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## ALEXANDER MEN'S VIEWS ON DOCTRINAL, MORAL AND RITUAL CONTENT OF WORLD RELIGIONS IN LIGHT OF THE TEACHING OF THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH

### Introduction

Almost his whole life, Father Alexander Vladimirovich Men (1935-1990) lived and worked under the oppressive regime of militant atheism of the Soviet Union. Born to a Jewish family, he received faith from his mother who had converted to Christianity in her adolescence. After receiving education in biology, Alexander completed his theological studies in preparation for the priestly ministry in the Russian Orthodox Church. He spent the remaining part of his life doing pastoral work in several undistinguished villages near Moscow, until he was murdered, at the age of 55, on his way to the Sunday liturgy. Despite the adverse conditions under which he worked, Fr Men developed impressive pastoral activity, important part of which was related to the religions of the world. The main work devoted to this theme was his six-volume history of religions *In Search of the Way, the Truth and the Life*. Important aspects of this topic are covered in some of his other writings, too.

More than fifty years ago, Vatican II brought the Catholic Church to the epicenter of intensive interreligious and ecumenical dialogues. The Council officially declared its positive views on other religions as containing elements of goodness and truth that come from the one God. At the same time, the Council emphasized the necessity to proclaim Jesus Christ as the fullness of the saving Truth. After Vatican II, the topic of inter-religious dialogue was analyzed in several documents of the Catholic magisterium. Alexander Men developed well-defined and comprehensive views on world religions. Those views can be analyzed in light of the directions provided in magisterial

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documents. This article concentrates on how Men viewed doctrinal, moral, and ritual content of different world religions. Its purpose is to evaluate if Men's understanding in this area is in line with the position articulated in the conciliar and post-conciliar magisterial documents of the Catholic Church.

### **Catholic view on the content of world religions as containing positive and negative elements**

The fundamental attitude of the Catholic Church towards the content of world religions could be articulated as follows: non-biblical world religions contain positive elements of good and truth; these positive elements, called *semina Verbi* (Latin for the *seeds of the Word*, here refers to Jesus Christ as the divine *Word*; see Lukaševičius 2009), come from God and are mixed with negative ones. For the purpose of analysis in the present work, the content of world religions is seen as comprised of three parts: doctrinal teaching, moral code, and ritual celebrations. Among several possible divisions, the author chose this one because Alexander Men himself had used it. At the beginning of his history of religions, he explicitly noted that “every religion has three main elements: its world view, the living standards, and its mystical feeling that finds its external expression in cult. The first element is directed towards man's intellect, the second – towards the aspirations of the will, and the third – towards man's emotional sphere and his intuition” (Men 2001, p. 47).

The documents of the Catholic Church indicate that the *semina Verbi* may be present in all aspects of other religions, namely, in their doctrine, morality, and rituals. The Declaration of Vatican Council II, *Nostra aetate*, reads: “She [the Catholic Church] has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings, which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men” (*Nostra aetate* 1965, 2; see *Dignitatis humanae* 1965). Here, “manner of life and conduct” and “precepts and teachings” could be seen as representing moral code and doctrinal teaching respectively. The Declaration *Dominus Iesus* explicitly mentions positive elements present in the rituals and prayers of other religions: “Indeed, some prayers and rituals of other religions may be treated as a preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, 21; references are made to John Paul II 1990, 29 and the Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994, 843). Therefore, the Catholic magisterium asserts that God's truth can be reflected in every aspect of the

religions of the world, namely their doctrines, moral codes, and rituals. At the same time, all these areas can contain “gaps, insufficiencies and errors” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, 8). The aim of this analysis is to examine if Fr Men agreed with the Catholic magisterium that there are “elements of good and truth” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, 8) present in different world religions, where they are interwoven with different “evil associations” (Ad gentes 1965, 9).

### **Positive and negative elements in the religions of Egypt and Mesopotamia**

When discussing the content of Egyptian religions in the 4<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> millennia b.c., Fr Men concentrated on the doctrinal and moral aspects, while the ritual element was mentioned only occasionally without paying particular attention to it. Regarding the Egyptian understanding of deities, Alexander Men emphasized the struggle between monotheistic and polytheistic concepts. According to Men, the monotheistic tendencies in Egyptian religions reached their climax in the religious beliefs of Pharaoh Akhenaton. However, even in Akhenaton's ideas and activity, Fr Men discerns elements of *Magism*, which are viewed by him exclusively negatively, as a tendency of a fallen human nature to control both material and spiritual spheres. The belief in the divine nature of Pharaohs was, according to Men, a magical concept that had survived all changes.

