

Transfiguring Time – An Expanded Translator’s Introduction

The great French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément was born in the village of Aniane in the Languedoc region of South-West France, to a non-religious family. “I grew up in an environment in which Christianity played no part. I was not baptized and received no religious instruction.” Attracted first by poetry, especially that of Rainer Maria Rilke, and then by the Bible, he spent his twenties exploring the religious traditions of India. “For ten years I searched through this vast world of religions and myths. I was drawn to all of it. But I found myself trapped between the spirit of India, where all is sacred, divine, and immersed in the ocean of divinity, and my sense of the uniqueness of the human person.”¹

It was Clément's encounter with Vladimir Lossky's *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* that showed him another way. Lossky's chapters on the Trinity, and man made in God's image, thrilled Clément. “The Trinity appeared to hold the solution to the impasse: a total unity, greater by far than that spoken of in India, and completely different.” At the same time, he began to read the great Russian writers, including Dostoevsky and Berdyaev. “I discovered Christianity and I asked myself what I should do with this discovery.”² Baptized as an Orthodox Christian in 1952, Clément went on to study with Lossky in Paris, while teaching history at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. In 1965 Clément was invited by Paul Evdokimov to join the faculty of the Saint-Serge Theological Institute in Paris, where he taught for over thirty years.

Transfiguring Time, Transfigurer Le Temps – Notes sur le Temps à la Lumière de la Tradition Orthodoxe, his first book, was written when Clément was thirty-seven. It carries all the excitement of his fresh encounter with Orthodoxy and the Fathers of the Christian Church. In it, he draws on his deep study of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Indian myths to differentiate the conception of time and eternity in archaic religions, in Hinduism and in Buddhism, from the Christian, and specifically Orthodox, understanding of time and eternity. The print run was very small and the book disappeared from view,

1 Interview with La Croix, 2001, cited by Nicolas Sénèze, “Olivier Clément, grand penseur orthodoxe du XXe siècle, est mort,” La Croix, January 16, 2009

2 Ibid

almost without a trace. It was referenced only occasionally.³ This newly translated edition will bring Clément's early work to a new generation of readers.

According to Monique Clément, the author's widow, *Transfiguring Time* is a bridge between Clément's research in the years before his baptism, and his immersion in the Orthodox faith. It is also a meditation on history. These reflections on the "sense of history" contribute to one of the main currents of post-war French thought.⁴ The book gives an Orthodox perspective on those questions that Albert Camus was exploring at the same time, from the perspective of an atheist.

Starting from an in-depth examination of the understanding of time as cyclical repetition in pre-Christian religions, Clément teases out the status of human experience and of the human person in these vast cyclical systems, that "burn up" time in annual ritual festivals and that deny the autonomy of the individual. In his view, by the time of the ancient Greeks and the gnostics, increased knowledge and self-awareness was accompanied by an increasing sense of entrapment.

By contrast, Clément reveals key Old Testament stories to be explorations of human freedom, and of the growth of understanding of God's working in time and in human history. The cyclical and cosmic events of ancient religions are transformed "from primitive celebrations of a cosmic liturgy to memorials of God's work." Thus, in the Old Testament he sees the beginning of historical time, in which there is both remembrance of the past and expectation of the future.

Then comes the Incarnation, which, for Clément, is the central event in human history. "The cyclical time of nature and the historical time of the Covenant contract into, or in the words of St. Paul, are recapitulated in Christ...The Incarnation draws in and transfigures all human and cosmic reality." The Incarnation opens up the possibility of the fullness of the human person. This is an event that contains all time: Christ said "I am the Alpha and the Omega."

With the Resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost begins the "deified time of the Church." For Clément, as for St. Ignatius, the Church is constituted as Christ's body in the world, whenever Christians assemble in communion. The deified time of the Church both exceeds and encompasses the earlier conceptions of time. The nostalgia for paradise of ancient cultures is given a

³ *Transfigurer le Temps* received a favorable notice from Yves Congar, *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, 1961, vol. 35

⁴ Monique Clément, personal communication, 2017.

new form, reopening paradise to mankind. “Christ is more than paradise, as, by extension, is his Church: the light of the eighth day already shines there.”

Clément concludes with a profound exploration of the working of the Holy Spirit in the world. He anchors this in an uncompromising adherence to human freedom, that includes the freedom to reject God, and in the idea of the humility of God: God standing at the door waiting to be invited. Clément sets a very high bar for the role of Christians in the world, who “by force of their prayer, through their act of being present and then through their participation in creation ...fight to transform the earth into sacrament and to transform culture into an icon of the heavenly Jerusalem.”

The concepts explored in the book: paradise, eternity, eon, act, freedom, liturgy, and sacrament are constantly reexamined and rewoven into a fuller understanding, in the light of the Incarnation. Clément’s text resonates with biblical imagery and with the language of Orthodox hymns and troparia. His work has lost none of its freshness and relevance. While providing an extensive analysis of the conception of time and eternity in archaic religions, Greek philosophy, and Eastern religions, *Transfiguring Time* stands on its own as a meditation on the meaning of time and eternity, rooted in both the Patristic tradition, and in the newness and shock of Clément’s encounter with Christianity.

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Translator