

ARTŪRAS LUKAŠEVIČIUS

EVALUATION  
OF ALEXANDER MEN'S VIEWS ON BRAHMANISM  
IN THE LIGHT OF THE DECLARATION *DOMINUS IESUS*

INTRODUCTION

More than fifty years ago, Second Vatican Council officially declared its positive view of other religions as containing elements of truth that come from the one God. This step gave a fresh impetus to the inter-religious dialogue and to its theological reflection. At the same time, it was often interpreted in a way that overemphasized the significance of the values present in other religions. This led to the diminished understanding of the role of Christ and to the weakening of the Church's missionary activity. In the encyclical *Redemptoris missio*<sup>1</sup>, John Paul II defined this position as religious relativism and warned of its danger to the Catholic faith. One of the documents of the Catholic magisterium, devoted to these problems was declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Dominus Iesus*. The purpose of the declaration was to provide guidelines for Catholic theologians for an authentic implementation of the principles of the inter-religious and ecumenical dialogues.

Father Alexander Vladimirovich Men [Александр Владимирович Мень] (1935-1990) was one of the most productive writers and pastors in the Russian Orthodox Church in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the fact that almost all of his life he worked under the militant atheism of the Soviet Union, he managed to develop an impressive pastoral and scholarly activity. The range of his work includes written material, public lectures, sermons

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<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 1990, 36.

and talks in small groups of Christians. Significant part of his legacy is related to religions of the world. The main work where Alexander Men presents his views on this topic is his six-volume history of religions entitled *In Search of the Way, the Truth and the Life*. He worked on it, with breaks, for about 20 years. He also discussed this topic in many of his lectures, among which most important is a series entitled *Spiritual Culture of the World*.<sup>2</sup> In a fragmentary way Men refers to the theme of the world religions in his other works as well. In general, Men's legacy contains sufficient material to see a comprehensive picture of his vision of the world religions, which permits its systematic analysis.

In this article I plan to give a detailed analysis of one religion—Brahmanism, as it is described by Alexander Men. Brahmanism has been chosen among other religions because Men gives an extensive and detailed descriptions of it, covering the main themes discussed in *Dominus Iesus*. The purpose of this article is to assess to what extent Alexander Men's views on Brahmanism are in line with the guidelines presented in the declaration *Dominus Iesus*.

#### BRAHMANISM IN MEN'S WORKS

In the rich and diverse religious life of India in the first half of the first millennium B.C. Alexander Men gives his main attention to Brahmanism, and especially to the spiritual life related to the Upanishads as a significant part of the sacred writings of this religion. In one of his lectures Men directly states that Brahmanism is the “teaching of the Upanishads.”<sup>3</sup> Besides this reference, Fr Men does not give formal definition of Brahmanism. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines Brahmanism as “religion of ancient India that evolved out of Vedism. It takes its name both from the predominant position of its priestly class, the Brahmans, and from the increasing speculation about, and importance given to, Brahman, the supreme power. Brahmanism is distinguished from the classical Hinduism that succeeded it by the enhanced significance given in classical Hinduism to individual deities ... and to devotional worship

<sup>2</sup> Александр Мень [Alexander MEN], *Мировая духовная культура* [Mirovaya duchovnaya kultura] [Spiritual Culture of the World] (Москва [Moskva]: Храм Святых бессребреников Космы и Дамияна в Шубине [Храм Svyatix bessrebrebnikov Kosmi i Damiyana v Shubine], 2002). Hereafter quoted as *Culture*.

<sup>3</sup> *Culture*, 104.

(bhakti).”<sup>4</sup> This general definition corresponds well with the descriptions of Fr Men, and it will be used in the following analysis.

It is not always clear if one or another religious element in Men's texts is strictly attributed to Brahmanism, or to some other related religious tradition of India. This situation could probably be explained by the primarily pastoral purpose of Men's work, which was to show the general developments in religious sphere, instead of giving detailed analysis of different religions. Another reason which explains this lack of strict definitions is the specifically complicated interrelationship between different Indian religious traditions, which makes it very difficult to find clear boundaries between them. In the following analysis, unless stated otherwise, all religious processes in India in the first half of the first millennium B.C., as they are described by Men, are referred to as part of Brahmanism.

The main source for Men's views on the teachings and practices of Brahmanism is the third volume in his history of religions entitled *At the Gates of Silence*<sup>5</sup>. Besides, Brahmanism is given considerable attention in two of his lectures in the series *Spiritual Culture of the World*, entitled “Духовные искания Азии” [“The Spiritual Searches of Asia”] and “Брахманизм. Буддизм. Кришнаизм” [“Brahmanism. Buddhism. Krishnaism”]. In the sixth volume Men speaks of Brahmanism in the context of origin of classical Hinduism<sup>6</sup>. Men mentions Brahmanism in his other works, too.