The belief in the immortality of human soul was, according to Alexander Men, a positive element in the Egyptian concept of human being. This area was closely related to morality which contained, in Men's judgment, “the greatest religious revelation, which was achieved by the Egyptian people” (Men 2001, p. 108): the insight in the importance of morality for the state of the soul after death. However, as Fr Alexander maintained, this positive insight existed side by side with negative elements: on the practical level, the attempts to achieve the desired state after death were closely related to different magical notions.

Fr Men maintained that the religious life in Mesopotamia in that period was similar to that in Egypt. The concept of deities in Mesopotamia was, according to Men, analogous to the Egyptian one, and expressed prevailing *Magism* with occasional elements of monotheism. The beliefs related to the origin and the meaning of the Universe included both positive and negative elements. After reviewing the Babylonian myth *Enuma Elish*, Men made the following comment: “In this colorful myth side by side with profound ideas about Intellect that creates harmonious world, about consecution of creation, we find belief in the *precedence of Chaos* and rude polytheism,

we discover notions about world process as a result of envy and rivalry of beings which are rather unattractive” (Men 2001, p. 181-2).

According to Men, the concept of human being in Mesopotamia was associated with problems. Here, unlike in Egypt, human destiny after death was believed to be, in general, very unhappy. Fr Alexander pointed out that in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and other great literary works of the end of the third millennium b.c., human life itself was believed to be essentially meaningless. This gloomy anthropology contributed to an inner conflict which could not be resolved: “A deep contradiction appeared between spiritual character of the nation – gifted, industrious, creative, and its concept of the purpose of man” (Men 2001, p. 121). The Sumerian-Akkadian civilization was, in the words of Alexander Men, a “great ancient culture which, despite all its technical achievements, could make peace neither with life nor with death, and arrived at deep irremediable pessimism” (Men 2001, p. 138). Men’s narrative illustrates well the situation described by Vatican II in the Constitution *Lumen gentium* which notices that people “living and dying in this world without God [...] are exposed to ultimate despair” (*Lumen gentium* 1964, 16; see *Gaudium et Spes* 1965). In the area of morality, Fr Men pointed out an attempt to implement a religion-based reform aiming at social justice. Such attempts on the part of a ruler reveal a positive notion that religion is related to social justice. Like in his descriptions of the religious life in Egypt, Fr Alexander did not pay particular attention to the ritualistic aspect of religions in Mesopotamia.

### **Positive and negative elements in the religions of India and China**

In the opinion of Fr Alexander, a degradation of the elements of monotheism was a general tendency in the Aryan religious life during and after the Aryans had conquered the local inhabitants of India at the beginning of the second millennium b.c.. This process manifested itself in all the aspects of the religious content. According to Men, the Aryan concept of deities consisted of both monotheistic and polytheistic elements. Men maintained that the former were the remnants of the primitive beliefs from the times before the Aryans came to India, such as the belief in *Dyaus Pitar* as the Creator of the Universe. Alexander Men noted that the number of polytheistic elements rapidly increased in the Aryan religion after their invasion of India. He also noted that, with time, the belief in *Dyaus Pitar* was becoming stifled by the religion of the Mother Goddess.

Men regarded also a clear belief in the immortality of the human soul to be a positive element in the doctrinal aspect of the Aryan religion. He emphasized that the original Aryan concept of human destiny after death

was optimistic: "In the early hymns the problem of death does not have tragic nature [...]. They are confident, they know that after burial of the body [...] all pleasing to *Varuna* keepers of his law will cross into sparkling worlds" (Men 2001, p. 152). In the sphere of morality, Fr Men stressed the positive insights into the existence of objective moral values, as well as the consciousness of human sinfulness and the need for repentance. The caste system was, according to Alexander Men, a negative phenomenon in the area of social morality in Indian society. He maintained that the caste system had its origins in and its stability was based on the magical world view. In the opinion of Men, the same dynamics of degradation characterized the ritualistic aspect of the Aryan religion. The original Aryan worship of *Dyaus Pitar* was gradually changed from a simple ritual into a magical ritualistic system: "[T]he times when Aryans were satisfied with simple altars under the open sky were history. The first colonnades of Indo-Aryan temples emerged on the conquered land, and people bowed before the first graven images of deities" (Men 2001, p. 157).

