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TIME, INCARNATION AND ETERNITY

An Interview with Translator Jeremy Ingpen
on Olivier Clément and *Transfiguring Time*

English-speakers who have encountered the French Orthodox theologian and historian Olivier Clément (1921-2009) have usually done so through *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary*, often used in seminaries as an introduction to the Church Fathers. In Clément's brilliantly-linked texts, the words of the fathers come to life; or rather, burst into flame, and the reader finds himself in touch with the living spirit of the early Church.

Now, we have an equally important volume: *Transfiguring Time* – Clément's astonishing book on time and eternity recently published by New City Press. Through this spirited and moving discussion with the book's translator, Jeremy Ingpen, we hope that Clément's work will find a whole new audience.

I. Transfiguring Time: The Context

RTE: Jeremy, to begin, in the preface to *Transfiguring Time*, Ilia Delio tells of a 1922 debate between a leading philosopher of the day, Henri Bergson, and Albert Einstein. This debate, Delio says, “would ultimately affect how we understand the nature of time.” While Einstein claimed that time was simply physical and psychological, Bergson held that the future was “open, unpredictable, and indeterminate...” and that to act on the future we must look to the past. Bergson was so convincing that the Nobel Prize committee decided not to give Einstein the prize for his work on relativity, but for his photoelectric equation.

Opposite: Jeremy Ingpen.

Like Bergson, Olivier Clément views time not from the point of view of science, but philosophically, and specifically through religion – how a Christian would make sense of time as “eternity inserted into history”; that is, how the eternal God enters into time.

This is a remarkable beginning and, page after page, I found myself not only astonished by Clément’s *Transfiguring Time*, but impressed by your very clear and readable translation from the French original. What prompted you to become a translator, and particularly of this book?

JEREMY: I was born in England into a colonial family that had returned from India – my mother and her brothers were born there. My grandfather joined the Bengal Police after high school and ended his career as the Chief of Police in Calcutta. He was a phenomenal linguist who had forgotten more languages than I will ever know, and in his later years even taught himself Russian. He desperately wanted to visit Russia to see Orthodox services, but the Soviet government would not give him a visa because of his World War II Indian police work against the communists. He went to Orthodox Easter services occasionally when he was in France and in Switzerland and was the first to acquaint me with the Orthodox liturgy, when I was about fourteen. He also taught me French from when I was very young, and then I had French classes all the way through secondary school. Later, I spent time at the University of Bordeaux before attending my English university, and then I just kept using the language.

I have exacting standards as a translator. I began by translating poetry – trying to be accurate to the words, to the rhythm, and to the rhyme, which is nearly impossible, and therefore well worth doing. There is a temptation to paraphrase and just smooth over, but I don’t do that. I won’t say it’s a one-for-one match, but it’s pretty close.

RTE: And what led you to Olivier Clément?

JEREMY: At the time I was becoming Orthodox, the woman who ran our parish bookstore in Vermont pulled *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* off of the shelf and said, “You should read this.” I did, and like you, I thought, “Who is this Olivier Clément?” I skimmed it, but without the attention it deserved, and instead made the obligatory Orthodox convert’s attempt to read *The Philokalia* – until I had indigestion.

For many years, I'd worked in a small non-profit for affordable housing, but after the recession in 2008 we struggled for five years until finally I went to my Board and said, "Guys, we are running out of money. We need to force a merger and get rid of the executive director" – being myself.

My wife and I had moved to New York to be closer to her mother, not far from St. Vladimir's Seminary, and I thought, "Well, I can take some classes." I was wandering around the seminary library one day when I saw a book in French called *Transfigurer le Temps (Transfiguring Time)*. I had always had questions about time and as I pulled the book out, I saw it was by this same Olivier Clément. When I asked when it had last been read, the librarian replied, "Oh, this hasn't been taken out for thirty-five years." From the markings on the copy you could see that someone had gone over it very attentively, using his own system of marking passages. I began reading and very soon said to my wife, "This is an astonishing book. It has got to be known." As far as I can determine, that copy had belonged to Georges Florovsky.

So, there I was, now working as a consultant to the not-for-profit housing industry and thought, "Okay, so I don't go crazy, I will start translating this book I found." I gave myself a year to finish it, but it ended up taking four.

It is an amazing book. If you've become a little jaded, you can pick up this book, read one paragraph, and your mind soars – it is phenomenal. It is a great puzzle to me that it isn't just flying off the shelves. Clément wants you to be on fire and perhaps people just aren't ready for that. Clergy and laity both are often a little afraid: "What would happen if we were all aflame with evangelical passion?"

Some pages were so dense that I could only translate a paragraph a day; in many places it is pure poetry. I took the finished manuscript to New City Press – the publisher and custodian of other English translations of Clément's works: *The Roots of Christian Mysticism; On Human Being*; a little book about papal primacy called *You are Peter*; as well as Paul Evdokimov's *Orthodoxy* (a solid book with everything you ought to know), with a preface by Clément. New City said, "Yes, we'll do it," and it was published in 2019.

St. Vladimir's Press has also published a couple of Clément translations: the book *Three Prayers*, which has beautiful essays on the Lord's Prayer, O Heavenly King, and the Prayer of St. Ephraim; and, most recently, *The Song of Tears*, Clément's wonderful meditation on the Canon of St. Andrew of Crete. They also publish *The Living God* – a catechism in two volumes. This

has a preface by Clément, but the book is credited to a collective of Orthodox clergy and lay persons. However, Clément's influence is very evident.