In the following analysis the teachings and practices of Brahmanism are examined as divided into three areas, namely: the doctrinal teachings, the moral code, and the ritual celebrations. Among several possible divisions, this one has been chosen because Fr Men himself uses it. In the beginning of his history of religions, he explicitly notes that “every religion has three main

<sup>4</sup> “Brahmanism”, in *Encyclopædia Britannica 2003: Ultimate Reference Suite CD-ROM* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Александр МЕНЬ [Alexander MEN], *В поисках Пути, Истины и Жизни, III: У врат молчания: Духовная жизнь Китая и Индии в середине первого тысячелетия до нашей эры* [V poiskakh Puti, Istini i Zhizni, vol. 3: U vrat molchaniya: Duchovnaya zhizn Kitaya i Indii v seredine pervogo tisyacheletiya do nashey eri] [In Search of the Way, the Truth and the Life, vol. III: At the Gates of Silence: Spiritual Life of China and India in the Middle of the First Millennium B.C.] (Москва [Moskva]: Фонд имени Александра Меня [Fond imeni Alexandra Menya], 2002). Hereafter quoted as *Gates*.

<sup>6</sup> Александр МЕНЬ [Alexander MEN], *В поисках Пути, Истины и Жизни, VI: На пороге Нового Завета: От эпохи Александра Македонского до проповеди Иоанна Крестителя* [V poiskakh Puti, Istini i Zhizni, vol. 6: Na poroge Novogo Zaveta: Ot epokhi Aleksandra Makedonskogo do propovedi Ioanna Krestitelya] [In Search of the Way, the Truth and the Life, vol. VI: On the Threshold of the New Testament: from Alexander of Macedonia to the Preaching of John the Baptist] (Брюссель [Brüssel]: Жизнь с Богом [Zhizn s Bogom], 1983), 16–36.

elements: its world view, the living standards, and its mystical feeling that finds its external expression in cult. The first element is directed toward man's intellect, the second—toward the aspirations of the will, and the third—toward man's emotional sphere and his intuition.”<sup>7</sup> Vatican Council II indicates the possibility of the presence of elements of truth in various areas of other religions: “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.”<sup>8</sup> The goal of the following analysis is to examine if Fr Men's descriptions of Brahmanism are in line with the fundamental affirmation of the Catholic Church that there are “elements of good and truth”<sup>9</sup> present in different world religions, where they are interwoven with various “evil associations.”<sup>10</sup>

#### THE DOCTRINAL TEACHINGS OF BRAHMANISM

Men's descriptions of the doctrinal teachings of Brahmanism will be reviewed here as follows: first, the concept of the Deity, second, the origin and the meaning of the Universe, and finally, the origin and the goal of human life. Men notes that Brahmanism was one of the first religions in human history to discover the Deity, called *Brahman*, as the spiritual source of all being. Men sets high value to this mystical insight, and considers it the most valuable element in Brahmanism. To describe the experience of the Absolute, the mysticism of the Upanishads, Men notes, developed a special kind of *apophatic* theology<sup>11</sup>. It uses exclusively negative terms, for the Upanishads insisted that the Brahman could not be likened to any pheno-

<sup>7</sup> Александр МЕНЬ [Alexander MEN], *В поисках Пути, Истины и Жизни*, II: *Магизм и единобожие: Религиозный путь человечества до эпохи великих учителей* [V poiskakh Puti, Istini i Zhizni, vol. 2: Magizm i edinobozhie: Religiozniy put chelovechestva do epoxi velikix uchiteley] [In Search of the Way, the Truth and the Life, vol II: Magism and Monotheism: Religious Path of Mankind up to the Epoch of the Great Teachers] (Москва [Moskva]: Фонд имени Александра Меня [Fond imeni Alexandra Menya], 2001), 47.

<sup>8</sup> CONGREGATION for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus* on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2000), 2. Hereafter quoted as *DI*. Citing DECLARATION on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions *Nostra aetate* (Washington: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1965), 2.

<sup>9</sup> *DI* 8, footnote 23, referring to DOGMATIC Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 1964, 16.

