

Encounters with Orthodoxy: Alexander Men, Modern Martyr

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With the publication of my translation of Alexander Men's *Son of Man*,¹ a three-year sojourn in the community of Orthodox Saints has drawn to a close. While I am glad to move on to other projects, my reminiscences have taken a bittersweet turn as I think of the marked changes that have taken place in my soul and mind during this period. Over the course of the translation, I have been introduced to a theology and a post-martyrdom community that have altered my experiential understanding of Mormonism. This rich communion has made me a more committed Latter-day Saint and Christian.

I first met Father Men four years after his murder in 1990.² It was my first trip to Russia, and I basked in their culture while I spoke passionately with locals about religion—theirs and mine. One friend, Lyuda, was physically nauseated by churches. She even refused to enter the famous ones while we went about touring. But she was just as revolted by the Russian LDS converts I introduced her to, unable to accept their departure from Orthodoxy, the emblem of Russian culture. I tried to learn why she felt as she did but ultimately just exasperated her. Just before I left, in desperation, she

¹ *Son of Man*, Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1998, translation of *Syn Chelovecheskij*, Moscow: Slovo, 1992.

² Men was hacked to death by an unknown assailant with a hatchet not far from his house just outside Moscow. It was Sunday morning, 9 Sept 1990, and he was on his way to lead services in church. He managed to drag himself home before expiring on the threshold. An investigation was called and closed inconclusively a couple months later. Many believed it had been sponsored by either the KGB or anti-Semites in Russian Orthodoxy. An accessible general biography is Yves Hamant, *Alexander Men: A Witness for Contemporary Russia*, Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1995. On the specifics of the murder and ensuing investigation see David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb: the Last Days of the Soviet Empire*, New York: Random House, 1993, pp. 357-66; Sophia Coudenrove, "Book Based On Murder Published," *St. Petersburg Times*, 179 [22 July 1996]: 7 (<http://www.spb.su/times/179-180/book.html>).

thrust in my face a pamphlet—ironically a Protestant publication—which contained a sermon by a father Alexander Men, pleading, “Read this. This is Russian religion.”

I read the sermon, entitled, “To Be a Christian,” and was taken by a sense of consummated longing, as I found a Russian who understood me spiritually. He preached about personality and identity, responsibility and freedom, personal spirituality and community obligation. I wanted more, but by then I had returned to the USA, and the pressing demands of education left no time to seek out additional material. Assuming that nothing would be available in America, I put my search on hold.

I returned the following year, alive with the search for the priest who knew my spiritual needs. I let everyone—LDS, Orthodox, Jewish, and atheist—know that I was trying to find works by Alexander Men. And all were pleased with my search, even the atheists and Latter-day Saints, allowing me to accumulate ten volumes in two weeks. I immediately devoured *Son of Man*—his introduction to Christ and Christianity—the work of which he was most proud. His presentation of the life of Christ was fresh and compelling, teaching me more, I felt, than the LDS commentaries I had read. And I began to speak with my Mormon friends about translating the work.

How passionately proud of Men were the Moscow Latter-day Saints. He almost seemed to represent a way for them to be true to their Saints, even as they became Saints in a foreign church. One soon-to-be-endowed family—a sociologist, an economist, and their precocious children—glowed with excitement as they gave me their own copy of *Son of Man*, inscribing it painstakingly: “We hope that by the power of the Holy Spirit your translation will be worthy of the original.”

Another church member felt the tension between the martyred Saint and the Latter-day Saints more acutely. A woman working for the church, a recently returned missionary, privately confided to me in anxious glances and stiff-lipped syllables that reading Men filled her with longing, an inexpressible desire to be united with the religion of her Motherland. She also ached for the restoration of mystical hymnody and iconography, hungry for the otherworldly character of Orthodox worship. Hoping that knowledge of my future translation would be somehow helpful, I

shared with her the yearning for her Zion, for the time when her Prophet lived and spoke for the Lord.

