condemned just because he read widely, including works by those whom especially conservative Orthodox consider suspect, such as Ernest Renan, Vladimir Soloviev, and Sergei Bulgakov. Daniel would also argue that Men’s charitable disposition towards other Christian confessions should not be taken for acceptance of non-Orthodox dogma. In defense of Men, he cites Aleksandr Ermolin’s study in which Father Men’s exposure to Catholic and Protestant literature is seen to represent “only a small fraction”
of his encyclopedic reading. Even though KGB chief Yuri Andropov defined this troublesome priest a crypto-Catholic, that certainly is no reason to believe he was.

As to the issue of Men’s fidelity to Scripture, Evangelicals are split. To illustrate their ambivalence, I quote from an American missionary who has sojourned among Russian Evangelicals for decades and who possesses firsthand knowledge of their thinking. Preferring to share anonymously, he writes:

Men was a favorite among Protestants during the Soviet period. The erudition and literary virtuosity of his works were helpful tools in evangelizing the intelligentsia. No Protestant [in the Soviet Union] had achieved such excellence. And during the late Soviet period there was nothing available in Russian of such caliber. His most popular books among Protestants were Son of Man and How to Read the Bible. In the 1970s and 1980s Moscow Baptist Church youth worked on joint projects with Men, for example, creating filmstrips illustrating biblical passages to be used in Sunday schools. In September 1990, I was bringing him volumes that he had requested, but instead ended up going to his funeral. His well-known disciple, Fr. Aleksandr Borisov, the long-time head of the Russian Bible Society, gave a truly Christian eulogy at Men’s funeral. So there is much positive to say about Men. But when I started reading Men’s books myself, I kept finding things that jarred with my own understanding of Evangelical thought. So I quickly stopped promoting him.

As eloquently as Daniel makes his case for Men’s orthodoxy [lower case], other proponents of Christian orthodoxy (be they Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant, myself included), can also find some of Daniel’s characterizations of, and quotes from, Men jarring:

- “To Fr. Aleksandr Men the creation of rigid boundaries sapped Russian Orthodoxy of one of its greatest strengths” (p. 320);
- “Fr. Aleksandr did not want to close Russia off from other religions and diverse kinds of experiences” (p. 254);
- “He promoted open dialogue with other faiths” (p. 254); and
- “The Muslim who ‘believes in a single God as sovereign of history and humanity,’ Fr. Aleksandr said, ‘also confesses a truthful faith’” (p. 207).
Can these sentiments be squared with the exclusive truth claims of Christ who declared, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6)?

I personally find it painful to highlight points where Father Men, in my opinion, strays from Christian orthodoxy (again, lower case), because I also find so much to admire in his life and witness: His thirst for a truly liberal arts education that strengthens rather than undermines faith, his wide-ranging, brilliant defense of the compatibility of science and religion, his extraordinary productivity such that he could somehow tend his flock and still write prodigiously, his courageous, protracted confrontation with the KGB that did not end with his spiritual capitulation— as befell others with less steely constitutions, and his ability to give compelling witness to both simple folk and intelligentsia.

Wallace Daniel is right that much can be gained from an appreciation of the life of Father Aleksandr Men. And for those inclined to dismiss Father Aleksandr because of points of disagreement, it is worth stressing that for minds to be fully engaged and for hearts to be fully blessed, it is essential to learn to discriminate in the positive sense of the verb. This “discrimination” should not be exercised on the loathsome basis of race, color, or station in life, but in the honing of discernment necessary to identify the truth wherever it may be found. Believers can learn from—and even sometimes be inspired by— others with whom they may not always agree. Without “discrimination” in this positive sense, the sphere of permissible influences upon a believer’s thinking and spiritual growth will be terribly impoverished and circumscribed.

I will end where I began—in 1990. Three short weeks after I met Father Aleksandr in August 1990, I was back in the U.S., busy with Moscow State exchange students at Wheaton College. On September 9th I was an hour from campus in Chicago assisting our Moscow State
faculty advisor with an errand when the shocking report came over the car radio of Father Men’s murder. We were both stunned by the news. I asked my exchange counterpart if she would like to go to the nearby Orthodox Holy Trinity Cathedral for prayer, to which she readily agreed. As this accomplished, but thoroughly secularized, professor lit a candle for Father Men, I was struck by the depth of her grief. It brought to mind, once again, the extraordinary gift this learned, yet down-to-earth, priest had possessed in pointing Russian intelligentsia to Christ. Whatever my own reservations with some of Father Men’s theological formulations, for me they pale before the great spiritual good he worked in Russia—and far from it. Lord, have mercy.