In the Aryan cult of Soma, Fr Men indicated an unsuccessful attempt to achieve the fulfillment of man's desire for the lost harmony with all existence. The Aryans are like many other nations in this aspect. This is how Men commented on one of the hymns related to Soma rituals: "This Bacchanal hymn, this cry of ecstasy before the unclosed to the soul pleasures of being, is as if an echo of those vanished away days when the harmony between man and the world was not disrupted. The desire to return this condition is found in primitive shamanism, as well as in voluptuous cults of Syria, and in the religion of Dionysus. These attempts as a rule were doomed to fail, they did not want to know that in comparison to the original condition man already departed far away from a possibility to participate in the festival of universal Harmony" (Men 2001, p. 160). Fr Men considered the cult of Soma to be a negative element, closely related to *Magism*.

According to Fr Men, the main positive religious element in the teaching of the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu was his feeling that the Universe has a spiritual origin, which is the essence of all being. Tao wrote: "In this sacred One the philosopher finds the forgotten source of truth, the lost perception of Reality" (Men 2002b, p. 27). Another positive element, as shown by Men, is Lao Tzu's "negative theology" which refuses to give name to the origin of the Universe. Fr Alexander compared this to the development of "negative theology" in other religions, including Christianity. However, Lao Tzu's concept of deity was pantheistic. Fr Men did not explicitly recognise pantheism in the teaching of Lao Tzu, but mentioned it while describing views of the followers of the Chinese philosopher. Since Men, in general,

regarded pantheism to be a mistake, he also saw this mistake as part of Lao Tzu's teaching. Regarding pantheism, the positive value of Lao Tzu's insights is also limited by the fact that Tao was considered to be the origin of good as well as of evil.

According to Fr Alexander, Lao Tzu's perception of human life was problematic since he disregarded all earthly concerns, believing that they block 'natural' life. In general, the teaching of Lao Tzu could not provide answers to the question of the meaning of human life, because it "enters into deep and insurmountable conflict with the fact of life, creation, real world, human creativity" (Men 2002b, p. 59). Regarding morality, the problem in Lao Tzu's teaching, as indicated by Men, was lack of basis for morality, for "the nature was not sufficiently solid reference point, because the most important – moral principle, was not present in nature. Man cannot derive impulse for ethics from nature" (Men 2002a, p. 9). The love of nature and a positive influence on Chinese art were mentioned by Men as positive impacts of Lao Tzu's teaching.

Men stressed that for Confucius "there existed the one and highest Absolute" (Men 2002a, p. 2), which, however, was not given much attention. Fr Men disapproved of Confucius' teaching on afterlife as bearing signs of agnosticism: "He did not justify his agnosticism philosophically. This was a utilitarian agnosticism which put aside everything that does not immediately affect everyday problems". In the ritualistic sphere, Confucius put emphasis on the scrupulous following of rituals. Men perceived negatively the fact that they were devoid of religious meaning. On the other hand, Confucius did not assign any magical significance to them, and regarded rituals as a means to promote humanness, i.e. *jen*. Fr Alexander viewed Confucius's ideal of *jen* as the most positive element in his teaching, and held that the greatest "achievement of Confucius was some demythologization of old traditions, and turning them into an instrument of humaneness, respect, kindness, justice, peacefulness" (Men 2002a, p. 4).

Alexander Men negatively viewed the fact that Confucius "did not consider prayers necessary, for [he] conceived Heaven as some faceless Fate [...] [which] in no way manifests itself in the life of people" (Men 2002b, p. 41). Confucius was very concerned with the morality of individuals and of society. His high moral ideals could, according to Men, be summarized as the "golden rule". Confucius required particularly high moral standards of rulers, for which reason, Men likened him not only to Plato, but even to the biblical prophets, and viewed his teaching as a step towards contemporary democracy. According to Men, Confucius' understanding of morality was problematic in a way similar to that of Lao Tzu's, namely Confucius did not

relate moral requirements with any supernatural source. Instead, he saw it just as an expression of human nature. In this attempt to fully base morality on human nature, Fr Men sees “the first in history endeavor to construct an autonomous morality that is not related to religion and Revelation” (Men 2002b, p. 47).