I spent a month working at the sociologist's laptop (taking turns with his wife as she finished her dissertation), pounding out a draft of the first five chapters. Men's work, and my creative involvement in it, charged me spiritually the way the temple ceremony can on my better days. I relished his earnest witness that God is with us, that His loving intimacy is the primary feature of Christ's religion. While the following argument was familiar, its religious and national context was not:

Of all the names by which the Creator is known in the scriptures, Jesus preferred the word *Father*. In His prayers it came out *Abba*, the way children addressed their fathers in Aramaic.

This choice was of profound significance...

Only Christ speaks of a Father Whom every human soul may find access to, should it so desire. The Gospel brings people the gift of God-sonship. On those who accept it is Christ's covenant fulfilled. They come to know that with the Creator of the Universe we may speak one to one, as with *Abba*, as with a loving Father, who awaits our reciprocating love.³

Affirming the importance of Gethsemane, Men added an insight about Christ's suffering that struck me powerfully—Christ may have been occupied with our sins of religious chauvinism:

To us is not given to penetrate the depths of the mortal struggle to which the old olive garden was witness. But those to whom Christ is revealed in love and faith know the most important thing—He suffered for us. He absorbed into Himself the pain and curse of centuries, the gloom of human sin, experienced all the terror and hell of God's absence. Night, devoid of hope, engulfed Him; Christ willingly descended into the abyss so that by entering it He might take us out of it and into unfading light... What was carried past His thoughtful gaze? Images of the future? Persecution, wars, violence? *The apostasy of His followers, their ingratitude and lack of faith, their hardheartedness and Pharisaism?*⁴

Father Alexander's arguments and insights combined wisdom and scholarly competence with a humble, compassionate delight in the love of God. The process of reaching for meaning in

³ *Son of Man*, p. 58.

⁴ *Son of Man*, p. 179, italics mine.

Men, of bridging gaps that divide nations, religions, and worldviews nourished me, as did the content of Men's book.

I returned to the States and continued, as time permitted, to work quietly on the translation. After completing the first several chapters, I realized that I needed to obtain English language rights for the book, and set out looking. A cultural historian of Russia from Washington State who was also intensely interested in Men and his legacy placed me in contact with an old friend and colleague of Men. He in turn referred me to the Alexander Men Foundation, overseers of Men's literary estate. I sent them an e-mail, indicating that I was one-third done and asking whether I could receive permission to publish the work. Their response was enthusiastically affirmative. They had long been wondering how to ensure translation of the work, and the publisher was waiting and ready for a manuscript. Delighted at the simplification of the publication process, I began translating in earnest, completing a draft of the last portions in several intense months.

The Foundation was pleased with my regular progress updates, and the more excited they became, the more I urgently I felt the need to admit my heretical religious affiliation. My eventual confession was met with polite but considerable concern about my ability to prepare an unadulterated product. Their reluctance is certainly understandable. I have since imagined with a smile the concern on the part of the LDS Church if a devout Russian Orthodox linguist decided to translate Talmage's *Jesus the Christ* into Russian. Initially, I was offended, then amused, then pensive about my responsibilities as translator. I became extremely careful to distinguish what I wished Men would say from what he in fact did say, a helpful exercise for me personally.

Their initial statement of concern was followed by a specific, very detailed interrogation of my theology. We spoke of approaches to deification—I called it “apotheosis”; they called it “Theosis”—and realized that the primary difference was not whether the event would take place, but what form it would take. While faithful Mormons are destined to be “gods,” the Orthodox are destined to be “God,” as He swallows up distinction and separation. I found in this teaching a robust notion of atonement: Christ's incarnation made possible the absolute and complete union of

humans with God. This close exploration of Trinity and Unity made it easier for me to understand why the earliest Latter-day Saints were reluctant to part with the notion of the indivisible God, why Book of Mormon language should be so suggestive of One God rather than many.

We discussed several other areas of difference and concord. Some Orthodox teachings were beautiful to me, others seemed artificial or even silly. In the end we made curious Christian bedfellows, but we decided to proceed regardless, the Orthodox Bishop who served as liaison praying that “the Holy Spirit Himself will guide us [that it might] be a blessing beyond expectation for both of us.”