<sup>10</sup> DECREE on the mission activity of the Church *Ad gentes*, 1965, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Александр МЕНЬ [Alexander MEN], *Трудный путь к диалогу* [Trudni put k dialogu] [A Hard Road towards Dialogue] (Москва [Moskva]: Фонд имени Александра Меня [Fond imeni Alexandra Menya], 2001), 398.

mena of the outer world. This is how Men summarizes this teachings: "After centuries of paganism, they [i.e., the Upanishads] proclaimed oneness of the Divine Source, and admitted that the external rituals were only of secondary importance. They showed the people the priceless gift ...—the secret depth of the Spirit. In the age when man was endowing gods with mean passions as well as with bodies, the Upanishads taught that the Absolute surpasses everything created, seen, or conceivable."<sup>12</sup> Beside these elements of truth, however, Men indicates a significant insufficiency in Brahmanism's concept of the Absolute. It consists, according to Men, in the lack of insight into the personal nature of the Deity: "It is impossible to love Him who can only be described as "neither this nor that." It is impossible to pray to Him who does not have any Name or Face."<sup>13</sup>

Men maintains that serious problems start with Brahmanism when the authors of Upanishads began to interpret their mystical insights. According to Men, the beginning of this interpretation marks "the boundary, which separates live religious experience from the play of mind and arbitrary fantasies. When trying to construct a theory of the origin of the Universe, they appear to be ruled by contradictions and they resort to legends and old myths."<sup>14</sup> Men characterizes Brahmanism's view of the origin of the world as dominated by "one general idea: they see nothing else in creation but birth or, emanation, effusion of the world from the depths of the Absolute. ... This wipes away all boundaries between the Absolute and his creature; they turn out to be *identical* by nature."<sup>15</sup> Men maintains that this idea results from the misinterpreted discovery of spiritual depth in a human soul: "Man started exploring the mystery from his own self, and, finding in his own spirit the deep dimension which links him to the ... [Absolute], he regarded them to be identical."<sup>16</sup> According to Men, it was these mistakes that did not allow Brahmanism "to become the Old Testament of humankind."<sup>17</sup>

This fundamental mistake, according to Father Alexander, is related to other problematic areas in this religion. He especially stresses the difficulties of explaining the motives for bringing the world into existence, as well as the value of the world. According to Men, in Brahmanism the world has

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<sup>12</sup> Gates, 83. See also Alexander MEN, *Сын Человеческий* [Sin Chelovecheskiy] [Son of Man] (Брюссель [Brussels]: Жизнь с Богом [Zhizn s Bogom], 1983), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Gates, 95.

<sup>14</sup> Gates, 86.

<sup>15</sup> Gates, 87, emphasis in the original.

<sup>16</sup> Gates, 90.

<sup>17</sup> Gates, 84.

come into existence due to the Deity's desire "to experience the lower modes of being."<sup>18</sup> This idea, Men points out, has sometimes led to an extreme view that "all being ultimately is like a consequence of the Deity's falling into sin."<sup>19</sup> Another problem, he says, could be detected in some concepts of the relationship between the world and Brahman: Brahman has brought the world into being, but he himself has become "entangled in the webs of ... the law of karma."<sup>20</sup> This idea, Men says, has proved "a true deadlock reached by a religious thought lacking the concept of divine Love and Reason!"<sup>21</sup> In Brahmanism, as Men points out, the world is Brahman's dream, so it does not really exist, and thus, it cannot have any real value or meaning: "What is the world in this case? It is something illusionary and unstable, or even unnecessary and dispensable, for by falling from the eternal being into an ordinary being, the world becomes split and imperfect.... Thus, the world has no value. Life has no value. Matter has no value. ... The world is [but] a bad dream, almost a nightmare, for the eternal consciousness."<sup>22</sup>

According to Men, Brahmanism's anthropology contains both elements of truth and significant religious errors. Men indicates an important element of truth in Brahmanism's idea that the true happiness of man consists in his closeness to the Absolute. Thus, the goal of human life is in seeking Brahman. Men praises the fact that the Indian mystics have turned away from the attempts of finding the divinity in nature. They have concentrated their efforts on the inner life of a person. Men attaches great value to their discovery of this spiritual world: "Silence, concentration of spirit, special spiritual exercises studied and transmitted ... from generation to generation, brought man to the discovery of a great interior dimension of being. One can call this the greatest revolution in a hundred thousand years of man's existence."<sup>23</sup> However, as Men notes, Brahmanism has run to an opposite extreme – having discovered this inner world, the authors of Upanishads came to total disregard of the physical world as having no value. According to Men, these difficulties in Brahmanism's anthropology are in close relationship with the erroneous concept of the origin of the world.