Fr Men's criticism of Confucius lessened in his lecture on Chinese philosophy *Spiritual revolution in the East China* (Men 2002a, p. 64-89). In the lecture, unlike in the six-volume history of religions, Men put greater emphasis on the positive elements in the teaching of Confucius. This probably could be explained with the primarily pastoral purpose of his lecturing: he did not have time to present a complete picture of Confucius' teaching in a short lecture, so he highlighted more positive elements in order to show Confucius as a great teacher of humankind. This perspective could have been distorted if listeners had been led to concentrate on negative details in the teaching of Confucius. On the other hand, in the book, a broader picture is presented, and Men allows himself to describe more negative elements. In both, the lecture and the book, Fr Alexander portrays the teaching of Confucius as containing both positive and negative elements.

### **Positive and negative elements in the religions of Greece and Canaan**

Alexander Men maintained that the religious processes among Greek tribes after their invasion of the Balkans in the second millennium b.c. were similar to the processes which occurred in India after the Aryan invasion: in both cases, what followed was a gradual growth of polytheism. According to Men, the popularity of monotheistic elements diminished among Greek tribes under the influence of three main factors: “Firstly, the agricultural cult of Pelasgi with their farming witchcraft and magic rituals. Secondly, the religion and culture of Crete with the worship of the Mother Goddess and frantic zeal of priestesses. And thirdly, the change in the style of life of the newcomers, their transition to agriculture” (Men 2001, p. 248-9). Eventually Greeks attempted to reverse these tendencies, to which the Zeus's pantheon of gods in mythology testifies. As Men noted, Greeks did not succeed completely as Zeus was imagined as combining in himself remnants of monotheism with later anthropomorphic elements.

The Greek notion of the origin of all being was according to Fr Men similar to that of many other nations: it is the original Chaos which gave birth to everything. In Men's words, the rise of the religion of Zeus revealed the following, positive aspect: “proclamation of primacy of Light, Reason, and Harmony over Darkness, Irrationality, and Chaos. In this respect, it is

the direct predecessor of teaching about Logos as a rational creative principle in the Universe. However, the emergence of this teaching was still far away” (Men 2001, p. 270). Despite the positive perception of rationality in divinity, Fr Alexander pointed out significant faults in the Greek concept of gods. The first fault was the fact that Greeks did not perceive gods as truly spiritual beings, which led to the image of gods as characters with flaws. Eventually, the religion of Zeus incorporated magical elements, which, in the opinion of Fr Men, manifested itself in the presence of temples, priesgood, sacrifices, taboos, and ritual purifications as a means to control deities.

What is more, Zeus and other gods were dependent on a greater power, which, as Alexander Men showed, ultimately appeared to be the same Mother Goddess. Men noted that unlike among other nations the concept of the deified ruler was absent in the case of Greeks.

Analyzing the Greek notion of human existence after death, Men noted that originally it was conceived as bleak and hopeless for all. Eventually, however, there appeared notions saying that the destiny after death was not the same for people, and some individuals could achieve the blessedness. Men summarized Greek beliefs about the afterlife as linking two ideas: “[O]n the one hand, all that is valuable is confined within this earthly life; the shadow which remains of man drags his meaningless and miserable existence into Erebus. On the other hand, elected souls, for their heroic deeds and as a result of gods’ special favour, attain bliss in Elysium. Both trends contributed, especially in the circles of aristocracy of knights, striving ‘to take from life all the possible’ ” (Men 2001, p. 289-290). Men pointed out the lack of clear moral teaching in the religion of Zeus, and considered this to be a significant problem. He related this lack of moral teaching to the specific feature of Greek religion, namely it being a religion without prophets.

In the case of some religions, Fr Men concentrated on negative elements only. An example of this could be Canaanite religion from the times of the Israelite invasion in the 12<sup>th</sup> century bc. Regarding the religion of the Canaanites, Men did not explicitly mention any positive elements. The question is whether he indeed did not discover any positive elements in this religion, or there were other reasons for this. It seems rather that it was not the absence of positive elements, but the specific way in which Men described Canaanite religions that explains why he did not mention any positive elements.

The only place where the description of these religions is longer is the volume *Magism and Monotheism* (chapters XX-XXI, and partially chapter X). Thus, the Canaanites are not given much attention compared to other cultures. The religious life in Canaan is also described differently than in



other cases, i.e. not as a separate religion, but in the context of the narrative of religious developments in Israel. As a result, these descriptions are rather fragmentary. Fr Alexander concentrated on those elements in Canaanite religions which constituted spiritual challenges to Israel. Obviously, these were different polytheistic and magical notions that Men evaluated negatively. Fr Men focused on the moral and ritual aspects of Canaanite religions, and devoted very little attention to other areas. In this respect, Men's characterization of Canaanite religions differs substantially from the descriptions of other religions, where he usually pays significant attention to doctrinal teaching. Finally, Fr Alexander did not review historical processes in Canaan, which again distinguishes Canaanite religions from other major religions in Men's narrative. These specific features of the description of Canaanite religions allow drawing the conclusion that they were not approached in the same way as other religions in Men's works. This may explain the absence of positive elements in Men's description of Canaanite religions.