Before his conversion, Clément had already written on alchemy and the transformation of matter, and after his baptism in 1953, he comes back to this idea in *Transfiguring Time*. But now he says that in the light of the Resurrection matter regains the "transparency" that it had at creation. So, he has these early core ideas that he expands throughout his life. In *Transfiguring Time*, he takes you from archaic ideas about religion, through the time of trials in the Old Testament, to the Incarnation, Resurrection, and what he now calls sacred or deified time. This is a huge sweep and much of his later thinking is already in this first book.

For *Transfiguring Time*, I had two very thorough and thoughtful initial readers, Fr. John Breck, who had taught at the *Institut Saint-Serge* (St. Sergius Institute of Orthodox Theology) in Paris, and Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. They had both known Clément and said that they could hear his voice in the translation.

Olivier Clément: Life and Times

RTE: Let's move now to Clément himself. Twentieth-century theologians sometimes mention the "Philosopher's Ship" a group of Russian Orthodox intellectuals, theologians and writers who were forcibly exiled in 1922 after the Russian Revolution. Many of these émigrés ended up in Paris, including Nicholas and Vladimir Lossky, Paul Evdokimov, Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Georges Florovsky, but few of us have heard of their younger colleague, the French-born Orthodox convert Olivier Clément. Can you tell us about Clément's life, connections, and the breadth of his writing?

JEREMY: First, as you say, he is purely French. If you find a video of him at a conference, you will see a passionately engaged, gesticulating Frenchman, dressed quite humbly but often with bishops on either side whom he is advising. He grew up in an environment in which God was not talked about. The received text is that he grew up in a wholly atheistic environment, but this is not the whole story, as he writes about finding a Gospel of St. John in a house that had belonged to his aunt, and a copy of the *Life of St. Sergius of Radonezh* on his father's bookshelves. However, he was never baptized, and God was never talked about.

When France was secularized in the nineteenth century, socialism in many ways became another church. Clément describes his village as divided between the Catholics, the Protestants and the Socialists – but he also describes them coming together in the evenings and at village bullfights. Clément himself had a deep fascination with spiritual things from an early age, particularly stemming from his distress at the idea of death, which he talks about in his spiritual biography, *The Other Sun*. He recalls how as a schoolboy, on learning that Charlemagne was crowned emperor in 800 and died fourteen years later, he suddenly understood the tragedy of death. In that instant, he realized that all of these bright historical figures were dead, just as he and everyone he knew would also die. This sense of mortality stayed with him, and was the foundation for his later spiritual search.

As a teenager, he encountered poetry: Charles Baudelaire, from whom we get the idea of correspondences between this world and the other world (the symbolic representation of “this matching that”); then Rainer Maria Rilke, Oscar Milosz, T.S. Eliot; and finally, Arthur Rimbaud, who he talks about almost as a theologian. So, he is steeped in French culture while being deeply interested in questions of mortality and eternity. This is not the Richard Dawkins’ “everything can be explained by science” atheism. The culture he grew up in was much more nuanced.

RTE: Although his family was socialist, he surely lived against a background of French Catholicism. Wasn't there a church in every village?

JEREMY: No, that doesn't really apply to his region. He lived in a very secularized society. He is in the southwest, in the territory that had seen the Albigensian Crusade against the Cathars in the eleventh or twelfth centuries, and then in the sixteenth, the incarceration of Protestants who refused to give up their Protestant faith. His religious environment was a landscape of ancient religious hostility. In a way, this is similar to what I grew up in – an English village where there was a memorial on the high street to sixteenth-century Protestant martyrs burnt by the Catholics and where the old stately homes had “priest holes” where fugitive Catholic priests had been hidden. These were terrible memories and growing up there, your choice is either to paper over it or to say, “a curse on both your houses.”

By Clément's time, government and education have been completely secularized. This is the France of the Third and Fourth Republic. So, he comes to Orthodoxy in his thirties without much of a sense of Catholicism.

Around the beginning of World War II, he goes to the University of Montpellier in southwest France. Paris is now occupied by the Germans, and some of the finest French intellectuals have retreated to Montpellier, so he is taught by Alphonse Dupront, a cultural historian whom we hear way too little about. Dupront had previously been a cultural attaché in Romania, and was responsible for bringing the renowned historian of world religions, Mircea Eliade, to France and getting his work into translation. There was also Marc Bloch, an outstanding medieval historian who in 1944 is shot by the Nazis. So, Clément is taught by both of these remarkable men and receives a very thorough training as an historian. In my own study of Clément, I find critics who say: “Clément is not really a scholar.” Or, “He’s not really a theologian, because he’s all over the place.” In reality, he is a profound scholar who defies categories.

If you read his purely historical studies, you will see a great historian at work. For instance, his article on the development of French thought from 1880 to 1940, focusing on Nikolai Berdyaev and the Personalist moment, is absolutely fundamental.

What is quite interesting is that Dupront, Clément’s mentor, was part of the French resistance and he recruited Clément. So now, the young 22- or 23-year-old Clément is running as a courier-messenger at night. He comes very close to death – sees someone shot – and asks to step back into a less front-line role. Towards the end of the war he somehow gets a copy of Lossky’s *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, right after it was published in 1944. How that happened, I don’t know, but there he is, sitting in a shelter at night with a communist buddy, a woodcutter by trade. Clément is reading this stuff aloud about the divine energies permeating all things and the atheist woodcutter, his eyes brimming with tears, says: “Yes, that’s it. That’s exactly it.” Soon after they retreat to a manor house, and on the shelves of the library is a book by Berdyaev. This is the first time that Clément’s reading doesn’t just speak to his interest in the spiritual world, but introduces him to the possibility of Christianity.

