

## Face as Icon, Face as Encounter: Olivier Clément's Theology of the Face

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In *The Other Sun* we hear Clément wonder about the mystery of the face: “Faces ... where do they come from?”<sup>1</sup> Later in life Clément returned to this theme: “The mystery of the face never ceased to confront me. I would say to myself, if a person is nothing but a collection of atoms, why does the face hold such a mystery? Why does a glance or a smile touch us in the way that it does? In all these faces, I became aware of a hidden space in which we meet the other, the space in which there is a light that transcends the person. In fact, in and of itself, the face is the negation of non-being.”<sup>2</sup>

In “Dionysos et le Ressuscité,” an article written in 1968, Clément wrote: “The West elaborated a theology of action and of the Word; the Christian East a theology of silence and of the icon. ... It is time to unite these two visions into a theology of the face.”<sup>3</sup> And in a late essay, he advanced a radical theology of encounter in the face of our neighbour: “Today a poetry of the created world, tomorrow a poetry of faces. Because the world of God and humankind, the world of God made man and of Man-Adam called to become God, only exists in the encounter of the gaze, in the communion of faces.”<sup>4</sup>

Clément never completed the task of “uniting these two visions into a theology of the face.” His two main presentations are *Le Visage Intérieur*<sup>5</sup> (1978) and his preface, “Visages de Silence,” to a photo essay on the faces of monks and nuns, published in 1987.<sup>6</sup> These are short essays in which Clément outlines his main themes but does not systematically develop them. In what follows I will attempt to lay out Clément's theology on the face. It is worth noting that, when one reviews *Questions sur l'Homme* from the perspective of the face, one finds that, with a slight shift in the angle of view, it too is as much a meditation on the face as a meditation on the person.

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<sup>1</sup>Clément, *The Other Sun*, 82.

<sup>2</sup>Clément, *Mémoires d'Espérance*, 21.

<sup>3</sup>Clément, *Évangile et Révolution*, 85.

<sup>4</sup>Clément, “La Neige Fond,” *Une Saison en Littérature*, 32.

<sup>5</sup>Clément, *Le Visage Intérieur* (Paris: Stock, 1978; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Paris: Salvator, 2017).

<sup>6</sup>*Portraits*, Roland Fischer, Munich, Mosel & Tschechow, 1987

Clément's early teacher Alphonse Dupront explored the semantic roots of image and idol in *Le Sacré*: "Our root-word, image, and its Latin original, means imitation or portrait. It also means shade. ... The image, in Greek, is *eidolon* or *eikon*. With *eidolon* we find ourselves in the world of shadows: these are *eidola*, forms without substance, yet able to be apprehended by the senses, in some sense body-less images that the gods make use of ...." Dupront continues: "In the vocabulary of 'Christian combat,' *eidolon*, latinized as *idolum*, quickly entered the vocabulary of the battle against the idolaters, and was used to denounce the paganism of the image, a paganism embodied in the religious attitude ... that concentrated in the man-made object all the impiety ... that had to be destroyed."<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, Clément saw the whole effort of the modern world, especially in its twentieth-century totalitarian and technological manifestations, as an attempt to destroy the image of God in humankind. In the history of the twentieth century he saw so many ways of rendering a person faceless, of presenting them with a mask of indifference or the ferocious snout of the oppressor.

In *Questions sur l'Homme*, Clément expanded on the destructive force of the flood of visual images and images of the face with which we meet today in our day-to-day existence.<sup>8</sup> This critique anticipates that of "The Common Mission of Christians in the Secular City" by 30 years: "There is a mounting wave of barbarism, images of faces emerge from all sides, obsessively, barbarically. This flood of faces merges into one and leads the soul into a state of dissolution, in which everything dissolves—values, traditions, criteria, local customs."<sup>9</sup>

He explained: "Humanity has interrupted the circulation of glory (the *khabod*) and has blocked the Eucharistic dimension of creation. The light has become external to us, so that things now have an aspect of horror and darkness."<sup>10</sup>

But he concludes on a transcendental note: "And yet there is an irreducible beauty, an irreducible enigma that this acid can never corrode, and this is the face of the person and the longing for a worldwide communion of faces."<sup>11</sup> And yet, he says, "the reality of the irreducible person, when considered in the light of the spirit, shows us that the more I know someone, the more they remain unknown."<sup>12</sup>

### **Revelation in the Iconic Face**

Eugene Trubetskoi tells us that the icon is not a portrait. Instead the icon portrays the *lik*, the inner, spiritual life of the person.<sup>13</sup> The icon of Christ reveals the Christ to us in the same way that the incarnate

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<sup>7</sup>Alphonse Dupront, *Du Sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 105.