Alexander Men indicates that Brahmanism viewed human beings—as well as all the other beings—as part of Brahman's dream. Human beings

<sup>18</sup> *Gates*, 88.

<sup>19</sup> *Gates*, 89.

<sup>20</sup> *Culture*, 106.

<sup>21</sup> *Gates*, 89.

<sup>22</sup> *Culture*, 50–51.

<sup>23</sup> *Culture*, 100.

will return to the Absolute after Brahman has finished his dream and returned to his original state of rest. However, differently from the other beings, man can recognize Brahman inside himself and thus attain freedom from the illusionary world before Brahman's dream ends. Until then a person is held in numerous cycles of reincarnation by the law of karma. Thus the goal of human life, according to Brahmanism, is the breaking of the circle of reincarnations. This can be achieved through the renunciation of the physical world and man's bodily needs: "This is where the uncontrollably eccentric asceticism of the Brahmanic tradition comes from. It can sometimes obtain rather grotesque forms."<sup>24</sup> The human body, Men notices, has been seen as the cause for dependence on the material world and the vehicle that kept a person in the cycles of reincarnations. To break these cycles, all the links with matter had to be broken, and all bodily needs had to be fully mortified. This caused hatred for the body and its needs, and led, Men points out, to "sophisticated forms of self-torture."<sup>25</sup> This negative attitude towards the body has been linked with a broader problem, that of hatred for all matter. According to Men, this idea has obscured the greatest achievements of Brahmanism: "The idea of incomprehensible unity, expressed in wondrous philosophical forms, which had later been adopted by Christianity, as well as by Islam and the other major world religions—that God cannot be defined in any way—... this idea has been paralyzed by their rejection of the world. Eventually, work and life itself had to lose any value, as all this was considered a mistake, a disaster. I would even say, these things have been treated like ... [manifestations of] the fall of God trapped by matter."<sup>26</sup>

Thus Men treats the doctrine of reincarnation as significant religious error in Brahmanism's anthropology. He maintains that Brahmanism accepted the idea of reincarnation from the pre-Aryan beliefs of the local inhabitants of India<sup>27</sup>, and it caused significant problems in Brahmanism. Men indicates that all these drawbacks of Brahmanism have made a particular impact on religious life of the common people. The sublime philosophical insight into the oneness and inexpressibility of Brahman was at large incomprehensible to them. They were unable to understand the philosophical details of the doctrine of reincarnation, either, so they took it very literally: a personality

<sup>24</sup> *Culture*, 51.

<sup>25</sup> *Culture*, 106.

<sup>26</sup> *Culture*, 107.

<sup>27</sup> Александр МЕНЬ [Alexander MEN], *Библиологический словарь* [Bibliologicheskii slovar] [Dictionary of the Bible], vol. 2 (Москва [Moskva]: Фонд имени Александра Меня [Fond imeni Alexandra Menya], 2002), 197.

can travel from body to body and receive his or her recompense because of the law of karma. The masses could not participate in the ascetic practices of renouncing everything earthly: “For those people who were looking for the true faith, but did not desire to become monks, there was little to derive from the ideas of the Upanishads. If coming to the Deity was possible only through ... a complete dissolution of the personality, a living, thinking, feeling and loving person had no chance of approaching Him.”<sup>28</sup> At the same time, Men stresses, religious teachers of Brahmanism distanced themselves far away from the common population and would not help them in their spiritual needs. This attitude was also related to their view of all creatures as worthless and illusory.

#### THE MORAL CODE OF BRAHMANISM

Alexander Men finds both elements of truth and religious errors in Brahmanism’s moral code. While reviewing the moral teachings in India of the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Men says that “the ancient Indian culture had been much more deeply penetrated by the ethical element than other cultures of that time.”<sup>29</sup> According to Men, in some areas its moral standards had been unsurpassed anywhere in the world. For example, Men gives a very high evaluation to some prescriptions of the right behavior during a war, and notes that “it is India that possesses the monopoly of such precepts in the ancient world.”<sup>30</sup> The moral requirements were very high also for the Indian rulers.

Side by side with these high achievements in Brahmanism’s moral teachings, Men also indicates some significant problems and drawbacks. A most problematic issue is the relationship between the members of different Indian castes, or *varnas*. Men calls the beliefs related to the caste system “a cruel custom”, “monstrous prejudices”, “tenacious and loathsome fallacy.”<sup>31</sup> The miserable life of those not belonging to any caste, in Men’s words, “is a symbol of India’s [greatest] shame.”<sup>32</sup> He stresses that those belonging to the lowest caste of Shudras have been “equated to animals.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Gates, 95.