After the war, still in Montpellier, he takes the *Agrégation*, a killer exam that allows university graduates to teach in the famous lycée system – the French academic high schools. (When a friend of mine took the *Agrégation*, there were five hundred applicants and four were chosen to teach.) Clément

Opposite: Olivier Clément (Courtesy New City Press)



passes on the first try because he is absolutely brilliant. He is then involved in some kind of scandal – he doesn't say what – and moves to Paris to take his first job at the *Lycée Condorcet* where he works for a decade in a working-class Jewish neighborhood, where he becomes very close to these families.

Sometime later, he founds the Society of Believing Writers, which includes Jews, Muslims and Christians. Here, among others you find: Clément himself; Mohammed Talbi, a Muslim; Emmanuel Levinas, a major French philosopher who had been in a German POW camp during the war; and André and Bernard Chouraqui. André Chouraqui goes on to translate the New Testament from a Jewish perspective and Bernard becomes the deputy-mayor of Jerusalem. In addition to his studies on the philosophy of eternity and the nature of the person, Levinas teaches a weekly class on the Talmud. (He, in turn, had been instructed by a mysterious wandering Jewish scholar named Chouchani, who also taught the young Elie Wiesel.) So here we are already in an environment that is cross-religious.

Now, Clément never met Berdyaev, who died in 1948, the same year that Clément arrived in Paris – but in 1945 Berdyaev and Vladimir Lossky are on the editorial board of a journal called *Dieu Vivant*, (*The Living God*). This was founded by Marcel Moré and there were Sunday afternoon seminars at Moré's house in the late 1940s with Berdyaev, Lossky, Sartre, Camus, and the surrealist novelist Raymond Queneau in attendance. It is a surprising and improbable collection of people.

RTE: Would Clément have met the young Fr. Anthony Bloom, who was then in Paris?

JEREMY: Their time in Paris barely overlapped, as Clément arrived around the time Fr. Anthony left Paris to serve in London. Father Anthony had been mentored by Vladimir Lossky and knew the Parisian Russian theological scene well, but I haven't seen any indication that he crossed paths with Clément. In 1965, however, Clément sent a warm letter of support to (now) Bishop Anthony during a difficult time for the young hierarch, writing that, at a youth congress in Marseilles, "... I could evaluate the salutary light of your passing through. Greeks, Russians, French spoke of you with the unfeigned enthusiasm of men who have been touched to the heart." Clément goes on to say that he and others are "proud to have you as our bishop."¹

¹ Quoted in Avril Pyman, *Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh: A Life*, (Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, 2017)

So now Clément is teaching in Paris and after a decade of studying Eastern Asian religions he turns to Christianity and immerses himself in Irenaeus of Lyons, Dionysius the Areopagite, the Greek fathers, Maximos the Confessor, Nicolas Cabasilas, as well as the later twentieth-century works of Berdyaev and Vladimir Lossky. Two things then happen: he picks up a small triptych icon from a second-hand store that deeply impresses him; and he goes to meet Vladimir Lossky. In *The Other Sun*, he says, “I now found myself with all of this Christian knowledge and wondered what I should do with it.” In the end, he is baptized in 1953 at the age of 32, formally joining the Orthodox Church.

Already before 1953, Clément had become acquainted with Fr. Lev Gillet, who was pastoring a small Orthodox parish and, with Lossky, was editing the Orthodox journal *Contacts*. Lev Gillet spots this young man and, even before Clément’s conversion, has him on the *Contacts* editorial board. By the late fifties’ Clément is the secretary of *Contacts*, which puts him in touch with everyone in the Orthodox world.²

He becomes good friends with Paul Evdokimov (also on *Contacts*’ board) and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel. He also begins taking classes with Vladimir Lossky, who is teaching in the small *Institut St. Denis* seminary in Paris. He takes Lossky’s classes on dogmatic theology from 1954-1958. In 1958, Lossky dies without having published anything except *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, and a few articles. Clément then becomes the custodian of Lossky’s work, transcribing his own detailed lecture notes for what becomes Lossky’s *Dogmatic Theology*, first published in Paris in the quarterly *Jour-*

2 Ed. Note: In the early sixties, for example, Clément corresponds with the French-born American Trappist Thomas Merton, whose article on Mt. Athos had been published in *Contacts*, and Clément soon initiates a lively correspondence between Merton and Fr. Sophrony Sakharov, the disciple of Elder Silouan of Mt. Athos. Merton had acquired one of the rare original copies of *Transfiguring Time* and writes in his journal, “...this book of Olivier Clément is really excellent. Only now that I am in the middle do I realise that I have missed much by not reading with very close attention. A book to read twice. Few books deserve two readings.” Merton continues reading and two days later wrote: [Clément’s words are in italics]

The heart of Clément’s book – that “fallen time” has no present. *Fallen time is simply that pure transience where the present is only a point with no content, between the abyss of the past and the abyss of the future, only emerging from the former to be swallowed up in the latter. It is only the expression of an absence – the absence of God, and thus the absence of man to himself and to others.* Redeemed time is concentrated in a “present moment” and born of the presence of God even in our misery, insofar as our misery does not fall into despair, but rather, as one might put it, falls into the divine love, becoming therefore an opening of humility onto the new life in the risen Lord.

