

Radical Encounter with the ‘Other’

“‘Being’ means the infinite depth of personal existence and of the communion of persons” ¹

“The ‘other’ gives me the paradisaical newness of the world illuminated by Sophia”²

“I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone, which no one knows except he who receives it” ³

Can we formulate an Orthodox theology of radical encounter? For the French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément (1921-2009), the creation of the world ex-nihilo, the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ, and the revelation of God in his created works, are absolute givens, about which he writes at length with poetic clarity. But Clément left us with two concepts that he only sketched out. Clément meditates on the ‘extreme summons of that which is’ (*l’appel extrême de ce qui est*) and on the *methorion*, the boundary between the divine and the created. These two concepts are closely related. The extreme summons is about the ‘quiddity’, the ‘what-ness’ of the created world. There is a point of transparency at the heart of being and matter. The *methorion* is about the transparent frontier of the created world and the divine, the point of contact of the immanent and the transcendent. For Clément these two concepts come together in the human face, where created matter, the external representation (the *prosopon* or mask) and the inner fullness of the person (the *hypostasis*) are fused into one. I will attempt to show how the immediacy of the extreme summons and the transparency of the *methorion* make possible the Eucharistic encounter with the Other.⁴

Clément wrote a set of related essays, with different titles for what is fundamentally the same essay, where each title sheds a different light on the question of our contact with the created world. The external created world is immediately and irrevocably THERE. It may be apprehended as a *gnosis ton onton* (the spiritual knowledge of created being), as Clément named his presentation to a conference on Mount Tsukuba, Japan, in the 1980s. It may be apprehended as *L’appel extrême de ce qui est*, Clément’s account of his trip to Japan for the monthly *France Catholique*, on his return to France. Or it may be apprehended as *The Glory of God Hidden in his Creatures*, as Clément named the relevant section in his annotated Patristic sourcebook, translated as *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*.⁵

Clément’s teacher and colleague Vladimir Lossky explained the ‘quiddity’ or what-ness of the external world, in his magisterial study of Meister Eckhart’s apophatic theology.⁶ “To know the reason of things is to know things in their principles... ; it is to know the concrete in the abstract, the participant in the participated ...”⁷ We can also express this idea in terms of the *logoi* of matter. Clément cites Maximus the Confessor: “God revealed the world to St. Peter, as spiritual food, the visible world, perceived by

¹Olivier Clément, Preface, in Paul Evdokimov, *Orthodoxy*, New City Press, 2011, p.9.

²Clément, “La Thème de la Personne dans la Pensée Russe,” *Berdiaev*, 55.

³Revelation 2:17 (RSV)

⁴The Other is *l’autrui*, the direct pronoun form corresponding to *lui*, him; this is not the more abstract ‘alterity.’

⁵Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 2nd Ed., New City Press, 1993, Part Three (2).

⁶Vladimir Lossky, *Eckhart’s Apophatic Theology - knowing the unknowable God*, translated by Monk Sophrony and Jonathan Sutton, James Clarke & Co, 2024. Clément served his ‘theological apprenticeship’ with Vladimir Lossky from 1953-1958, and edited and indexed Lossky’s thesis after Lossky’s death in 1958.

⁷*Eckhart’s Apophatic Theology*, p.157.

means of its *logoi*, through the invisible world—or, if you prefer, the invisible world manifested by the sensory world..... The person who transcends the superficial and thus mistaken conception of things sanctifies the visible and partakes of the unseen *logoi* as a spiritual food, and receives the spiritual contemplation of nature ... this person sees the spiritual meaning of beings through their visible form.⁸ In his discussion of the Prayer of Jesus, Father Lev Gillet tells us that the liturgical person “seeks the point of transparency at the heart of being and matter, the point of transparency from which the light of Tabor radiates.”⁹

The extreme summons of the created world can be realistic, in a naturalistic or scientific delineation of external reality, or animistic as in archaic and folk religions, or it can be Eucharistic, when we take each of the elements of matter and lift them up sacramentally, as the particles of matter in the painted surface of the icon, as the bread and the wine, as the stones of the church. The Eucharistic takes on and transforms the realistic and the animistic. This knowledge of the created world, this ‘knowing the reason of things’ is a *gnosis*, where *gnosis* implies an opening to the understanding of the divine, as opposed to an *epistemology*, the knowledge within the created sphere of that created sphere.