<sup>29</sup> Gates, 116.

<sup>30</sup> Gates, 116

<sup>31</sup> Gates, 118.

<sup>32</sup> Gates, 118.

<sup>33</sup> Gates, 118.



Men notes that these people had become completely marginalized and were not even granted the right of participation in sacrificial ceremonies. At the same time, the caste of the Brahmins was standing at the opposite end of the spectrum. As Men states, it was believed that “a person was consecrated from birth by the very belonging to this varna.”<sup>34</sup> In general, Men condemns Brahmanism’s position regarding the relations between different Indian castes as great moral evil that deeply injures human dignity.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Men detects another moral problem in the extreme ascetic practices of some groups in Brahmanism. He points out in these hard and even heroic practices an element of human pride as a hidden enemy, which is rather fed than defeated by these efforts: “No matter how difficult this path is, no matter how much struggle it takes, it cannot confront man’s main secret enemy which is his *pride*. On the contrary, this pride will be much more satisfied, for nothing can feed it better than man’s imagining that he has become the highest being and stands above all!”<sup>35</sup> Thus, side by side with the positive aspects of Brahmanism’s morality, Men identifies its weaknesses and problematic points.

#### THE RITUAL CELEBRATIONS OF BRAHMANISM

In his analysis of Brahmanism’s rituals, Men concentrates on their negative aspects. According to him, the ritual celebrations of this religion mainly expressed superstitious attitudes. Men notes that they were very complicated, and their efficacy was seen in the detailed precision of their performance. Therefore, they could be carried out by very special priests only. The rituals, Men says, “often [became] dull and expensive”,<sup>36</sup> and they were frequently conceived as very mechanical means for obtaining either temporal goods or a desired state after death. The system of the rituals and ceremonies had greatly expanded, for “any thing or action could easily be turned into an object of sorcery.”<sup>37</sup> While discussing the way the priests performed sacrifices, Men criticizes their repetition of prayers, bereft of conscious understanding: “All these sorcerers uttered multiplicity of prayers and incantations hardly understandable to anyone, said in the ancient language. These incom-

<sup>34</sup> Gates, 118.

<sup>35</sup> Gates, 94, emphasis in the original.

<sup>36</sup> Gates, 120.

<sup>37</sup> Gates, 119.

prehensible words were believed to have infinite power. The mantras were regarded as able to cause disasters or to cure diseases.”<sup>38</sup>

This mentality of magical ritual, according to Men, was easily detected in some of the sacred writings used in Brahmanism: “In some of them true jewels of poetry have been found and the spirit of lively devotion has been preserved, but the main content of both Yajurveda and Atharvaveda consisted in ... magic superstition and unconditional obedience to the mechanical ritual.”<sup>39</sup> Men stresses that even such writings as Rigveda, where he had pointed out numerous elements of truth, became part of this magical machinery: “Rigveda was treated with superstitious fear, like the words of gods themselves; each sound in it was considered to be sacred.”<sup>40</sup> In general, Men gives a negative evaluation of the Brahmanism’s rituals: “Sacrifices have become the weak point in this Indian religion.”<sup>41</sup>

In the area of ritual ceremonies Men points out almost exclusively elements, which, in the words of *Dominus Iesus*, “depend on superstitions or other errors (cf. *I Cor* 10:20-21), [and, therefore] constitute an obstacle to salvation.”<sup>42</sup> In the same chapter *Dominus Iesus* states that “some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel.”<sup>43</sup> Men does not directly mention such rituals in Brahmanism. Could this be interpreted as a position different from that of *Dominus Iesus*? Probably not. First, *Dominus Iesus* does not assert that ritual celebrations of each religion will necessarily contain these positive elements. Rather, *Dominus Iesus* asserts some possibility for that. Fr Men, on the other hand, does not explicitly state, that ritual ceremonies of Brahmanism do not have any positive elements. Men’s intention was not to give an exhaustive description of Brahmanism’s ritual ceremonies. His goal was to present the general sketch, which should serve as a segment of a broader picture of humankind’s spiritual journey. For this purpose, Fr Alexander chose the most typical features which, in his opinion, were negative.

According to Alexander Men, Indian religions in their further developments made attempts to overcome some problematic aspects. He sees one of such attempts, for example, in the religious tradition related to Bhagavadgita. As the main positive element in Bhagavadgita Fr Men points out

<sup>38</sup> *Gates*, 65.

<sup>39</sup> *Gates*, 66.

<sup>40</sup> *Gates*, 66.