(A.M Allchin, “Our Lives, a Powerful Pentecost: Merton’s Meeting with Russian Christianity,” from a paper presented at the opening of the Thomas Merton Center at the Brown Library, Bellarmine College, Louisville, KY, Oct. 10, 1997. [Quotes from Merton’s journal, *Turning Towards the World*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996. Italicized lines translated from Clément’s original, *Transfigurer le Temps*, Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1954, p. 166.]).



nal de l'Exarchat Russe. Clément also edits Lossky's *The Vision of God* and *In the Image and Likeness of God*, as well as preparing Lossky's monumental thesis on Meister Eckhart for publication, and indexing it by hand.

RTE: Did Lossky write in Russian or in French?

JEREMY: Lossky was trained as a scholar of French medieval Catholic theology, and described himself as a French scholar. The caricature that has French Orthodox theologians with Russian names always being Russian exiles is not true; Lossky himself wrote in French, and only did a handful of articles in Russian. In his autobiographical *Seven Days on the Roads of France: June 1940*, Lossky wrote "I could never have lived or worked in Russia, whatever the regime. I am too deeply rooted in the West, in France, in particular."

So, Clément spent most of the 1960s getting Lossky's work into print as a homage to his master. It was a huge labor, and many doctorates have been given for editing much smaller works of theology. Lossky has been extensively studied in the West, and now in Russia he is being read with appreciation by many fine Russian scholars. His work is fundamental to the whole debate on the Neopatristic School and Russian religious philosophy. Unfortunately, the work of some of the other theologians of the 'Paris School' has been viewed with suspicion in conservative Orthodox circles.

Clément also wrote a definitive essay on Lossky that was first published immediately after Lossky's death in the *Journal de l'Exarchat Russe*, and then, after Evdokimov's death, as part of a tribute to both theologians called *Deux Passeurs (1985)* (*passeur* meaning a guide through mountain passes). Lossky saw himself as a "passeur" – a French-educated Orthodox scholar bringing Russian theology and culture to a Western audience. Like so many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century educated Russians he thought of himself as a bearer of European culture – he was thoroughly European.

Clément was introduced by Lossky to Fr. Sophrony Sakharov, who became his spiritual advisor. Sophrony had left Mount Athos and come to Paris where he lived in the tower of a dilapidated chateau, known as "the dungeon," and in *Transfiguring Time* you find many footnotes referencing Sophrony's *Life of Silouan*. Sophrony leaves for England in about 1952 or 1953, and with his departure it seems that Clément's direct contact with him ceased.

Opposite: St. Sergius Theological Institute, Paris. (Courtesy HaguardDuNord via Wikimedia Commons).

However, in 1958 another monastic comes into his life – the astonishing André Scrima, a young academic who became a monk, about whom people in the USA know little or nothing. Scrima was from an amazing circle of Romanian monastics and laymen that included Dumitru Staniloae and Fr. Roman Braga, who were soon to be imprisoned under horrendous conditions. Just before they were rounded up, Scrima had been invited to teach at the University of Benares, so he was in India when the arrests happened. He arrived in Paris in 1958 and almost immediately Clément did an article on Scrima's spiritual father (another monk we haven't heard of) by the name of Ivan (Fr. Ioann) Kulighin, an exiled Russian hieromonk from the famous Optina Pustyn, who had known the Optina Elders Joseph, Anatoly, Barsanuphy, and Nektary.

Optina had been closed by the Soviet authorities in 1923 and, after some time in the gulag, Kulighin escaped to Romania in 1943 where he became the spiritual father to a group called *The Burning Bush*, organized by the poet Sandu Tudor, who also became a monk. *The Burning Bush* includes Frs. Roman Braga, André Scrima, and a dozen others who met regularly for spiritual discussion and to learn the practice of the Jesus Prayer, influenced by the lineage of Paisii Velichkovsky and the spiritual legacy of Optina Monastery. When the Soviets enter Romania in 1946, they re-arrest the 64-year-old Kulighin and return him to Russia where he is sentenced to ten years hard labor in the gulag camps. He is never heard of again.

RTE: Memory Eternal! This is tragic, but it is also a fascinating link, because now we can draw a line from Optina Pustyn to Kulighin, Scrima and Clément, and a second line from Mt. Athos, with Sts. Silouan and Sophrony, to Clément.

JEREMY: Yes. There is a deep connection to this spiritual lineage behind Clément's work, and his writing on prayer in particular.

Now it was Fr. André Scrima who received Kulighin's final testament, his letter to his spiritual children, and from 1958 to 1964, while he is in Paris, Scrima becomes the right-hand man of Patriarch Athenagoras. He is the patriarch's official representative at the Second Vatican Council and later helps arrange the historic meeting between Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI, taking part in the negotiations that brought the mutual anathemas of the Great Schism to an end. Scrima is also a great spiritual teacher and towards

the end of his life he returns to Romania where, today, young scholars are writing about his and Kulighin's heritage.

I am quite sure that Scrima played an important part in Clément's intellectual and spiritual world, and the reason I say this is because, paradoxically, Clément says almost nothing about him. When Sherlock Holmes gets stuck, he always goes to see his brother Mycroft and whereas Sherlock is scurrying around with his magnifying glass examining everything, Mycroft only has to sit and ponder to get the answer. Just occasionally, when stuck, Clément will say, "As André Scrima said..." just a few quotes, scattered around his work. In the forthcoming translation of Clément's *Dialogues with Patriarch Athenagoras*, there is a paragraph on Scrima, where he says that "in Scrima's person the treasures of the Orthodox spiritual tradition were harnessed to support the work of the Patriarch." After this, Clément says, "May Fr. André Scrima forgive my indiscretion." Whether it was one of spiritual fatherhood, we don't know, but for whatever reason, their relationship was confidential.