<sup>8</sup>The chapter is entitled "The Third Beauty."

<sup>9</sup>Clément, *Questions sur l'Homme*, 185–186, my translation.

<sup>10</sup>Clément, *On Human Being*, 137, modified.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 137, modified.

<sup>12</sup>REF

<sup>13</sup>Eugene N. Trubetskoi, *Icons: Theology in Color* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1973), 22–25.

Christ revealed the hypostasis of the Father.<sup>14</sup> Christ is the transparency of the Father (Le Guillou).<sup>15</sup> And, following John of Damascus, the icon reveals the prototype to whom veneration is made.

Here we encounter the question of the definition of the hypostasis. If, following Gregory of Nyssa's definition in St. Basil's Letter 38, the *hypostasis* of a person is that which is *circumscribed*, how can the iconic portrayal also reveal the (unseen) *becoming-hypostasis* of the person?<sup>16</sup> As cited by Clément in "Le Christ du Crédo," Christoph Schönborn offers us one path: The person is *knowable and circumscribed* in their energies (Latin—operations) but *unknowable and uncircumscribed* in their essence.<sup>17</sup> Schönborn cites the text of Nicea II: "Who venerates the icon, venerates in it the hypostasis of the one who is there depicted."<sup>18</sup> Clément also offers us another possible path, following Trubetskoi: The icon reveals the purified and perfected person who has attained the resemblance.

Therefore, we can say that the *face* of the person whom we greet/encounter/welcome is not an icon of that person. But the *face* is the place where the *matter*, the *prosopon* (the external person) and the *becoming-hypostasis*<sup>19</sup> are fused into one. In the case of the purified, stripped-bare ascetic, the face may already be becoming iconic.<sup>20</sup> Or, in the case of the tormented, suffering human, the face may be the revelation of the suffering and crucified Christ.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Schönborn, *L'icône*, 41, commenting on St. Basil's Letter 38, attributed to Gregory of Nyssa.

<sup>15</sup>Le Guillou, "Le Christ, Image du Dieu Invisible," *Le Visage du Ressuscité*, 86–90.

<sup>16</sup>Schönborn, *L'icône*, 32.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 120–126.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>19</sup>the whole unique being—see Yannaras, *Person und Eros*, §15.

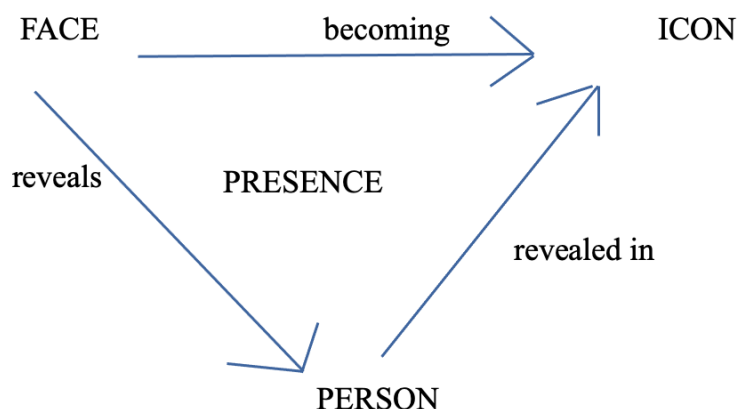
<sup>20</sup>Clément comments on Patriarch Athenagoras in his preface to *Dialogues with Patriarch Athenagoras* and in "The Common Mission of Christians."

<sup>21</sup>cf. Clément, *Deracine-toi* and *Le Chemin de Croix à Rome*.