<sup>41</sup> *Gates*, 65.

<sup>42</sup> *DI* 21.

<sup>43</sup> *DI* 21.

a concept of the personal nature of the Absolute in the person of Krisna. He could be held, in Men's words, "one of the first among the ancient prototypes of Christ."<sup>44</sup> However, in its teaching on the personal nature of the Absolute Bhagavadgita was not consistent. In general, Men points out many positive elements in Bhagavadgita, but emphasizes the presence of significant problems as well: "Great is the teaching of Gita about saving faith, about loving God. Noble is its appeal towards action and unselfishness. When it touches upon these subjects, its lines, which are sometimes called 'Indian gospel', breath with moving cordiality. However, all this must not overshadow the fact that these are just separate dots of light in the darkness of the heathen night. And nowhere this dark appears with such power as it is in Gita *itself*!"<sup>45</sup> As Fr Men summarizes, Bhagavadgita's attempt to overcome the problems of Brahmanism was not successful.

At the end of his volume *At the Gates of Silence*, Men generalizes his views on the Indian religions of the first millennium B.C., including Brahmanism. The following passage may serve as a conclusion for the present review of the teachings and practices of this religion: "The experience of India is one of the most serious and significant human attempts to approach ... [the Absolute]. The contemplators of this mysterious country managed to come to the very threshold of the sacred silence. Unfortunately, stricken by the inscrutable immensity of the Divine, they appeared unable to distinguish the Face in His light or to hear the Word in His silence... That is why the teachings about Brahman ... failed to become the highest among the truths revealed to the pre-Christian world ... The Indian teachers were right in their recognition of the world's nothingness ... It is only when man is aware of the heavenly gaze turned towards the earth that the earth breaks into bloom of imperishable beauty. This ... gaze, however, appeared to be hidden from the Oriental ... [mystics]. They have discovered the peace of contemplation, but lost both themselves and the world."<sup>46</sup> In summary, Fr Men views Brahmanism as containing important positive elements that are mixed with various erroneous notions. Thus, the position of Alexander Men is in line to that of *Dominus Iesus*.

<sup>44</sup> *Gates*, 100–101.

<sup>45</sup> *Gates*, 111, emphasis in the original. See also Александр МЕНЬ [Alexander MEN], *В поисках Пути, Истины и Жизни*, V: *Вестники Царства Божия: Библейские пророки от Амоса до Реставрации (VIII-IV вв. до н.э.)*. [V *poiskakh Puti, Istini i Zhizni*, vol. 5: *Vestniki Tzartva Bozhiya: Bibleyskie proroki ot Amosa do Restavratzii (7<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.)*] [In Search of the Way, the Truth and the Life. V. The Messengers of the Kingdom of God: Biblical Prophets from Amos to the Restoration (7th-4th cent. B.C.)] (Брюссель [Briussel]: *Жизнь с Богом* [Zhizn s Bogom], 1991), 104.

<sup>46</sup> *Gates*, 235–236.

## MEN'S VIEW OF SEARCH FOR GOD IN BRAHMANISM

Fr Men sees humankind's search for God as essentially belonging to human nature: "*Man always strives after God. Normal state of man—to be in one or another degree related to the Highest*"<sup>47</sup>. For him this is a most valuable element in the world religions<sup>48</sup>. This search, according to Men, was especially vivid in Indian religions. He describes Brahmanism as originating from an ascetic movement at the beginning of the first millennium B.C. These Indian ascetics, called *munis*, renounced earthly values and spent their lives in eremitic communities in the jungle. They concentrated on spiritual exercises and philosophical reflections as a way leading to authentic spiritual life. Men shows great respect for the inner attitude of *munis*, which, according to him, was essential in their spiritual searches. This beginning phase of Brahmanism provides a vivid illustration of Men's attitude towards authentic striving for God in general. He stresses it as one of the most positive and distinctive features of this religion: "Despite the likeness of India to other countries, there emerge in it features of originality, which will make it the land of seekers for God. In woods that surround cities and villages, crowds of strange inhabitants can be seen: they are nearly naked, their bodies are covered only by long mops of tangled hair. These meagre-faced new inhabitants of the jungle could be taken for forest ghosts, coming from queer tropical thickets.... These people are not satisfied with their former life any more: a striving for something else which is higher, but not yet fully comprehended, has been awakened in them. They are seekers of truth, those who have not found the answer to their questions in the customs and religion of the surrounding society."<sup>49</sup>

One of the reasons for this movement of *munis* was, according to Fr Men, growth of superstition in the predominant religion in their surroundings. Men maintains that *munis* peacefully protested against this degradation.