In 1962, he wrote in his introductory survey, *The Orthodox Church*, that there were two great Orthodox theologians in the post-war period: Vladimir Lossky and Dumitru Staniloae. This is a remarkable statement because in 1962 Staniloae was still in prison and none of his work had been published in the West. But around the same time André Scrima is quoted as saying the same thing in an ecumenical forum in Paris. It may well have been Scrima who brought Staniloae to Clément's attention. In 1970, Clément publishes Staniloae's *Le Génie de l'Orthodoxie*, for which he wrote the preface, introducing Staniloae to the French reader.

RTE: This is a wonderful synopsis, Jeremy, a very solid picture of Clément's academic education and the Orthodox milieu that he converted into.

JEREMY: Yes, and also, this is the context out of which *Transfiguring Time* comes. The actual book took shape in 1957 when Clément was invited to attend a conference, "The Eighth Day of Creation," in Switzerland, in place of Paul Evdokimov. I think that Jean Daniélou, the French cardinal and theologian, must also have been there, because in 1958 he wrote a book with an excellent chapter on the eighth day. It seems likely that one or two chapters of *Transfiguring Time* came out of talks that Clément gave at that conference. Other bits may have come from a book review by Clément on a work by the Swiss theologian Oscar Cullmann on Christianity and time, because Clément refers to him throughout the book, as if in a debate with Cullman.

Then, in 1959, *Transfiguring Time* is published. The publisher is Delachaux et Niestlé, with offices in Switzerland and Paris, but it is actually printed on the presses of the Taizé community in a very small run of perhaps five hundred copies. It was never reprinted and it is very interesting to speculate on why it just disappeared. In *Transfiguring Time*, you already see Clément's mature thinking, but he might have looked back at it feeling, "that was then," and that he had outgrown its youthful enthusiasm. He continued to mine it, however, for I've found ideas and phrases from it in later writings. I am hoping that Éditions du Cerf, which published much of Clément's work in French and has already reissued his other early works, will also reissue *Transfigurer le Temps*.

Clément then writes two historical studies published in 1964. The first is on what led up to the Great Schism – from Chalcedon in the 500s to approximately 1000. In the second, he writes about Byzantium and the growth of hesychasm in the East. Together they provide an excellent overview of this period.

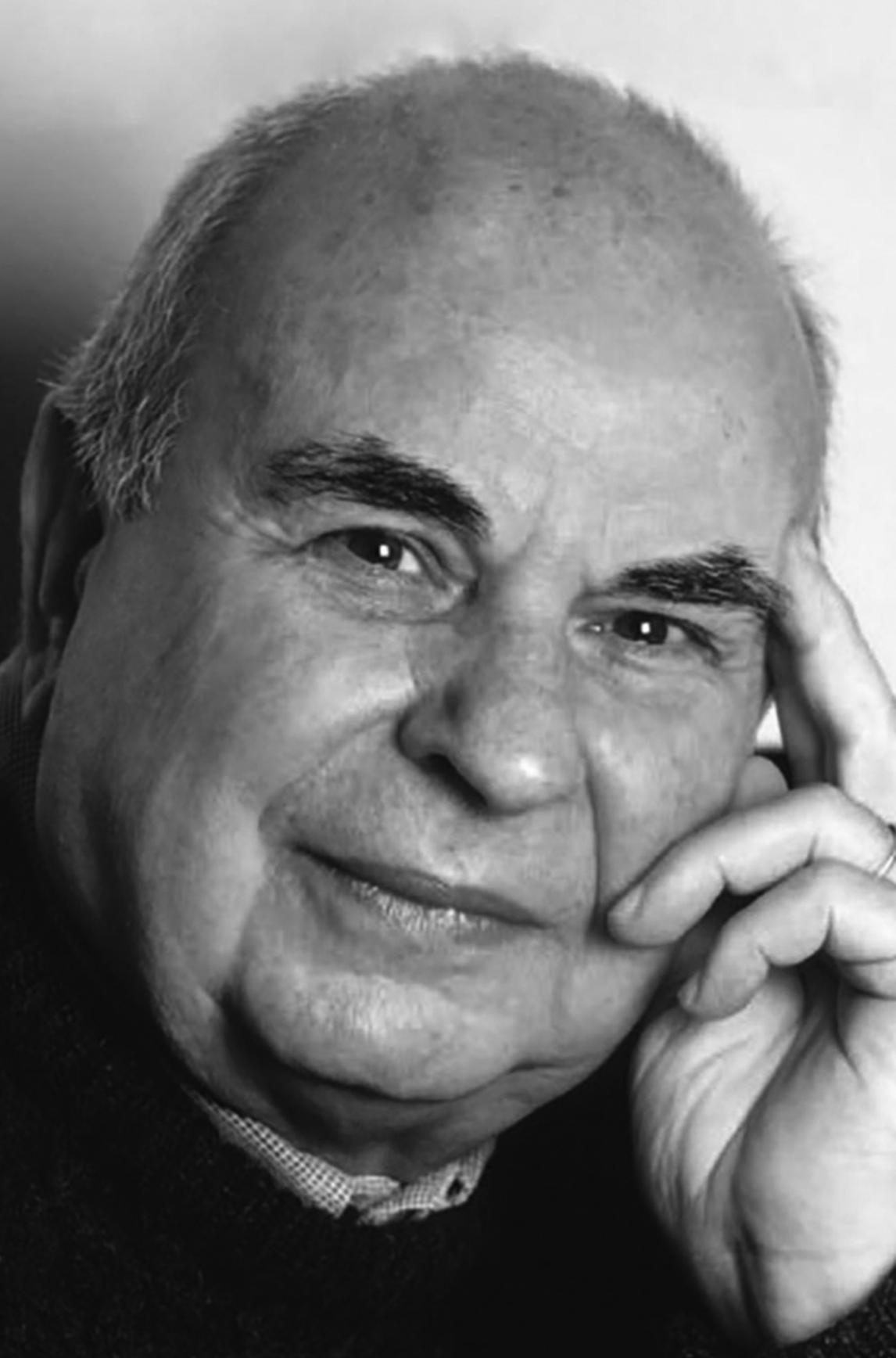
Clément was a whirlwind. It is said that he only wrote situationally, that is, when he was asked to present on something, but this isn't completely true. Several of his studies are from periods when he spent a year or two on a particular subject. For instance, he did a lengthy study of Berdyaev, published in 1991, and a year-long study that resulted in a book called *Le Visage Intérieur (The Interior Face)*. And obviously, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* was not a haphazard event: he sat down over a significant period to pull together what he knew about patristics. Later in life, Clément begins to think again about how to make real the Transfiguration, to unite the two streams of science and religion. What if scientists lost their Promethean ambitions and, looking at the beauty of matter, could grasp the mystery of transfiguration? This in fact takes him back to a theme that he had met very early on in Berdyaev and that he addresses in his early articles.