At the same time, the general mood of his description of Canaanite religions has the same warmth and understanding towards the Canaanite people of that time as the description of other religions. For example, this is how Men described the context of those rituals that were evaluated by him extremely negatively: "Each area had its *baal*. Peasants and inhabitants of cities believed that baals helped them, and turned to these deities in periods of sowing, drought, or cattle plague. A symbol of baal usually was a bull, even though sometimes baals resembled a human being in their appearance. All – rain and harvest, increase of cattle and health of people depended on baal. In order to find his favor, during holidays, Canaanites arranged feasts, in which baal was supposed to participate invisibly as a guest. He breathed in the fragrance of sacrifices, drank wine and treated himself to fruits of the earth [...]. In the years of national calamities, people in despair made greatest sacrifices. Children were sacrificed to spirits, in hope to assuage baals' wrath. This sacrifice was considered to be particularly effective" (Men 2001, p. 356-7). Given Men's specific approach to Canaanite religions, his descriptions should not be viewed as contradicting the fundamental position of the Catholic Church which affirms the presence of positive elements in world religions.

## Alexander Men's view on the origin of the *semina Verbi* in world religions

The Declaration *Dominus Iesus* emphasizes that positive “religious elements [...] come from God” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, 21). They “are part of what ‘the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures, and religions’” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, 21; the quotation is from John Paul II 1990, 29). Fr Men did not specify in his writings if they come from God, and if it is the Holy Spirit that brings them about.

However, in the epilogue to his *On the Threshold of the New Testament*, Men explicitly mentioned the *semina Verbi*. Referring to the teaching of St. Clement of Alexandria, Men stated that “the divine Word was always present in history and awakened higher aspirations in people” (Men 1983b, p. 666). Even though it was not stated explicitly, it was clearly implied that the divine Word comes from God.

Another question, which is a specific expression of a broader problem of the relationship between God and the positive elements in world religions, is the question of the relationship between these elements and Jesus Christ. *Dominus Iesus* cites *Redemptoris Missio* to stress the deepest relationship between the *semina Verbi* and Christ: “In the process of discovering and appreciating the manifold gifts – especially the spiritual treasures – that God has bestowed on every people, we cannot separate those gifts from Jesus Christ, who is at the centre of God’s plan of salvation” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, 10). The separation of the *semina Verbi* from Christ is one of the expressions of the separation between the Word of God and Jesus Christ. *Dominus Iesus* devotes attention to this problem and warns about the danger of a serious theological mistake: “To introduce any sort of separation between the Word and Jesus Christ is contrary to the Christian faith” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, 10).

Again, Fr Men in his history of religions did not address this problem directly, just like he did not address the question of the relationship between God and the positive elements in world religions. However, in one of his answers, he broached this issue by referring to the position of the Fathers of the Church: “Fathers of the Church spoke that before coming of Jesus the Nazarene to earth, Christ as Divine Word was present in history and manifested himself in different religious and philosophical teachings” (Men 1999, 312). At the same time, Fr Men did not state in any of his writings anything that could indicate that he considered positive elements to be unrelated to Jesus Christ. Therefore, Fr Men’s position on this motif should be regarded as identical to that expressed in *Dominus Iesus*: the *semina*

*Verbi* in world religions come from God and are closely linked to Jesus Christ.

### Alexander Men's view on the purpose of the *semina Verbi*

The question about the purpose of the *semina Verbi* is closely related to the origin of this term. The position of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church on this point could be summarized by the following citation from Vatican Council II: "Whatever good or truth is found amongst them [i.e., non-Christians] is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel" (Lumen gentium 1964, 16). Fr Men's attitude regarding the question of the purpose of the *semina Verbi*, similarly to the question of their origin, is not presented in a systematic way, but can be inferred from related issues and recognized from separate remarks. In those few instances when Men spoke of this directly, he usually referred to the Fathers of the Church, in particular to St. Clement of Alexandria. In general, Alexander Men viewed the whole pre-Christian history of humanity as *praeparatio Evangelica*: "all [ancient religious teachings] served as an Old Testament for the humanity" (Men 1999, p. 268). The whole history of religions was viewed by Men as the history of humankind's efforts to achieve "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (*In Search of the Way, the Truth and the Life* is the title of Men's six-volume history of religions) and, therefore, preparing man to receive the Good News.