Clément explained the ‘ahité’ of things, the wonder at the ‘Ah!’ of things, in his presentation on Mount Tsukuba, Japan, and in his poems.¹⁰ A parallel approach may be found in Sergei Bulgakov’s *Autobiographical Notes*. Writing towards the end of his life, Bulgakov described the landscape of his childhood, in all its humble, shabby poverty, as suffused by Sophia, by an absolute beauty, the memory of which brought tears to his eyes. The sophianic glow of the created world is as it were a pre-conceptual apprehension of the sophiology that Bulgakov would later seek to explain in complex theological terms.¹¹

Clément posits the *methorion* as the frontier between the immanent and the transcendent. If the *methorion* is the boundary between the created world and the divine, if the sophianic glow reveals the inner ‘reason’ of things, then we might say that ‘transparency’ is the characteristic of the *methorion*, and that ‘sophianicity’ is the revelation of the divine at the *methorion*. Clément says that the human being is a frontier-being, a *methorion*.¹² The face is the privileged locus of the revelation of the person. “The face becomes the ‘limit’—the *methorion*—between this world and the other world, the true symbol in which the flesh of the earth becomes, at times, transparent to another light.”¹³ Citing his friend and mentor Paul Evdokimov, Clément writes: “in the school of the icon we learn to decipher each face around us as the horizon of the world, the place in which everything begins to catch fire.”¹⁴

⁸*Les Visionnaires*, p.192. Clément cites Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, q. 27.

⁹A Monk of the Eastern Church, (Lev Gillet), *La Prière de Jesus*, Chevetogne, 1959, 103–105.

¹⁰For Clément’s presentation in Japan on Mount Tsukuba, see “Gnosis ton onton: la connaissance des êtres dans la tradition ascétique du christianisme oriental,” in Michel Cazenave, ed., *Colloque de Tsukuba: Sciences et Symboles – Les Voies de la Connaissance*, Albin Michel, 1986, 381–412, and “L’appel extrême de ce qui est,” *Les Visionnaires*, pp.163-168. Tadeo Takemoto comments on Clément’s presentation in *L’Âme Japonaise en Miroir*, Entrelacs, 2014, pp.46–48.

Clément’s poems are collected in *Déracine-toi et plante-toi dans la mer*, Sillery, Quebec, Anne Sigier, 1998.

¹¹Sergei Bulgakov, *Avtobiograficheskii Zametki*, YMCA Press, 1971, pp.10-11.

¹²Clément, *Mémoires d’Espérance*, p.202.

¹³Clément, *La Révolte de l’Esprit*, p.414.

¹⁴Clément, *Le Visage Intérieur*, p.45.

At this *methorion*, “for an instant, the face opens, this supreme place in which nature (or matter) becomes porous to the person (*hypostasis*), first of all by way of the transparency of the eye. For an instant the face is not seen according to the heaviness of nature but in God.”¹⁵ This is the apprehension of the ‘*ahité*’ of the person, the apprehension of their ‘extreme summons.’ It is the spark of immediacy and wonder in the encounter, that Clément points to when he says “the Other gives me the paradisaical newness of the world illuminated by Sophia.”¹⁶ This gives us a model for apprehending the sophianic immediacy and the transparency of the person whom we encounter.