It is hard to imagine how Clément did what he did: writing thirty-five books while teaching at the lycée and at Saint-Serge, acting as an advisor to bishops and the patriarch of Constantinople, ghost-writing for the patriarch of Antioch, going to Romania to teach and visit Staniloae, and spending summers on the beach in his beloved Southwest home village with his family. It is difficult to imagine how he ever slept.

Some well-known critics have said that Clément is impossible to translate, but at this moment we have four new books out: *The Other Sun*, the auto-

biography of his repentance; *The Song of Tears*, based on the Canon of St. Andrew of Crete; *Transfiguring Time*, and the upcoming *Dialogues with Patriarch Athenagoras*, which will be out later in 2022. Now, with the earlier *Roots of Christian Mysticism*; *On Human Being*; *You are Peter*; and *The Spirit of Solzhenitsyn*, we will have eight books available in English.

European Catholics have been Clément's greatest academic audience outside of France, along with Orthodox readers in Romania and Lebanon, but with more translations in English, we hope that English-speaking Orthodox Christians will also want to read this remarkable theologian as one of their own.



II. Transfiguring Time: The Content

RTE: Thank you for that fascinating introduction. Can we move now to the content of *Transfiguring Time*? Clément's first chapters are on cyclical time in archaic and eastern religions. Am I right in remembering that before his baptism he explored the spirituality of the East quite extensively?

JEREMY: Yes, he spent ten years, roughly from age twenty to thirty, studying Asian religions. When he quotes Hindu scriptures in *Transfiguring Time*, it is evident that he has read these in depth.

RTE: Did he have connections with other French philosophers of that period who had turned East – such as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon or others of the Traditionalist School?

JEREMY: The scholar of the non-Christian East that he mentions most is Henri Corbin, a French expert on Islam. The person he keeps coming back to is the Romanian religious historian Mircea Eliade, and even today Eliade's work seems to hold up among religious scholars. So, when Clément talks about archaic religions, much of his picture is drawn from Eliade, although he also looks to other historians and anthropologists. He was not the only Orthodox Christian to have studied eastern religions and cultures – Fr. André Scrima, the Romanian monk, had enough proficiency in Hindi and Sanskrit to impress the vice-president of India.

RTE: His first chapters on the archaic and Asian (particularly Hindu and Buddhist) conception of time required concentration and a little re-reading, but the rest of *Transfiguring Time* is quite understandable, even without a philosophical background.

JEREMY: Yes, his thinking can be very dense and poetic. The thing to do with this book is to treat it like fine cognac. Sip it one paragraph at a time.

Archaic and Eastern Concepts of Time

RTE: In writing on cyclical time, Clément describes these concepts as a trap from which there is no escape, while those who believe in reincarnation

Opposite: Olivier Clément. (Courtesy New City Press, NY)

would say that linear time, which Christians believe is oriented toward God's kingdom, is no more than a single cosmic cycle. What else can you and Clément say about this conflict of world views?

JEREMY: Beginning with the archaic religions, Clément talks about these repetitive cycles as a desire to return to paradise. You recover paradise by burning up the present. In archaic cultures, such annual celebrations include orgies, temple rites, city festivals, but what they all have in common is the symbolic burning up of time in an attempt to return to the perfect beginning. Clément says that in this kind of belief there is no real history because you are just in a cycle of constant return.

I grew up in a village in England that still had bonfire nights – these fire festivals are so very old. Even the Christmas carol, “The Holly and the Ivy,” is steeped in a primitive Northern European religion of trees, berries, fecundity, the perpetuation of life. In the Hindu religion we have vast complex cycles – enormous eternities absorbed into even larger eternities. Here, “time does not reveal eternity; it obscures it.”

