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Father Aleksandr Men'

EMMA WATKINS

The following memoirs are derived from interviews with Fr Aleksandr Men'.¹ He describes events in the lives of himself and his fellow Russian Orthodox priests during the 1960s, providing a remarkable insight into how they dealt with the problems of the time and into the personality of Fr Aleksandr himself.

Aleksandr Men' is one of the most famous names in modern Russian Orthodoxy. I say 'is', despite his horrific death in September 1990, because his influence continues to this day and looks set to do so for many years to come. Born in 1935 of Jewish descent, he was brought up in the Orthodox tradition under his mother's influence and from an early age decided to become a priest. It was his calling and one to which he was faithful despite many pressures in later life. His as yet unsolved murder cut off a flower of Russian Orthodoxy and left, as his close friend the writer Vladimir Fainberg put it, 'a bleeding hole' in the hearts of those who loved him, of whom there are many.

Fainberg relates an illustrative anecdote. They sometimes travelled together and on one visit to Central Asia they found themselves sitting in a hotel restaurant surrounded by drunks and prostitutes. Fainberg was concerned – how would his priest and spiritual father react to being in such a place and among such people? This was surely not a situation for a man of the cloth to be in! Fainberg voiced his concern to Fr Aleksandr. 'They are our clients!' was the priest's reply.

Is this the reason why Fr Aleksandr appealed to believers of all denominations? (Some Baptists who read his writings are said to have exclaimed, 'He's one of us!') And is it the reason why he was followed by the KGB and often taken in for questioning? There are many varying opinions on who killed him and why, but the confusion simply reflects the reason why his contribution to Russian Orthodoxy, to Russia and to the church as a whole, is so important. It has been said that to get through life without making enemies is nothing to boast of. Aleksandr Men' certainly had enemies. He was a Jew, so there was a reason for antisemites to hate him. He was a Jew but a Russian Orthodox priest, so there was a reason for some orthodox Jews to hate him. He was a priest who had an effect on people, so the KGB were not his friends – and neither was the Moscow Patriarchate. How did he respond to these reactions from such a range of people? Sometimes with amusement, at other times saying, 'Everything is in the hands of God'. He did not set out to convert Jews and thereby win the enmity of some, but Jews came to him and were attracted by the faith he was living out. Young people gathered round him – another reason for the KGB's interest. He was extremely erudite, spending hours reading and working on his own

writings. If anyone had a question on theology he knew exactly what article to recommend to them in answer. In three huge bound volumes of the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* there are only four pages listing articles on biblical exegesis and several of those are by Fr Aleksandr. He had a passion for the Bible and believed in the value of personal study, something lacking in the Orthodox Church at that time. It is reported that he sometimes encouraged his parishioners to attend Baptist churches in order to hear the Bible being expounded. It was his view that God made everyone different but that the barriers between us do not reach heaven. Unity through tolerance and love he considered a priority, something to which his books testify.

What made him most beloved was his love of other people and the energy he put into answering their needs. Though he did not proclaim himself to be an evangelist, that is what he was, simply by being an excellent parish priest. He lived out the Christian life and as a result people were attracted to the Christ he represented – young people, old people, Jews, atheists and agnostics. Again, though he did not seek fame, it was simply by his being what he was that fame came to him, first through his publications, then through lecture appearances and finally through television. The last naturally brought its hangers-on, at which one friend became concerned. How can a humble parish priest be a television celebrity and attract attention from those not sincerely interested in the Christian faith but only in the fame it was bringing him? Fr Aleksandr's response was that he understood the variety of motives among those surrounding him but that the chance to tell the Gospel to so many people was too good to miss and that if only a few people responded positively the effort would still be worthwhile. 'I know that the power of evil grows in the same measure as the power of good,' he said. 'People need to be directed towards the eternal.'

This strong will, charisma and knowledge are what he passed on to his many spiritual children. He encouraged them to be free, saying that the church is not a place in which to be ill, but a place in which to find peace and consolation. It is in this way that Yekaterina Geniyeva, Director of the Library for Foreign Literature in Moscow and a former parishioner of Fr Aleksandr, believes he influenced *perestroika* – that is, not through politics but through his public appearances and the message he conveyed, born of the life he lived, and simply through the fact that education of the laity was dear to his heart. He was the first religious speaker at the Library for Foreign Literature and in the year that he died he was involved in the establishment of an open Orthodox university for the study of the Bible and theology, which is now in its fourth year and bears his name. Some of his many written works were published secretly in Belgium while he was alive and many are now available in Russia, where they reach a wide audience. He is known of and read not just in Moscow, but in places as far away as Pyatigorsk in the northern Caucasus. As a Russian spiritual thinker and educator his legacy must surely be of value to the Orthodox hierarchy in their strong desire to keep Russia Russian, and as a native Christian disciple he must stand as a reminder to foreign missionaries that Russia has just as much to offer as it has to learn.

This is a lesson that can be reinforced by visiting the church of SS Kosma and Damian in Moscow, which continues in the tradition of Fr Aleksandr and has as its priest his close friend, Fr Aleksandr Borisov. When Fr Aleksandr died, many of his parishioners moved to SS Kosma and Damian, which is also the location for the Aleksandr Men' Foundation, itself closely linked with the Russian Bible Society. It is as though God provided for the work when his worker was taken away. To quote a letter from Fr Borisov to Keston's support group in New Zealand,

Our parish sees its duty in continuing the way of Fr Aleksandr Men' – the way of enlightened, open-minded Christianity. Our credo is to find the ways to mutual understanding between the different Christian confessions. We regard the representatives of other Christian denominations as our brothers in Christ. So we see our duty as religious upbringing of believers, especially of young believers, in traditions of real Christian culture, in the spirit of Christian love. In this sense the activity of our parish is varied. We hold many courses and lectures on different Christian and social problems. Many of our young churchgoers, organised on the principles of the 'small group', are very active socially.

The significance of Fr Aleksandr Men' lies not in the fact that in later life he became a public figure, nor in that he was a focus of KGB attention, but rather in that he sought to be a parish priest serving his parishioners. It was that alone which brought him attention, and him in particular because he was different. While not seeking to be a dissident, he was, for the communist state of the time, the most subversive kind of opponent – an unassuming Christian, one who just got on with the daily business of serving Christ, which for him involved being both educated and educating others. In a time of darkness, he was a reflection of the Light to the World.

Note

¹ Two separate interviews with Fr Aleksandr were conducted in 1978. The interviewer is now a priest and lives in the West. The texts were edited and combined by Yakov Krotov (a deacon in the Russian Orthodox Church, a journalist on religious affairs and dean of the Philosophy and Theology Faculty of the St John the Theologian Russian Orthodox University in Moscow), and translated and further edited at Keston Institute.