As Paul Evdokimov explained, the icon is also a pedagogy. As restated by Clément: “There comes to us the testimony of the icon, testimony of an eternity that opens in the unfathomable depths of the face, of a God who has become a real face so that in Him we could decipher the human face. The final proof of the existence of God, said Paul Evdokimov, is that of the icon, of the radiance of some faces.”<sup>22</sup>

“In the school of the icon we learn how to decipher each face around us as the horizon (*le fin*) of the world: the place in which everything begins to catch fire.”<sup>23</sup> This is a moment of seizing and of being seized. Schematically we may represent this as follows:

**Figure 7.1**



This is an instance of the *sudden*: “And then, for an instant, the face opens, this supreme place in which nature becomes porous to the person (hypostasis), first of all by way of the transparency of the eyes. For an instant, the face is not seen according to the heaviness (opacity) of nature but in God. And then everything is turned upside down. Rather than the person being explained by the world in which she is immersed, the presence suddenly sheds light on the world and explains its meaning.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Clément, *Le Visage Intérieur*, 14.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>24</sup>Clément, *Questions sur l'Homme*, 38.

## Theological Propositions on the Face

We find a sequence of propositions in “Le Dieu Visage” that start from the citation from Philippians: “who, though he was divine, took the form of a servant and humbled himself even unto death on the Cross.”<sup>25</sup>

a. There is an antinomy between fullness and emptiness which gives us the measure of the “mad love,” the *manikos eros*, of God who *transcends* his own transcendence and *descends* even to the bottom-most depths of separation and “slavery,” into his own absence in death and hell (38).

b. “Love seeks reciprocity. For God, the existence of the other implies a retreat and implies vulnerability. ...” (39).

c. “Therefore, the face of God was not only that of a contingent individual, but also the non-face of a ‘slave,’ the *aprosopon*, the one who is not seen, and thus also the face stripped bare of all the masks of *non-being*. ...”(39).

d. In Christ, God has become the ultimate *face*, the face of the world’s greatest opacity, ...., the face of the servant who has “no form nor charm to attract us”<sup>26</sup> yet who is radiant with the singular beauty that is at once goodness and love (40).

e. Through the free and sovereign offering at Gethsemane, all human anguish has become the very fabric and density of faith and of love.... The face of Christ forever signifies “the living icon of love” (41).

f. This face of faces, this one face, disfigured and transfigured by love, is indeed, the face of God, without separation. This face leads us only to God (41).<sup>27</sup>

g. Christ reveals to us what we have sensed from the most humble face: The face does not open onto a trans-personal essence, but onto the secret of the person (41).

h. In the Transfiguration, Jesus appears as the source of light. Clément cites Anastasius of Sinai: “How amazing is this face! It is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven.” “Through Christ,” “we see God in the form of a man, his face shining brighter than the sun” (42).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Phil. 2:6–8.

<sup>26</sup>Is. 53:2 (New Jerusalem Bible).

<sup>27</sup>See Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* 10, PG 91 1165D–1168A; tr. Constat, Vol. 1, 265–273.

<sup>28</sup>Anastasius of Sinai, *Homily on the Transfiguration*, PG 89, 1361–1376.

i. Christ is the light of light, as we say in the Nicene Creed. Clément cites Cyril of Alexandria: “Christ is the glory of the Father, the glory issuing from the very substance of light.”<sup>29</sup> “The Son issues from the Father like a pure outpouring of light.”<sup>30</sup> (43).

j. This light constitutes the essence of beauty, because beauty is a divine name, a divine energy, one of the fundamental modes of the presence of God in his creation. In Christ, the light of divine beauty restores human beauty.<sup>31</sup> “He has reestablished the image of God to its original dignity and has united it to divine beauty.”<sup>32</sup> (43).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Cyril of Alexandria, *Dialogue on the Trinity*, PG 75, 1030.

<sup>30</sup>Cyril of Alexandria, *Thesaurus de sancta et consubstantiali Trinitate*, PG 75, 560.