Clément describes Buddhism as a step towards purification – an attempt to strip Hinduism of its more elaborate features to get down to a raw purity of being – but again, always with an idea of return and rebirth that, in his view, does not allow for the uniqueness of the human person. For Clément and for us, it is Christ and his Incarnation that breaks through all of this. Sanctified time only starts at the Incarnation.

RTE: Serious Hindus also seem to believe that this goal of escaping the wheel of reincarnation isn't something that will happen in a hundred or even a thousand returns. It may take millions, perhaps billions of lifetimes.

JEREMY: I recently watched a presentation from the Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies at Cambridge, UK by a Hindu scholar who became Christian. She has studied her native tradition thoroughly. She says that in the Hindu way of thinking people are completely absorbed into this concept of spiritual vastness and eternity within eternity, and their uniqueness dissolves: Christianity allows the idea of the person to emerge. As Clément says, “I went through this vast world of Eastern spirituality that I found fascinating, but in the end, I felt myself swallowed up... I reached an impasse and Christianity was the way out.”

RTE: Clément also says that the Hindu and Buddhist view has begun to shift: “Since the beginning of the Christian era, the Hindu and Buddhist East has increasingly sought out a personal god and has thus begun to conceive of time as the locus for that possible encounter.”

JEREMY: Yes, this is an interesting passage. Clément says that in moving from the archaic religions to either Greek philosophy or to Hinduism and Buddhism, the I-Thou relationship with God that had long existed as intuitive insight within the archaic religions was lost. But he also sees the re-emergence of the personal encounter, both in Hinduism and in Buddhism; the emphasis in Buddhism over the centuries has changed from almost exclusively centering on the Buddha to honoring the bodhisattvas, those advanced mortals on the path to enlightenment who act as spiritual guides, teachers, and protectors. Clément even uses the “I will send a Comforter” language, and then adds, “But no bodhisattva has yet entered Nirvana!”

RTE: That would be an interesting place to begin a religious dialogue.

JEREMY: It would. In fact, in 1982 Clément was invited to a conference on Mount Tsukuba in Japan and, as part of the proceedings, there was a Shinto monk performing his rituals. Shinto is one of the oldest religions, but Clément writes that he found a “transparency” there. This is a striking expression. And the Shinto priest said of Clément, “I couldn’t understand a word of what he was saying, but I knew that he was a poet and a man of God.” So, there was this mutual recognition.

For Clément, however, the real center is the relationship of God as Trinity, and the incarnation of Jesus Christ that has opened the way for us to join in that communion: “The Eucharist protects the world and already secretly illumines it.” For Clément, the Incarnation is the moment in which real history begins.

Transfiguring Time was written soon after his conversion. It is very much the work of a young, brilliant, yet enthusiastic convert who has finally found the truth. Later he will caution us not to take superficial Western descriptions of reincarnation literally, that such religions have very nuanced understandings of cyclical rebirth. Nevertheless, in *Transfiguring Time*, he has the convert’s certainty that Orthodox Christianity has got it right and these other religions have not.

RTE: Over the past century, many westerners have been attracted to the cyclical view of time. In *Transfiguring Time*, Clément almost presciently speaks of nineteenth and twentieth-century western literature “...filled with a nostalgia for paradise akin to that of ancient times. Escape from time and the poetic magic of wonderland converge into a new atheism – a gnostic or mystical atheism, the growth of neo-Christian theologies that present ‘Christianity on steroids.’”

JEREMY: Yes, and you think, “This was written in 1958!” Since he wrote this we’ve been chasing after neo-paganism, alternative religions, and even mega-churches teaching the prosperity gospel. His foresight is extraordinary. This is the essential Clément.

RTE: He goes on to speak of cyclical time as “cosmic enchantment” and quotes St. Gregory of Nyssa calling it, “A children’s game played in the sand.” Later he compares the Orthodox ascetic’s “memory of death” to the Hindu dread of time – except that, as you say, in the Christian view, creation is always good. Can we say that the Hindu ascetic wishes to abolish time by destroying memory through successive “incarnations” while the Christian ascetic redeems time through repentance? Is this the crux of the difference for Clément?

JEREMY: Yes, this is fundamental. For Clément, the idea of the destruction of memory through cyclical time goes along with the sense that time and matter are bad – like New Agers who say “Ego is bad – get rid of ego.” No, time is blessed, and the idea of time as the fabric of creation is fundamental.

RTE: Is time as the fabric of creation Clément’s idea?

JEREMY: Yes, Time is not something added on, it is not an additional dimension, it is the actual *fabric* of experience.

RTE: Towards the beginning of *Transfiguring Time*, he sums up his belief that time is oriented toward our fulfillment in God:

Rather than simply being a dimension of space relative to the speed of light, time is the dimension of creativity and change that is inex-

Opposite: Stonehenge. Archaic celestial observatory and calendar, Salisbury Plain, England. (Courtesy, Cubske.46, CC BY-SA 4.0)



trically linked to the revelation of personhood and love.... just as the cosmos is oriented toward fulfillment in God, time is oriented toward fulfillment in eternity.... Eternity does not swallow up and dissolve the personal; rather it is the transformation of the personal into the full flowering of life, the continuing encounter face to face with the Living God.

JEREMY: That really sums it all up!

Platonic Philosophy's Unreachable Heaven

RTE: And Clément's views of pre-Christian Greek philosophy?