Clément’s teacher, Vladimir Lossky, tells us that the individual is a concept that belongs to the world of sense-data and rational science, whereas the inner person, the *hypostasis*, has infinite depths. Lossky applies the Chalcedonian model of the divine-human nature of Christ to the human person created in the image and likeness of God. Lossky tells us that “the image of God in man, insofar as it is perfected, is necessarily unknowable... since, in reflecting the fullness of its archetype, it must also possess the unknowability of the divine being.”¹⁷

Clément tells us that the person, the hypostasis, is irreducible and that “the reality of this irreducible person, when considered in the light of the Spirit, shows us that the more I know someone, the more they remain unknown.”¹⁸ Drawing on Lossky’s study of Meister Eckhart, Clément tells us that “the person is not of this world: an apophatic approach to the person corresponds to the apophatic approach to God.”¹⁹ This is “the infinite depth of personal existence which is revealed in communion with the Other.”²⁰

Sacred Spaces and Naming

Created matter and created beings may be demarcated by the creation of sacred spaces. On his visit to the temples of Japan in the 1980s, Clément remarked on three giant Japanese cedars (*cryptomeria*) enclosed by a rope.²¹ The setting aside of land for the church and graveyard in the villages of the European settlement of New England is another case of marking the boundaries of sacred space. But such ‘framing’ can be accomplished by a simple boundary, a wall, or a chalk line.²² We may treat the proper name, given in baptism or in a naming ceremony, as a special case of setting a sacramental boundary. In his discussion of the unnameable God, Vladimir Lossky, tells us that the ineffable God is

¹⁵Clément, *Questions sur l’homme*, p.38.

¹⁶Clément, “La thème de la personne dans la pensée russe,” *Berdiaev*, 55.

¹⁷Clément, “La théologie de l’homme chez Vladimir Lossky,” *Contacts*, no. 106, 1979, p.190ff. , citing *À l’Image et à la Resemblance de Dieu*, Chapter 6, “La notion théologique de la personne humaine.” See Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, SVS Press, 1974, pp. 111-123.

¹⁸Clément, “L’homme dans le monde,” *Verbum Caro* 45; and intervention at Mount Tsukuba, 1985, *Sciences et Symboles*, p.434.

¹⁹Clément, “La théologie de l’homme chez Vladimir Lossky,” 191.

²⁰Clément. Preface, in Paul Evdokimov, *Orthodoxy*, p.9.

²¹“L’appel extrême de ce qui est,” *Les Visionnaires*, p.167.

²²For Clément’s writing on sacred spaces, see my translation of “Transfigured Spaces: Some Reflections from the Eastern Orthodox Tradition,” in *The Shape of the Sacred: Eastern Orthodoxy and Architectural Modernity*, forthcoming, The Wheel/ Fordham UP, 2027.

present in the inner person as the hidden spring (*source*) of created existence.²³ This hidden spring is the true being that the person has hidden in her depths.²⁴

In his discussion of the Talmudic treatment of the names of God, Emmanuel Levinas says that to address a person by their proper name is to reach their innermost depths. “To initiate by way of a proper name is to affirm the irreducibility of the relationship to a form of knowledge that would thematize or define ... thereby grasping only the finite and immanent being. To initiate by way of a proper name is to understand the revelation in a modality that retains the transcendence of that which is manifested....”²⁵ This is the hidden name of the Book of Revelation: “I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone, which no one knows except he who receives it”²⁶

Levinas explains the epiphany of the face in *Totalité et Infini*: “The epiphany of the other, in her face, immediately invokes my responsibility. As soon as the other looks at me I am obliged to take on her weakness, her fragility and her vulnerability. The relationship that is established constitutes ‘the original fact of fraternity’ and implicates my freedom.... I am responsible for the other without waiting for any reciprocity, even if this should cost me my life... In my relationship with the other, the ethical obligation should be raised to an absolute level that orders my existence with unyielding force.”²⁷ Levinas tells us that: “the expression that the face introduces into the world defies not the weakness of my power but the power of my power.”²⁸ We have an absolute ethical responsibility for the Other.