<sup>31</sup>Here Clément appears to echo Emmanuel Levinas commenting on the names of God: “Chaque terme nomment Dieu ne saurait être moins qu’un nom propre. Ne feraient office de nom commun que le substantif ‘Nom’ ... et des formules descriptives. Nous avons insisté sur le fait que ces formules indiquent des ‘modes d’être,’ des modes de présence, à la fois séparation absolue (Sainteté) et proximité (Chekhinah)” Enrico Castelli, ed., *Débats sur le Langage Théologique* (Paris: Aubier, 1969), 55.

<sup>32</sup>Cited as Sunday of Orthodoxy – liturgical refrain. This is not in the text of the *Lenten Triodion* (London: Faber & Faber).

<sup>33</sup>Cyril of Alexandria, *Thesaurus de Sancta et Consubstantiali Trinitate*, PG 75, 559.

## The Face as Encounter

Nicolas Berdiaev described the face as “witness to the eschatological transformation of the world into the ‘image of beauty.’” Clément calls this a breach in the material world (*la déchirure dans l’univers*).<sup>34</sup>

Iconic viewing is an encounter with the divine presence—the *shekhinah*. Both Father André Scrima and Father Lev Gillet tell us that to utter the Name of God is a meeting with the divine presence. In *The Jesus Prayer*, Father Lev Gillet writes: “The Greek text of the New Testament uses three formulas when referring to the Name of Jesus: *epi to onomati*; *eis to onoma*; *en to onomati*. ... In *en to onomati* ... our spirit is transported ‘into’ the Name, within the Name, it is united to the Name and makes its abode there.”<sup>35</sup>

We find this summoning of the divine presence in Osip Mandelstam’s poem:

God, I said by mistake  
Never thinking, myself, to use that word:  
God’s Name, like a giant bird  
Flew from my breast.<sup>36</sup>

Here the divine presence is an instance of the *sudden*. In the concreteness of this image, we are reminded of the encounters of the Old and New Testaments, the chronicles of the encounters between God and Man-Adam—from the days of walking and talking together in the *Pardes*, the garden, to God’s anguished cry, “Adam, where are you?” From God’s anguished cry to Christ’s anguished cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The whole of the Old Testament is a story of encounter, an encounter that has at its heart the plea “Let me see your face.”<sup>37</sup>

And, Clément tells us, “the world ... only exists in the field of encounter of the gaze, in the communion of faces.”<sup>38</sup> In this encounter, we are in “the place in which everything begins to blaze.”<sup>39</sup> In “Visages de Silence,” Clément says that this encounter with the face is *Eucharistic*.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Clément, *Berdiaev*, 143, citing Berdiaev, *Essai de Métaphysique Eschatologique*, 200; Clément, *Questions sur l’Homme*, 37.

<sup>35</sup>Lev Gillet, *La Prière de Jesus*, 27. Andre Scrima, “Le Nom-Lieu de Dieu,” Castelli, *Débats sur le Langage Théologique*, 213–220.

<sup>36</sup>Osip Mandelstam, *Selected Poems* (1975), 31, translation modified based on *Mandelstam, Collected Works*, G. P. Struve & B. A. Philippova, eds. (Moscow: Terra, 1991), 17. This is a reprint of the 1967 New York edition.

<sup>37</sup>Clément, *Présentation de l’Eglise Orthodoxe*, 58.

<sup>38</sup>Clément, “La Neige Fond,” *Une Saison en Littérature*, 32.

<sup>39</sup>Clément, “L’Icône – Visage Transfiguré,” *Le Visage Intérieur*, 45.

<sup>40</sup>Fischer, *Portraits*, 34; Editions Paris-Musées, 35.

Clément wrote several books or articles on the theme of transfiguration: *Transfiguring Time*; “Transfiguring the Universe,” “Transfiguration dans l’Abîme,” “L’Icône, Visage Transfiguré.”

