

Olivier Clément (1921-2009) - theologian of encounter in the public square

In one of his last essays, Clément wrote: “ More and more we are finding that the fabric of society is not just crumpled, it is torn apart. And through the torn fabric enter nihilism and non-being. Our civilization is defined by non-being. And therefore I think that today’s nihilism is the arena (the agora) in which we must providentially sing out the good news of the Resurrection.” And this, perhaps, gives us the key to how to respond to contemporary critiques of society such as Peter Sloterdijk’s *Die Schrecklichen Kinder der Neuzeit* – which, by the way, are strikingly similar to those of the nineteen-sixties, both neo-marxist and existentialist.

In ‘The Common Mission of Christians in the Secular City’, Clément gives us the striking image of the Bazaar of Contemporary Ideas:

“We need prophets of life to emerge from the hidden depths of the Church. Prophets of a life so complete that it is a resurrected life. Imagine someone who is talking about the Resurrection in the back of his booth at the Bazaar of Contemporary Ideas. There would be a little Christian stall selling Christian books and proclaiming Christ’s Resurrection. But these prophets also need to be a little crazy – --- because the Resurrection is madness. We have to proclaim the crazy news of the Resurrection.”

– In our engagement with the secular city, we have to proclaim the crazy news of the Resurrection –

Clément’s public engagement with the secular thinkers of his time began with an obituary of Albert Camus, in 1960, and the early ‘Purification by Atheism’ that examines how atheistic thinking opens up the possibility of purifying Christianity of its theological baggage, of power and dominance.

In response to the student rebellion of May 1968, he wrote ‘Dionysios and the Risen Christ’, in which he engaged with the thinking and imagery of the May upheaval and with its intellectual heroes – Freud, Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich, the situationist Raoul Vaneigem. Despite his own existential shock at the wholesale destruction of cultural reference points (he himself had been verbally attacked at the Lycée where he taught), he undertook a sympathetic assessment of

the themes of the rebellion, and proposes that the Christian response must be more naked and – even - more playful and open to the voices of *eros* heard in the student revolutionaries.ⁱ

Clément actively wrote and taught from 1953 to 2008. ‘Dionysios and the Risen Christ’ sets the mold for his intellectual and theological engagement with the thinkers and poets of his time. Alongside his theological contemplation of the person, of the face, of prayer and of theological language, he wrote a series of programmatic statements – in which we find a remarkable continuity of thought.

These include a long coda entitled ‘For an Underground Church’ in ‘Dionysios and the Risen Christ’, ‘The Ruptures of Contemporary Life’ in *Sillons de Lumière*, ‘The Postscript for a Common Future’, in *Rome Autrement* and finally, ‘The Common Mission of Christians in the Secular City.’

Certain themes emerge. Clément lists these in ‘The Postscript for a Common Future’ as

1. Transcending modernity through the practice of inwardness, interiority – bringing to the secular world the knowledge and practice of prayer and, in particular, the prayer of the heart.

2. Responding to the problem of evil – responding to the charge that God is responsible for the evil in the world. No, Clément says, God did not create evil. He created the world and humankind out of kenotic love.

3. Accepting responsibility for the spiritual unity of the planet - Ending the exploitation of the planet and becoming careful stewards, the humble priests and kings of creation

4. Creating a new way of living. For Clément, the challenge is to attain the divino-humanity of the Chalcedonian synthesis. “The only reality is the person participating in God’s creative power and thus able to be in communion with all other people and to bless all things.”ⁱⁱ

The Italian theologian Giorgio Garrone, a priest of the Turin Diocese, has given us a succinct evaluation of Clément’s work.ⁱⁱⁱ To quote: “so many different ways of looking at the person and the world are summed up in the biography of one person.” In Clément’s approach, Garrone sees the possibility of resolving the contradictions between the intellectual, rational search for knowledge and the spiritual search, in a ‘higher’ synthesis.

“In a global look at his life, one can grasp an intrinsic [...] logic of life, a logic of the incarnate, historical Logos, speaking [...] through the life of one human being.”^{iv}

In ‘The Postscript for a Common Future’ Clément himself states the challenge as: “The rediscovery of a mystical and liturgical vision of the cosmos, in which the Eucharist completes the sacramental potential of all matter. Our role is to offer the spiritual essence of created things to God [...]” And in the introduction to *Evangile et Révolution*, in 1968, he says the challenge is “to give a positive content to the secular city, [...] to struggle to give humankind not just bread but beauty ... instead of the rhythms of the machine, to restore the human and cosmic rhythms. To give the possibility of meaningful work, the possibility of word and of silence ...”^v

How did Clément embody this encounter in the public square? Giorgio Garrone says that Clément was a guide, a ‘passeur’, not a chevalier, a medieval knight. But I would like to explore Clément as a chevalier, as someone who rode fearlessly into the heart of the modern condition. And by this I mean someone who fully assumes the sensory and intellectual coherence of the domain that they enter.

Clément engages with Sartre and existentialism, with Gandhi, with liberation theology, with Levi-Strauss and structuralism, with Jacques Lacan and psychoanalysis, with Emmanuel Levinas and the idea that we are responsible for the other, for ‘le prochain’, our neighbour. We can travel with him into the heart of suicide, into the indignities of illness and old age, into modern society’s flight from death – ‘now shame about death has replaced shame about sex’.^{vi vii} We can ride into the heart of modern relationships.