Clément takes the concepts of responsibility for the other and non-power (*non-pouvoir*) from Levinas. Clément explains that “the Judeo-Christian tradition places the accent on the human face, with its extreme vulnerability. If I wish to offer a welcome to the nakedness of a face, I can only have an attitude of ‘non-power.’”²⁹ Clément goes further to posit a Eucharistic encounter in the face-to-face. “The world of God-made-man and of man-called-to-become-God, exists only in the encounter of the gaze, in the communion of faces.”³⁰ In this encounter we are “in the place where everything begins to blaze.”³¹ In *The Common Mission of Christians in the Secular City*, Clément tells us that the faces of men and women that we meet on the street are the “prophecy of the kingdom.”³² In *Visages de Silence*, Clément tells us that this encounter is Eucharistic.³³

What can we do with these two propositions, our radical responsibility for the Other, met in an attitude of non-power, and the Eucharistic potential of the encounter. Levinas’ ethical imperative exists in tension with Clément’s Eucharistic encounter. If in the attitude of non-power, we accept absolute

²³Lossky, *Meister Eckhart*, p.32

²⁴Lossky, *Meister Eckhart*, p.37

²⁵Levinas, “Le nom de Dieu d’après quelques textes talmudiques,” p.159. Levinas’ presentation to the 1969 Castelli Colloquium. *L’Analyse du Langage Théologique – le nom de Dieu*, Aubier, 1969, pp.155-167.

²⁶Revelation 2:17 (RSV)

²⁷Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, Livre de Poche, 2016, pp, 234-235.

²⁸Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 211-215, citation p.215.

²⁹From Clément’s discussion at the Mount Tsukuba conference, *Sciences et Symboles*, p.435.

³⁰Clément, “La Neige Fond,” *Un Saison en Littérature*, p.32.

³¹Clément, “L’Icône, visage transfiguré,” *Le Visage Intérieur*, p.45

³²Clément “The Common Mission of Christians in the Secular City,” Afterword to Michel Evdokimov, *Two Martyrs in a Godless World*, New City Press, 2021, p.154.

³³Clément. “Visages de Silence,” Preface in Roland Fischer, *Portraits*, Editions Paris Musées, 1989, p.35

responsibility for the Other who stands before us, we enter into communion with this person, and we may address them “by their only true name ... the name that unveils their true being in its fullness.”³⁴ If we enter into the Eucharistic encounter of the face-to-face, in the concrete reality of everyday life, we will find ourselves irrevocably responsible for the Other.

If we apply this to our everyday encounter, we will find ourselves bound to radical acceptance. This will transport us beyond the comfortable barriers of our normative differences. It will leave no room for anything except than a radical encounter with the Other as one who bears a secret name.

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This article continues a series of explorations of face and encounter in the writings of Olivier Clément. They have their starting point in one of Clément’s last articles, “The Common Mission of Christians in the Secular City.”³⁵ I explored encounter in the public square at the Volos IOTA conference in 2023.³⁶ My extended examination of Clément’s theology of the face can be found in *The Face is the Prophecy of the Kingdom – an introduction to the work of Olivier Clément*, my doctoral dissertation for the Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge, UK, presented in summary form as ‘Face as Icon, Face as Encounter’ at IOCS in October 2024.³⁷ A full Clément bibliography can be found in ‘Face as Icon, Face as Encounter’ <https://transfiguringtime.com/articles>. Vladimir Lossky’s dissertation on Meister Eckhart is now available in English: *Eckhart’s Apophatic Theology – knowing the unknowable God*, translated by Monk Sophrony and Jonathan Sutton, James Clarke & Co, 2024. My dissertation, *The Face is the Prophecy of the Kingdom*, can be found at <https://doi.org/10.25411/aru.27854316> .

³⁴Maxime Gimenez, *Le Couple, de l’unité primordiale aux nocces cosmiques*, Cerf, 2018, p.256

³⁵Olivier Clément “The Common Mission of Christians in the Secular City,” Afterword to Michel Evdokimov, *Two Martyrs in a Godless World*, New City Press, 2021. This was first published in *Contacts*, No.193, 2001, pp. 44-58.

³⁶IOTA, Volos, Greece, January 2023, “Olivier Clément - theologian of encounter in the public square.”

³⁷IOCS, October 2024, “Face as Icon, Face as Encounter.” A full Clément bibliography can be found in “Face as Icon, Face as Encounter,” <https://transfiguringtime.com/articles>.