In “Transfiguration dans l’Abîme,” Clément writes: “It is enough to discover, beneath the depths of our own dereliction, this crucified God who breaks the gates of our personal hell ... [and to learn] that the Kingdom is already within us and between us: peace, light, joy, an end to exteriority, nothing but faces.”<sup>41</sup>

And in “L’Icône, Visage Transfiguré,” Clément writes: “The icon leads us from the perceived other to the hidden other, to the secret of her face ‘hidden with Christ in God.’”<sup>42</sup> ... God became face and the ‘ultimate proof of God’ for the person of today is, no doubt, the human face when it is stripped of all its pretensions and is lit up by another light, when the face begins to become icon.”<sup>43</sup> Finally, Clément writes: “The time is coming for a Christianity of transfiguration in which beauty will no longer be a symbol but, instead, the unveiling of a reality.”<sup>44</sup>

In the essay “Histoire et Métahistoire” he comments: “Christianity is a religion of faces because [citing Berdyaev], ‘in Christ, God becomes face and humankind in turn become aware of their own faces.’”<sup>45</sup> and he adds, concluding as it were the discussion of symbol and reality that was the subject of an earlier seminar on Clément’s symbolic language: “As a symbol that becomes reality as the result of a long ascesis, or in the life-changing eruption of love, the face witnesses to the eschatological transformation of the world into the ‘image of beauty.’”<sup>46</sup>

In “Le Dieu Visage,” Clément takes us through the antinomy of God concealed and revealed, which leads to the encounter with Christ, and with the person in whom we encounter Christ. The encounter with Christ leads to the revelation of the Transfiguration and the outpouring of glory, and this leads us to the meditation on the icon as a transfigured face. This sequence of veiled and unveiled, encounter and transfiguration, applies also to the face-to-face encounter with our neighbour.

In the icon, the matter of the world is employed to portray the image of the Saviour. In the face, the matter of the world, the *prosopon* (the external person) and the *hypostasis* are fused into one. Regarding the face-to-face encounter, Clément writes: “Then, for an instant, the face opens, this supreme place in which nature becomes porous to the person [becoming-hypostasis] and first of all by way of the transparency of the eyes. For an instant, the face is not seen according to the heaviness of nature but in God. And then everything is turned

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<sup>41</sup>Clément, *Les Visionnaires*, 13.

<sup>42</sup>Col. 3:3, “your life is hid with Christ in God.”

<sup>43</sup>Clément, *Le Visage Intérieur*, 62.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 90, “Aujourd’hui Quelques Chemins vers l’Esprit.”

<sup>45</sup>Clément, *Berdiaev*, 193, citing Berdiaev, *Le Sens de la Création*, 109.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 193, citing Berdiaev, *Essai de Métaphysique Eschatologique*, 200.



upside down. Rather than the person being explained by the world in which she is immersed, her presence suddenly sheds light on the world and explains its meaning.”<sup>47</sup>

The gaze is Eucharistic (“Visages de Silence”). This is the possibility of a Eucharistic encounter with the Other (*le prochain*) in the face to face. Paul Evdokimov makes clear the distinction between the Eucharistic transformation of matter into the host, and the *eikos*—the likeness—of the ikon. We can say that the host is Christ. We cannot say that the icon of Christ is Christ. Evdokimov explains this distinction with respect to the rite for the blessing of an icon: “In this rite, the fact of ‘naming’ the icon, ‘this image is the icon of Christ,’ and [the statement that] ‘this icon is sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit,’ signify that the ‘resemblance’ that is affirmed sacramentally confers on the icon the charism of the presence inherent in the Name. ... The Eucharist effects the transformation of the matter of this world into a celestial and transcendent reality. The rite of blessing the icon does not effect any transformation, but instead identifies the icon as the ... place (*lieu*) from which the *presence* of the Name radiates.”<sup>48</sup>

In a final proposition from “Une Approche Antinomique ou le Dieu Paradoxale,” Clément brings us back to the Name of Jesus: “On the Cross, the living God reveals his proper name to us and it is an expropriated name. The proper name Jesus designates the act of God, the act of liberation, the act of setting free, and this freedom is none other than the Spirit, the Breath, the Life itself of the living God.”<sup>49</sup> This expression of the Name to which humankind bows is at the same time apophatic.<sup>50</sup> We experience the identity in the world of the Crucified One and the Unspoken, the Ineffable One.<sup>51</sup>

The presence of the Name leads us back to the *apophatic antinomy* and to the deconceptualisation of theological thought that Clément discusses elsewhere with regard to the language of the Ecumenical Councils and the meditations on the divine image of Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor. Clément suggests the relationship of the *apophatic antinomy* to the veiling and unveiling of the face by juxtaposing the chapter “An Antinomic Approach to God” to the opening chapters on the face.