<sup>47</sup> Александр МЕНЬ [Alexander MEN], *Быть Христианином. Интервью и последняя лекция* [Bit Christianinom. Intervyu i poslednyaya lektziya] [To Be Christian. Interview and the Last Lecture] (Москва [Moskva]: Протестант [Protestant], 1994), 3, italics in the original. See Alexander MEN, *В поисках Пути, Истины и Жизни. I: Истоки религии* [V poiskakh Puti, Istini i Zhizni, vol. I: Istoki religii] [In Search of the Way, the Truth and the Life, I: The Sources of Religion] (Брюссель [Brussels]: Жизнь с Богом [Zhizn s Bogom], 1991), 14.

<sup>48</sup> Александр МЕНЬ [Alexander MEN], *Отец Александр Мень отвечает на вопросы слушателей* [Otez Alexandr Men otvechaet na voprosi slushateley] [Fr Alexander Men Answers the Questions of the Audience] (Москва [Moskva]: Фонд имени Александра Менья [Fond imeni Alexandra Menya], 1999), p. 269.

<sup>49</sup> *Gates*, 63–64.

According to Men, *munis* managed to achieve important spiritual insights. Their views eventually were expressed in the sacred writings of the Upanishads, which represent, Men says, “spiritual history’s one of the great turning points.”<sup>50</sup> Fr Alexander likens Upanishads in their attempt to find the ultimate source of all being to humankind in its seeking for the final meaning of the world and the man: “The pages of Upanishads shimmer with countless questions that generate further asking. It sometimes sounds like the voice of humanity itself – inquiring and searching. The whole world is a puzzle.”<sup>51</sup> Fr Men’s description of these attempts to find the ultimate meaning could serve as a good illustration of the teaching of the Catholic Church about man’s innate desire for God: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God.... Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.”<sup>52</sup> Because of this, the human person could be described as “a religious being”<sup>53</sup>. This desire for God has expressed itself in Brahmanism by authentic and powerful spiritual searches.

According to Fr Men, in the beginning of the first millennium B.C. *munis* and their disciples made enormous efforts and sacrifices in their spiritual strivings. In a similar way Men described religious quests in India several centuries earlier: “Difficult is the way of human spirit into the icy realms of Silence. Great valor, indestructible will, desire for truth directed him there.”<sup>54</sup> The renunciation of earthly possessions, long years of discipleship, special meditations and spiritual exercises described and praised by Men in Indian religious searches, can be compared with the high requirements for them as characterized in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “this search for God demands of man every effort of intellect, a sound will, “an upright heart”, as well as the witness of others who teach him to seek God.”<sup>55</sup> Most of these elements are in various forms present in Alexander Men’s portrayal of the teachings and practices of Brahmanism.

<sup>50</sup> Gates, 74.

<sup>51</sup> Gates, 76.

<sup>52</sup> CATECHISM of the Catholic Church (New Hope: Urbi et Orbi Communications, 1994), 27. See Declaration on religious freedom *Dignitatis humanae*, 1965, 1.

<sup>53</sup> KATALIKŲ Bažnyčios katekizmas. Santrauka [Catechism of the Catholic Church. Compendium] (Kaunas: Katalikų interneto tarnyba, 2007), 2.

<sup>54</sup> Александр МЕНЬ [Alexander MEN], *В поисках Пути, Истины и Жизни, II: Магизм и единбожие: Религиозный путь человечества до эпохи великих учителей* [In Search of the Way, the Truth and the Life. II. Magism and Monotheism: Religious Path of Mankind up to the Epoch of the Great Teachers], 169.

<sup>55</sup> CATECHISM of the Catholic Church, 30. See PASTORAL Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, 19.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to assess to what extent Alexander Men's views on Brahmanism are in line with the guidelines presented in the declaration *Dominus Iesus* and other related documents. The magisterium of the Catholic Church indicates possibility of the presence of elements of truth in all areas of other religions – in their doctrinal teaching, moral teaching, and ritual celebrations.