*Redemptoris missio* states that "[w]hatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures, and religions serves as a preparation for the Gospel" (John Paul II 1990, 29). Cardinal Ratzinger stresses in this statement the following aspect: "'preparation for the Gospel' must be considered not as what is to be found in religions but only 'what the Spirit brings about' therein. From this, the most important consequence arises: the path to salvation is the good present in religions – as the work of Christ's Spirit – it is not the religions themselves" (Vatican Information Services 2000). Therefore, the "preparation for the Gospel" is the *semina Verbi* present in various world religions. Consequently, all the other elements in world religions are not part of *praeparatio Evangelica*.

In one of the answers to the questions following his lectures, Fr Men said that all the truth and goodness in world religions before Christianity "was the preparation of humanity for the Gospel" (Men 1999). If taken separately, this short statement is not sufficient to conclude that Alexander Men agrees with Ratzinger's remark. However, some indirect confirmation for this can be derived from other instances where Men spoke on the positive elements as leading towards the Christian revelation. For example,

Fr Alexander valued very highly the spirituality of the Upanishads, i.e. the sacred writings that were part of India's religious tradition at the beginning of the first millennium bc. This is how Men listed their achievements: "After the centuries of paganism they proclaimed the oneness of the Divine Source, acknowledged secondary importance of external ceremonies, pointed out to people, the priceless gift, the magic crystal which was in their possession – secret depth of the Spirit. In the period when man endowed gods not only with mean passions, but also with body, Upanishads taught that the Absolute surpasses all that is created, seen, conceivable" (Men 2002b, p. 83). However, having reviewed these positive elements, Men made the following comment: "But if the fullness of the Truth, accessible to pre-Christian consciousness, was discovered in the Indian wisdom, then our story would have to end with this chapter or with this book [...]. At first this could seem strange: was not the religion of Brahmins the best possible prologue to the Gospel? And yet there was something, which did not allow this Indian knowledge of God to become the Old Testament of mankind" (Men 2002b, p. 83-4). Thus, Alexander Men maintained that the positive elements seem to provide "the best possible prologue to the Gospel". On the other hand, according to him, it is the mistaken notions on the origin and purpose of the Universe that impede *praeparatio Evangelica* which was accomplished by the positive elements of this religion. These statements, taken together with the absence of the evidence to the contrary, support the argument that Men's approach was in line with the one expressed in Ratzinger's comment.

On several occasions, Men spoke of non-biblical religions in the context of broad political, cultural, and spiritual processes that helped spread and receive the Gospel. In those cases, he usually did not explicitly distinguish the *semina Verbi* in the non-biblical religions as preparation for the Gospel. For example, this is how Men described some politically based religious reforms of the Hellenistic age: "Asoka, Seleucids, Ptolemy Lagi [...] destroyed the stagnation of national cults, broadened the spiritual horizon of nations and created an atmosphere that [...] was favorable for the reception [...] of the Revelation. It was due to this three-century period of religious 'openness', that the apostles of the Gospel did not face a stone wall. *The Hellenistic beliefs had played the role of the plough* that tilled the soil for the sowers of the Word" (Men 1983b, p. 145, emphasis added. See also Men 2002c, pp. 8, 328-329, Men 1986, p. 359).

Elsewhere, Men mentioned some non-biblical religions and philosophies alongside with such technological progress elements as the road system in the place Roman Empire, all contributing to the reception of the Gospel: "The first missionaries of the Gospel [...] went along those [Roman] roads.

Without knowing it, the victorious Romans had opened the gates of the wide world before the apostles. It was not only the Greek translation of the Bible and the synagogues of the Diaspora, or Eastern cults and classical philosophy that forestalled the way for the sowers of the Word. It was also [...] [Rome] that had played its role in the preparation of mankind for Christianity” (Men 1983b, p. 383).

