

Why read *Transfiguring Time* now? Clément and Camus speak to today's world

The great French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément died in 2009 at the age of 88. On the tenth anniversary of his death, his first book, *Transfigurer Le Temps – Notes sur le Temps à la Lumière de la Tradition Orthodoxe*, is published for the first time in an English translation by New City Press. The rediscovery of this almost forgotten text allows us to see Olivier Clément in a new light. His first work already reveals a mature thinker, deeply rooted in the Patristic tradition. It lays out many themes to which Clément would return in later books and articles.

But why read Clément's *Transfiguring Time* now? Clément foresaw the rise of a new atheistic "gnosticism" and of "Christianity on steroids," the one trapping its proponents in the hell of their own existence, the other retrojecting on society the all powerful and vengeful God of the Old Testament. Instead, Clément sought the locus of human freedom and the flowering of full human potential in the Incarnation and in the encounter with a kenotic God who takes on all of human existence, and who waits, patiently, for us to turn and to hear.

This focus on human freedom and the full realization of human potential may be seen as one of the major themes of post-second-world-war French thought. After the Holocaust and the total destruction wrought by the war, was it possible to speak about humanity and God? For Clément, the answer was yes - there could be no fulfillment of human potential without God, without the Trinity. In face of a world in the grip of brutal totalitarianism, the model of Christian sainthood is Mother Maria Skobtsova or Father Maximilian Kolbe, who went to their deaths in the concentration camps, in absolute solidarity with their Jewish fellow prisoners, suffering with others, caring for others and taking the place of others in the "selection" for the gas chambers.

For Clément's contemporary, Albert Camus, the answer was no – we must seek to find a way to be fully human without God. In his 1947 novel *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux is Camus's model of sainthood without God, caring for his neighbors and seeking by all means possible not to be one of those infected, in body and mind, by the plague. In his address to Columbia University in May 1946, entitled "*The Human Crisis*," Camus said "we have understood that in a world stripped of meaning, the human person still has meaning.. We have understood that when some of us accepted death on behalf of the

community ... it was because they had discovered a value that was more important than their personal existence, and consequently had discovered, if not a truth, at least a rule of conduct.”<sup>1</sup>

In his address to Brooklyn College, entitled “*Are We Pessimists?*” - also in May 1946 - Camus said: “We are obliged to live without illusions, in direct contact with the most fundamental realities of existence ... to formulate the problems that the world poses and to maintain our willingness to resolve them.... Energy can be reconciled with lucidity, passion can rejoin with tranquil courage.”<sup>2</sup> Camus would have us live, without illusions, but in the full light of belief in our common humanity.

Is it a conceit to bring Camus and Clément together on the same page? Perhaps not. In a sympathetic obituary that revealed the depth of his affection, Olivier Clément presented Camus as one who had radically rejected the Augustinian Christianity of his youth, who nevertheless had at his core a vision of humanity, of the radiance of the Mediterranean sun, of the beauty of creation.<sup>3</sup> In a biographical note on St. Augustine, Clément refers to Camus in passing, as the quintessential atheist.<sup>4</sup> But, according to Christos Yannaros, Clément also recounted that, in the last years of his life, before the car accident that prematurely cut off his career, “Camus read Vladimir Lossky’s *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. For Camus, this theology was an unexpected surprise. This really is something that I can discuss. And he began his dialogue by dramatizing Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*. But he had no time to continue with it.”<sup>5</sup>

Here we see Camus, on the pathway of Orthodox thought. In the obituary of Camus, we see Clément deeply and sympathetically engaged with a major atheistic thinker. These encounters undermine the easy constructs of atheist and believer. With the collapse of the certainties of the post-second-world-war world order, the resurgence of ultra-nationalism, the loss of a sense of our common humanity, the challenge to the very nature of truth, it is a good time to reread these two profound thinkers, who each in their own way sought to formulate what it means to be fully human.

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1 *La crise de l’homme*, Albert Camus, Oeuvres Complètes, II, Editions Gallimard 2006, p.741

2 *Sommes-nous des pessimistes?*, Albert Camus, Oeuvres Complètes, II, Editions Gallimard 2006, p.749

3 *La Revue du lycéen orthodoxe* No. 9, July 1960, accessed online

4 *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, New City Press, 1995, page 314

5 Quoted from *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, George Demacoupolos and Aristide Papanikolaou, Fordham UP, 2013 (accessed through Google Books)