To a certain extent they were right that a Mormon is a dangerous translator.⁵ My best efforts to eliminate the peculiarly LDS influence from the translation were not uniformly successful. My deficit was summed up in controversy over the Russian *tainstvo*, “ritual,” from a root meaning “secret.” The LDS have used it to translate the familiar term ‘ordinance’ in church publications, and I readily appropriated that translation. Important it is that ritual is ordained, i.e. follows a prescribed mode in its repeated enactment. But my Orthodox friends corrected me early in the editorial process: it is more literally “mystery.” What mattered to them, even linguistically, was the mystery of it, the mystical profundity of these ritual activities. And for us, it seemed, it matters that they are prescribed. And Men educated us both, presenting these spiritual objects as mystical modes of uniting us with God, not just “contracts,” but rather transformations.

With the theological controversy resolved, the translation moved forward quickly. As I continued my work, the wisdom and sincerity of Men’s preaching continued to impress me. But I began to be affected in another way: I observed at close quarters the effect of his life and death on his spiritual community. Through this group’s relationship with its founder, I have come to appreciate the spiritual legacy of our murdered prophet, Joseph Smith.

⁵ But perhaps not the worst. By the report [personal communication] of Anna Maria Canepa Mordacci, an Italian Orthodox translator, the Italian translation of *Son of Man* created quite a stir when errors in translation caused portions of the book to be deemed heretical.

Bishop SERAPHIM Joseph Sigris⁶ was my first real contact with the community. He had become involved with the Men community through contacts within Russian Orthodoxy. Holding the blood-soaked New Testament that had failed to protect Men from his assailant moved him as no prior relics had. His enthusiastic devotion to Orthodoxy and Christianity generally were refreshing, as was his direct manner.⁷ He handled the question of allowing a heretic to translate Men's work. To help educate me, he sent several beautiful icons and challenging works on Orthodox belief at his own expense. Most importantly, he introduced me to the group of Christians within and without Russia who cherished the memory of the compassionate priest. They were academics and custodians, poets and *babushki*, heretics and the simply devout. From all walks of life, they had converged on the preaching of this one man who brought them the good news of Christ in a manner they could understand and accept.

Shortly after my introduction to this society, the sixth anniversary of the martyrdom of Father Alexander was observed in Moscow. A report of the memorial that was held described a woman saved from suicide by a waking vision of Men, a small group in Russia emboldened by vivid dreams of Father Alexander, and a community of spiritual children hungry for their absent father. A later report of a birthday celebration in his honor included a Venezuelan *Catholic* priest healed of metastatic cancer by praying to Men, musical and dance numbers created in honor of the dead saint, and a sacred but heady delight in Men's legacy. These people were alive with charismatic, miraculous religion the way our religious forebears appear to have been. The more I reflected, the more I felt connected through this community to the Saints of the mid nineteenth century. The parallels between Men and Joseph Smith became patent in my mind, and Men's inexorable draw became much clearer: he was, in several critical respects, an incarnation of the Mormon Prophet.

⁶ Orthodox priests assume a new name at the time of ordination. In this case, Joseph chose to be named for an 18th/19th century Russian saint, Seraphim of Sarov. Ironically the priest who introduced young Alexander to Christianity had also assumed that name.

⁷ Two examples of his directed questioning. When asking me about possible trips to Russia, Seraphim asked point blank: "Are you married? (one assumes that Mormons who do not mythologize are or proximally will be!)" In our exchange about the LDS religion, he noted, that his study of Brodie (whom he called a "Jacqueline Mormon") and others led him "to conclude that if I were LDS I would take a somewhat mythological approach to my faith rather than literal."