The above texts describe some non-biblical religions alongside secular developments as helpful in preparing for the Gospel. Alexander Men did not explicitly mention positive elements in those religions. These texts, however, can hardly be interpreted as contradicting Ratzinger's remark that only the *semina Verbi* constitute preparation for the Gospel. It is obvious that Ratzinger meant the *religious* part of *praeparatio Evangelica*, accomplished exclusively through the *semina Verbi*. Ratzinger would not have denied that many secular processes and achievements played their role in promoting the spread of the Gospel on the practical level. At the same time, it seems almost certain that Men omitted explicit talking about the *semina Verbi* for pastoral reasons: any detailed identification of the *semina Verbi* in these texts would make the texts clumsy because here non-biblical religions are merely mentioned among some secular factors, but are not considered separately. Since in his detailed descriptions of world religions Men clearly indicated that the role of preparation for the Gospel is played by the *semina Verbi*, his position should be considered in line with Ratzinger's remark.

### **Men's view on the relationship between world religions and the fullness of revelation**

*Dominus Iesus* indicates another important dimension in the theme of the *semina Verbi* in world religions: the elements of God's revelation in world religions are not complementary to His revelation in Christianity which is the fullness of God's revelation: “[I]n the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, who is ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (Jn 14:6), the full revelation of divine truth is given” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, 5). Fr Men did not directly discuss this question in his descriptions of world religions. However, this topic is in various ways related to many aspects of his narrative (see, for example, Men 1983a; Men 1991). In order to answer this question from the perspective adopted in of the history of religions, the problem of the relationship of the *semina Verbi* in world religions to the Christian revelation is restated as follows: did Fr Men in his descriptions of world religions point out any element of God's revelation as present in them, but not present in the Christian revelation? Formulating the question in this way should disclose if he saw any elements

in world religions as complementary to Christianity.

As it is seen from the above analysis, Men did not consider any world religions as containing the fullness of God's revelation: besides pointing out their flaws, he demonstrated lack of fullness even in their positive elements. Another question is if Men considered any specific positive element in world religions as superseding the Christian revelation, and, therefore, complementary to it. The analysis showed that in his descriptions of the positive elements in world religions Fr Men did indicate that any of these elements are absent in the Christian revelation. Rather, he explicitly stated at the end of his history of religions: "Similarly to the white color, which encompasses the whole of the spectrum, the Gospel embraces the faith of the prophets, the Buddhist longing for salvation, the dynamism of Zoroaster and the humaneness of Confucius. It sanctifies the best that has been found in the ethics of the classical philosophers and in the mysticism of the Indian sages" (Men 1983b, 665). Namely, for Men, it was the Christian revelation that served as the measure for evaluating the content of world religions and the positive elements in them. Fr Men did not suggest that any of the positive elements in world religions should be added to the Christian revelation in order to make it more complete. Therefore, his position is in line with that of the Catholic magisterium.

Explaining the proper attitude towards non-biblical religions, *Dominus Iesus* highlights the position of Vatican II that encouraged Catholics to treat "the values which these religions witness to and offer humanity, with an *open* and *positive* approach" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, 2, emphasis added). Catholics, who live in the surroundings of other religions, are encouraged to develop a similar approach to them: "They should be familiar with their [i.e., non-Christian] national and religious traditions and uncover with *gladness and respect* those seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them" (Ad gentes 1965, 11, emphasis added). This attitude is an important element of the authentic Catholic approach to other religions.

Gladness and respect are definitely among the main features in Fr Men's attitude towards world religions. This is how he explicitly described that attitude: "I value and respect all ancient teachings [...]. All – Indian wisdom, ancient Chinese wisdom, ancient Iranian wisdom, they are not pure errors. All human search for God has been always great and noble. And we should treat all these matters with extraordinary respect" (Men 1999, p. 268-269). In answering the question regarding his attitude towards "oriental mystics and their teaching", Men made a statement which summarizes well his approach towards world religions in general: "In each aspiration to perceive that what is the most important for us – the highest meaning of being,

there is always enclosed a spark of truth; and because of that I treat with respect, awe, or, at least, with tolerance all these phenomena, teachings, doctrines, and practices” (Men 1999, p. 269). Here Alexander Men’s position is very similar to the one expressed by John Paul II several decades later: “The Church’s relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold respect: ‘Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man’” (John Paul II 1990, 29).