He tells the assembled priests of the Milan Diocese, on retreat with their bishop, “Today people have sex without marrying... perhaps this is an opportunity for us to reach out and make clear the spiritual depth of that love. What I see ... are couples who have not been married, who say to each other one day, ‘our love is real and deep – let’s get married’. It is not the sacrament of marriage that is making the love sacred - it is the implicit sacredness of love that calls for the sacrament of marriage.”^{viii}

In *Corps de Mort, Corps de Gloire*, the little book on the ‘theopoetics of the human body’ that deeply impressed Pope John Paul II, he says that the Church must speak to everyone, including “the surrogate mothers, the indifferent sperm donors, the women ravaged by abortion, those suffering from AIDS.”^{ix}

We can ride with Clément into the heart of the literal truth of the Gospels and the Resurrection – a transgression of all contemporary rational understanding.^x Into the heart of the Eucharist and the restoration of person and matter to their original transparency.^{xi} Into the heart of Catholic spirituality in his Good Friday meditation on the Stations of the Cross.^{xii} Into the heart of Shinto and the Japanese temple.^{xiii} Into the heart of Islam in his dialogue with Mohamed Talbi.^{xiv}

I would like to leave you with two images. One is Olivier Clément at the Colloquium on Science and Symbols on Mount Tsukuba, Japan, in 1985, with scientists, psychoanalysts and a Buddhist priest in attendance. The old Buddhist priest said of Clément’s presentation “I did not understand a word but I was overwhelmed by the beauty and power of his words.”^{xv}

At the same Colloquium, Clément’s host in Japan, Tadeo Takemoto, said: “we are a people who love to sit quietly and motionlessly looking at stones placed in a garden – and then those stones speak to us more eloquently than any words.”^{xvi} Of his own encounter with Shinto in Japan, with Shinto practitioners who, without calling themselves Christians, were following the Christian way, of the stone garden at Ryoan-Ji, Clément said: “for us to be able to speak about Christianity to Shinto, it would have to be ‘fichtrement apophatique’ – ‘a mighty apophatic Christianity’ – stripped of all words.”^{xvii}

And then there is Olivier Clément in Istanbul, looking up at the dome of Hagia Sophia, in this vast space stripped of its religious images by what he calls the ‘radical purification of Islam’. “Unlike a Western cathedral with its long nave leading to [...] a sanctuary in which the divine presence is concentrated, Hagia Sophia IS the divine presence, in the totality of its light-saturated space. It is not so much a sacramental space ... it is an apocalyptic space, the symbol of the New

Jerusalem. Islam's harsh purification has transformed [it] into the temple of the Christ who will come again in the Parousia."^{xviii}

Here the church has been stripped bare in the anticipation of the Parousia, as in the stripping bare, the *dépouillement*, of the ascetic process. And perhaps this reveals something of how we need to speak in the marketplace of contemporary ideas.

In our encounter in the public square, we should not be carrying the banner of the culture warrior – we can see the tragedy of such an approach unfolding in the Russian attack on Ukraine and in the increasing polarisation and retreat into ritualism of the Orthodox Church in America. We should rather ride into the heart of the most painful and unresolved debates as well as into the heart of the most beautiful and glorious aspects of a new society, to bring these the mystery of divino-humanity, speaking when asked, or witnessing in apophatic silence. Because, Clément says, quoting Dumitru Staniloae, “the Church is the place in which one advances towards the Resurrection. It is the laboratory of the Resurrection.”^{xix}

In response to social media's saturation of words and images, we need to discover a new manner of speaking: (and we have here a classic paragraph of Clément's that piles up phrases and ends in silence)

“ There is a growing desire for the word as awakening, as liberation, as revelation of meaning. [Empty] language is noise: the word modulates silence. Faith lives by the word and dies from empty language. The true word is the word of life, that is secret and difficult to communicate, if not spoken, in a creative celebration of life and beauty, by people of compassion and silence.”^{xx}

- i Pantelis Kalaitzidis, ‘Olivier Clément, Théologien de la Modernité’, *Contacts – Revue Française de l’Orthodoxie*, No. 267-268, 2019
- ii Le Christ du Crédo, in Jean Delumeau (ed.) *Le Christianisme*, Paris, Fayard, 2004, p.24
- iii *De la Obscuridad la Luz*, Madrid, Paulinas, 2015
- iv “En una mirada global sobre sua existencia se puede captar un vincula intrinseco, hasta logico, de una logica de la vida, una logica del Logos encarnarnado, historico, que hable a la vida del persona a traves de las vidas de los seros humanos”, *ibid.* pp.146-147
- v Introduction, *Evangile et Révolution*, 1968, pp. 36-37
- vi ‘Au seuil, dans l’attente confiante de la Résurrection’, *Mémoires d’Espérance, Entretiens avec Jean-Claude Noyer*, Paris, Desclée, 2003, pp.228-230
- vii *Corps de Mort, Corps de Gloire*
- viii Common Mission of Christians in the Secular City, 2019, p.146
- ix *Corps de Mort, Corps de Gloire*
- x *Le Corps Spirituel*
- xi *Le Sens de la Terre*
- xii *Le Chemin de Croix à Rome*
- xiii L’Appel Extrême de ce qui Est, in *Les Visionnaires*
- xiv *Un Respect Têtu*
- xv *L’Âme Japonaise en Miroir*, Tadeo Takemoto, Paris, Entrelacs, 2014, p.46
- xvi *Sciences et Symboles*, Michel Casenove Ed., Paris, Albin Michel 1986, p.453
- xvii L’Appel Extrême de ce qui Est, in *Les Visionnaires*
- xviii *Dialogues with Patriarch Athenagoras*, 2022, p.152
- xix Preface, Dumitru Staniloae, *Prière de Jésus et Expérience du Saint-Esprit*, p.12, citing Staniloae, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2, p.226 (Romanian Edition)
- xx *Sillons de Lumière*, Les Ruptures Contemporaines, Troyes, Fates, 2002, p. 29

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