The doctrinal aspects of Brahmanism were analysed as divided into three parts: the teaching on the nature of Deity; on the origin and meaning of the Universe; on the origin, meaning and goal of human life. In the first area—the nature of Deity, Fr Men pointed out two positive elements. The first one is the mystical insight into the presence of the final reality, which is the source of all being. The second positive element is the development of a “negative theology”, or a description of Brahman as Deity in negative terms only. The second area—the origin and the meaning of the Universe, according to Fr Men, contains significant mistakes, namely: the notion of the world as an emanation of Brahman which makes them essentially identical; the notion that Brahman emitted the world in order to achieve new experiences; the essential worthlessness of the world as an illusion. The third area—the meaning, value and goal of human life, according to Fr Alexander, contains a mixture of positive and negative elements. For Men, a very important positive element is the insight that the goal and the true happiness of a human being lies in his closeness to the Absolute; the belief in reincarnation was a wrong notion in Brahmanism's concept of man; the erroneous concept of the world as an illusion led to another mistake—disregard as valueless of the physical aspect of man.

The moral teaching of Brahmanism, according to Fr Alexander, contains both positive and negative elements. The general moral standards of this religion were high, and in some cases, they had no equals among other nations at that time. In addition, the practical moral level of the population was comparatively high, too. The caste system, however, was a serious moral problem, which was based on the wrong underlying beliefs. Excessive ascetic practices are noted by Men as another problem in this area. The Brahmanism's ritual ceremonies, according to Fr Alexander, became expressions of superstitions and magical mentality. He does not mention any significant positive elements in the area of ritual. Documents of the Catholic magisterium state that non-Christian religions represent humankind's search for God and the fullness of truth. Fr Men sees this search as a distinctive feature of Brahmanism. In con-

clusion, the analysis in this article has shown that Alexander Men's views on Brahmanism are in line with the guidelines presented in the declaration *Dominus Iesus* and other related documents of the Catholic Church.

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#### EVALUATION OF ALEXANDER MEN'S VIEWS ON BRAHMANISM IN THE LIGHT OF THE DECLARATION *DOMINUS IESUS*

##### Summary

The Catholic Church welcomes the intensification of the inter-religious dialogue after Vatican II. At the same time, in the decades following the Council, some problems and negative tendencies in this area surfaced that were addressed by Catholic magisterium. One of the documents devoted to these problems was declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Dominus Iesus*. Significant part of legacy of Russian Orthodox priest Alexander Men (1935-1990) is related to religions of the world. The purpose of this article is to assess to what extent Alexander Men's views on Brahmanism are in line with the guidelines presented in the declaration *Dominus Iesus*. The teachings and practices of Brahmanism are examined as divided into three areas, namely, the doctrinal teachings, the moral code, and the ritual celebrations. The analysis shows that Men sees both elements of truths and religious errors in Brahmanism's doctrinal teachings and moral code. In the area of ritual Men does not indicate positive elements in Brahmanism. He sees search for God as essential element of this religion. The analysis in this article shows that Alexander Men's views on Brahmanism are in line with the guidelines presented in the declaration *Dominus Iesus* and related documents of the Catholic Church.

**Key words:** Alexander Men, declaration *Dominus Iesus*, Brahmanism, inter-religious dialogue.



EWALUACJA ALEKSANDRA MIENIA WIDZENIA BRAMANIZMU  
W ŚWIETLE DEKLARACJI *DOMINUS IESUS*

## Streszczenie

Kościół katolicki z zadowoleniem przyjmuje intensyfikację dialogu międzyreligijnego po Soborze Watykańskim II. W dziesięcioleciach następujących po Soborze pojawiły się problemy i negatywne tendencje w tej dziedzinie, które zostały poruszone Magisterium Kościoła. Jednym z dokumentów poświęconych tym problemom była deklaracja Kongregacji Nauki Wiary *Dominus Iesus*. Znaczna część spuścizny rosyjskiego księdza prawosławnego Aleksandra Mienia (1935-1990) związana jest z religiami świata. Celem tego artykułu jest ocena, w jakim stopniu poglądy Aleksandra Mienia na braminizm są zgodne z wytycznymi zawartymi w deklaracji *Dominus Iesus*. Nauki i praktyki braminizmu są rozpatrywane jako podzielone na trzy obszary, a mianowicie nauki doktrynalne, kodeks moralny i celebracje rytualne. Analiza pokazuje, że człowiek widzi zarówno elementy prawdy, jak i błędy religijne w doktrynie Brahmana i jego kodeksie moralnym. W obszarze rytuału Mień nie wskazuje na pozytywne elementy braminizmu. Widzi poszukiwanie Boga jako niezbędnego elementu tej religii. Analiza tego artykułu pokazuje, że poglądy Aleksandra Mienia na braminizm są zgodne z wytycznymi przedstawionymi w deklaracji *Dominus Iesus* i powiązanych z nią dokumentach Kościoła katolickiego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Aleksander Mień; deklaracja *Dominus Iesus*; braminizm; dialog międzyreligijny.