Men wrote about the positive elements in world religions with such joy and gladness that a reader, especially a Christian one, is immediately led to develop a similar attitude. Men’s stance becomes even clearer in light of his general understanding of the history of religions as humankind’s search for Christ. Each successful step in this search naturally causes joyful approval on the part of those who believe to have already found “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6). On the other hand, each failure and setback should evoke spontaneous regret rather than any feeling of superiority. *Dominus Iesus* repeats the solemn warning of Vatican Council II against a kind of spiritual malady in the form of Catholic triumphalism: “All the children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word, and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be more severely judged” (Lumen gentium 1964, 14). Since the Catholic Church believes to be entrusted with the fullness of the Word of God, this blessing prompts her to appreciate positive elements in world religions: “[t]hese are the seeds of the divine Word (*semina Verbi*), which the Church recognizes with joy and respect” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, 21, footnote 85). Fr Men identified his own attitude towards other religions as one of “deepest respect and interest” (Men 1999, p. 252). He consistently demonstrated this position in his description of world religions. This position is clearly in line with that of *Dominus Iesus*.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to evaluate to what degree Men’s understanding of the doctrinal, moral, and ritual content of world religions was in line with the position articulated in the conciliar and post-conciliar magisterial documents of the Catholic Church on this issue. The research showed that Alexander Men saw both elements of goodness and truth, as well as various religious errors in the content of non-biblical religions. For Men, positive elements in world religions come from God and serve as preparation for

the reception of the Gospel. According to him, Jesus Christ represents the fullness of revelation which does not have to be supplemented with any elements originating in other religions. Finally, Men consistently displayed a respectful attitude towards various world religions. Accordingly, the analysis showed that Alexander Men's stance was in line with the guidelines of the Catholic magisterial documents on these questions.

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### ALEXANDER MEN'S VIEWS ON DOCTRINAL, MORAL AND RITUAL CONTENT OF WORLD RELIGIONS IN LIGHT OF THE TEACHING OF THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH

**Keywords:** Alexander Men, world religions, the Magisterium of the Church, the *semina Verbi*, inter-religious dialogue.

This article presents the analysis of Alexander Men's views on the doctrinal, moral and ritual content of world religions. His position is assessed in light of the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church on these issues. Working as a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church, Men devoted significant attention to world religions. His most important work in this area is a six-volume history of religions, entitled *In Search of the Way, the Truth and the Life*. While describing world religions, Men indicates the presence of the *semina Verbi*, mixed with various religious errors. According to Men, positive religious elements in world religions come from God and serve as a preparation for receiving the Gospel. For him, the *semina Verbi* in world religions are not complementary to God's revelation in Christ as the fullness of the revealed truth. Men views the history of religions as humankind's search for Christ. Therefore, this study demonstrated that Men developed an explicitly Christian approach to the content of world religions, which is in line with the guidelines of the Magisterium of the Church on these issues.

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### POGLĄDY ALEKSANDRA MIENIA DOTYCZĄCE DOKTRYNALNEJ, MORALNEJ I RYTUALNEJ TREŚCI RELIGII ŚWIATOWYCH W ŚWIETLE NAUCZANIA MAGISTERIUM KOŚCIOŁA

**Słowa kluczowe:** Aleksander Mień, religie światowe, Magisterium Kościoła, *semina Verbi*, dialog międzyreligijny.

W artykule przeprowadzono analizę poglądów Aleksandra Mienia na temat doktrynalnej, moralnej i rytualnej treści religii światowych. Jego stanowisko zostało ocenione w świetle nauczania Magisterium Kościoła, odnoszącego się do tych kwestii. Pracując jako kapłan Rosyjskiej Cerkwi Prawosławnej, Mień poświęcał znaczącą uwagę religiom światowym. Jego najważniejszą pracą w tym obszarze jest sześciotomowa historia religii pt. *W poszukiwaniu Drogi, Prawdy i Życia*. Opisując światowe religie, Mień wskazuje na obecność w nich *semina Verbi*, które wymieszane są z różnymi błędami religijnymi. W opinii Mienia, pozytywne elementy religijne w religiach światowych pochodzą od Boga, służąc jako

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przygotowanie do przyjęcia Ewangelii. Dla niego *semina Verbi* tkwiące w światowych religiach nie stanowią uzupełnienia do objawienia Bożego w Chrystusie, stanowiącego pełnię objawionej prawdy. Mień postrzega historię religii jako poszukiwanie Chrystusa przez ludzkość. Niniejsze studium dowiodło, że Mień rozwinął wyraźnie chrześcijańskie podejście do treści światowych religii, które idzie w parze z wytycznymi Magisterium Kościoła, odnoszącymi się do tych kwestii.