Both had led their people “out of obscurity and out of darkness,” Joseph from troubling sectarian controversy, Alexander from the atheistic dogma of Marxism-Leninism. Both the Russian and the American were intensely charismatic, drawing around them throngs of people intoxicated by their preaching and enamored of them personally. Each was something of a rebel, a religious free-thinker who resisted ecclesiastical strictures. They disrupted, in a holy way, the normal course of religion in their respective lands. Civil authorities and bigoted men sought to suppress and persecute them and through them their followers. In response, both preachers proclaimed the need for religious toleration.⁸ They shared a fascination with the time of the patriarchs, each claiming Jewish genealogy (Men’s mother was Jewish; Smith claimed lineage from Joseph) and engaging in careful study of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures. Each translated portions of the Old and New Testaments, although Joseph Smith’s was a distinctive translation.⁹ Combined with all their spiritual wisdom was a boyish exuberance: Smith’s playfulness is well known, and Men was loved for his cheering renditions of folk songs on guitar and his voluble laughter. Neither was a stranger to good jokes. Perhaps most importantly, both preached a proximate God. Men searched the depth and breadth of Christianity for signs of the intimacy of God, as did Joseph Smith. And although Smith was perhaps more taken with visions and certainly claimed more authority, both sought the nearness of God through personal spirituality. They claimed that God was currently and passionately concerned with the fate of humanity and the individuals that comprise it. And, finally, these passionately beloved saviors on Mount Zion were snatched from their spiritual progeny in a dark and unexpected instant by assailants who were never brought to justice.

⁸ Interestingly, as I was preparing the final draft for the printer, the Russian Federation adopted xenophobic legislation banning the activity of foreign churches. Men and his spiritual offspring are the people who set the stage for the quiet indifference to this legislation which has allowed us to continue our activity in Russia. I relish the irony that a Mormon (me), now an officially outlawed heretic, carried the message of peace from the very Orthodox responsible for the ban on foreign religions.

⁹ Both also spent much energy exploring the relationships between ancient Hebrew worship and the current model. Men is particularly noted for a carefully thorough sermon on the evolution of current Christian worship from the Temple and synagogues. Smith was passionately concerned with tracing early Mormon practices to a biblical original.

Finally, as I have participated in the loss of Father Alexander, I have begun to experience the world of post-martyrdom Mormonism. In five years of work in the primary sources of Mormonism, I have never really appreciated the pathos of the years of exodus and adjustment. Now I think I feel it. We had taken on the world, brazenly confident that our cause would win, that God would allow us imminent victory. And here we lay broken. But it wasn't just that. God had been with us, had walked among us. We had touched and seen and heard his angel, the Prophet. Hollow, sad, disconsolate, we (and they) struggled to restore the presence of God, the Eternal which had failed to protect our prophets and had vanished with their deaths.

Men himself (I wonder how prophetically) placed in prose the sentiments I have learned from his community when he described the emotional state of the post-crucifixion Christians:

[E]ven more than fear of persecution and pangs of conscience, they were haunted by the thought that the Son of Man had been taken from them. He, Who walked with them along the green hills beside the lake, Who was so good and powerful, [Who] promised to bring His disciples into the Kingdom of God, now lay breathless. They would no longer hear the familiar words "truly, truly I say to you," would not see again the hand breaking bread. The disciples were in despair: why did God desert Him, desert them all? . . . But did this mean that Jesus was not the One they had taken Him for? Not the Savior of Israel and the world? And, consequently, was their faith in Him in vain; did Peter merely speak empty words when he said "You are the Messiah"? This was decisive, irremediable ruin. Their hopes and dazzling dreams were crushed. Never had people experienced a more onerous disenchantment. What remained for them to do? Run, run as fast as they could from this beastly city! Return to Galilee to their own homes and boats. Forget about the Man Who had Himself been deceived and led His simple followers into delusion...

Sad as it may be, I am united with other Christians by the loss of a shepherd. Watching a community search for direction without its loving pastor has connected me to the early LDS and the Christian community generally. I feel more acutely my own loss and appreciate its significance as a binding force among humans. And I am grateful to Father Alexander for unknowingly and posthumously teaching me.

No longer buried in the process of translating and editing, I return again to my status as an outsider to his community. I am enveloped by quotidian worries, tasks, and goals. Perhaps it has to

be that way. But there are six more volumes in the series of which *Son of Man* was the conclusion, and sometimes, maybe, I think I'll tackle one of them.