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<sup>47</sup>Clément, *Questions sur l'Homme*, 38.

<sup>48</sup>P. Evdokimov, *L'Art de L'icône*, 180.

<sup>49</sup>Clément, *Le Visage Intérieur*, 67.

<sup>50</sup>Phil. 2:10.

<sup>51</sup>In *Fondements de la Spiritualité*, Paul Evdokimov noted: “Icons further deepen the liturgical texts, becoming a contemplative reading of them. Where the spoken word becomes silent and powerless in face of the ineffable mystery, the icon continues.” This posthumous collection of essays was edited by Olivier Clément. Paul Evdokimov, *La Nouveauté de l'Esprit* (Abbaye de Bellefontaine, Spiritualité Orientale, no. 20), 71.

In *Présentation de l'Eglise Orthodoxe*, a teaching text prepared for the Institut St. Serge in Paris, Clément cites the kontakion for the Sunday of the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council to explain the veiling and unveiling of dogma accomplished through the work of the Ecumenical Councils:

“The Church was strengthened into one faith through the preaching of the Apostles and the doctrines of the Fathers. Robed in truth woven of the word of God from above, the Church unveils and glorifies the great mystery of faith.”<sup>52</sup> Clément comments: “‘The Church unveils ...the mystery.’ One thinks of Heidegger’s definition of truth as *a-leithia*, un-veiling ... in the sense of a truth that allows the infinite depths of its mystery to appear. This unveiling is not a *seizing* but a *being seized*. ‘Concepts,’ said Gregory of Nyssa, ‘create idols of God; only through being seized do we understand.’ This *being seized* ‘unveils and glorifies the great mystery of faith.’”<sup>53</sup>

The same veiling and unveiling applies to the encounter with one’s neighbour: Speaking at the Mount Tsukuba colloquium on Science and Symbols, in 1985, Clément said: “The reality of the irreducible person, when considered in the light of the Spirit, shows us that the more I know someone, the more they remain unknown. ...”<sup>54</sup> I would like once more to add that the Judeo-Christian tradition, in a very specific manner ... 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 (*non-pouvoir*).”<sup>55</sup>

This *non-pouvoir* is an abrogation or yielding of any power, rather than powerlessness. This encounter in the attitude of *non-pouvoir* links back to the stripping bare of the ascetic process and, in the encounter, results in a shift from the acidic corrosion of the person encountered, to the ascetic stripping bare of the person who encounters.

This encounter is the experiential equivalent of the apophatic antinomy of the encounter with Christ, as expressed by St. Gregory Palamas: “Altogether He is inaccessible, and altogether He becomes participable.” In his unveiling, Clément comments, “He remains concealed, by the superabundance of His light, for an encounter that is always new.”<sup>56</sup>

Clément concludes with a radical late statement of the theology of the face: “Today, a poetry of the created world, tomorrow a poetry of faces. Because the world, the world of God and the human, the world of

<sup>52</sup>Kontakion for the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council, <https://www.goarch.org/fathers-first-ecumenical-council>. Translation modified to reflect Clément’s text in *Présentation de l'Eglise Orthodoxe*, 40.

<sup>53</sup>Clément, *Présentation de l'Eglise Orthodoxe*, 40.

<sup>54</sup>Clément first formulated this in “L’homme dans le monde,” and here restates the same proposition.

<sup>55</sup>Clément’s intervention at the Mount Tsukuba colloquium (*Science et Symboles*, 435). For *non-pouvoir*, see Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 211–215, in particular, page 215: “The expression that the face introduces into the world defies not the weakness of my powers but the power of my powers.”

<sup>56</sup>Clément, *Le Visage Intérieur*, 73.

God made man and human called to become God, to *theosis*, only exists in the field of encounter of the gaze, in the communion of faces.”<sup>57</sup>

Further Reading:

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<sup>57</sup>Clément, “La Neige Fond,” *Une Saison en Littérature*, 32.

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