JEREMY: In his analysis of pre-Christian Greek belief, Clément speaks of Platonic philosophy's devaluation of the material world. What is valued is in an ideal heaven and what we see on earth are mere shadows of the ideal. Later heretical Christian sects like the Gnostics take it further: matter is seen as bad. In Manichaeism, you get to a fiendish division between bad and good. Clément presents a nightmarish vision of people trapped in a horrifying material world from which there is no escape.

It is fascinating to compare this to Jean-Paul Sartre, whose view of the material world was very similar. Matter is bad and unbearable and the depth of our being is a nothingness – not the nothingness from which God brought us into being, but a nothingness that Clément describes as a hellish world of damnation in which we are left sitting at the bottom of our refusal of God. Sartre adds, *l'enfer, c'est les autres* ("Hell is the others") and this is another hell from which we can't escape. The Platonic philosophers made an attempt to escape into a purer world of ideas and abstract objects, but even that is a world of illusion.

Clément has an interesting passage that links this to St. Gregory of Nyssa: "St. Gregory of Nyssa describes terrestrial existence as a web of illusion woven from futile cares; the dream mirage which arouses deceptive images of grandeur, wealth and pleasure in the intellect ..." But he is speaking about the illusory world of the Promethean wish of man to dominate, to control, to own, to exploit, to exercise our own will – not the world of created matter which is always blessed.

And Clément makes this same distinction when he contrasts the opaque image of a hell in which we have trapped ourselves, to the Christian under-

standing of the world. In Christianity, the created world is always good. This is fundamental: it was created and God said, “It is good.” So, creation is our first bible, although the ability to read it fully is lost at the Fall. Then we go through this extensive exercise of resistance, of battling with God, of refusal... until someone finally says, “Let it be according to Thy word,” and welcomes God back in. Now time is sanctified and begins anew.

The Closeness of God in Islam and Judaism

RTE: It is fascinating to read Clément’s early observations in *Transfiguring Time* on Judaism and Islam, where God is understood as an inaccessible monad, a remote Supreme Being from whom we creatures are separated by an unbridgeable gulf, while in Christianity we have Jesus Christ and the possibility of a personal relationship with God.

JEREMY: But on the other hand, in Clément’s dialogue with the Muslim historian Mohamed Talbi, Talbi says that in Islam “God is closer to us than our own skin.” And when you read the psalms, you feel the same – God is closer than your own being, your own breath.

How do you reconcile this with the idea of the inaccessible monad of Islam and Judaism? One of the Church Fathers wrote that the monad “reaches toward the dyad and is resolved in the Trinity,” the Trinity being perpetual communion, movement, openness, and joy. When Clément describes the Jewish concept of God the Father, he introduces the Hebrew concept of *raham*: the womb of the compassion of God, an image that is both male and female, “God the Father and Mother.” You look at that and think, “Alright, now I have an image of God the Father in Islam and Judaism that is very near to the intimate relationship Christianity offers.

The Old Testament, the Fall, and Redeeming Time

RTE: Can you say a little about how Clément saw the Islamic/Jewish view of time? You mentioned an unbridgeable gap, but isn’t that more about distance than time?

JEREMY: Well, I can only really talk about this from the Old Testament viewpoint. A number of things have happened at the Fall. Humans are sent out into the world to live by the sweat of their brows. The flaming angels are



placed to guard the doors of Paradise. And yet God provides for his people – he gives them plants and animals for food, and “garments of skins” for protection. And, Clément says, had they been allowed to stay in Paradise with their ill-gained vision of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil they would have burned up in the power of that knowledge. But once they have this premature knowledge, they now *need* time to re-enter Paradise. So, there is love and compassion even in what happens after the Fall.

The Old Testament is a time of experience and expectation, of trial and error. Clément adds that in this time of trial, God chose the most stubborn and difficult people, the most likely to resist. He didn’t choose the compliant; He chose the people of Israel, who would fight him every inch of the way.

There are so many ideas going on here. There is the *tsimstum* of Jewish thinking, which is God’s drawing back to give mankind freedom and room to move. So, in this long period of trial we step forward, step back, then forward again. Clément also says somewhere that God has had to put up with humans depicting him out of their own imaginations as a brutal, vengeful divinity who acts as humans act. These representations have turned many away from God. Atheists frequently cite Old Testament atrocities, and say, “Who could possibly believe in such a God?” Well, yes, this is quite right.

So, what else happens in the Old Testament? Clément describes the cosmic festivals becoming festivals in time, in history. The harvest festival becomes the memory of an historical event in the life of the Jewish people. A little further on he says that these memories become spiritualized. You see this in the Book of Psalms, where the stories become a metaphor for a spiritual journey. And all along God is waiting for someone to say, “Yes, I will.” This is Mary’s role. This is the Incarnation.

Clément says that the Incarnation is the central moment in history, that this moment reveals the full meaning of time because before the Incarnation there is no history in the sense of the record of the full participation of unique and unrepeatable people made in the image of God. Following the Incarnation, there is a meaning in time that cannot be burnt up in cyclical repetition. Time reaches its fullness and the barrier separating the human and the divine nature is destroyed.

Opposite: Detail of Byzantine sun dial at Panagia Skripou, Orchomenos, Boetia, Greece. (Courtesy Schuppi via Creative Commons.)

RTE: But if, before the Incarnation, there is no real history, how do we understand the history of the Hebrew people *in time* that begins in the Old Testament, as explained in Clément’s chapter “God and Time.”

JEREMY: I think you’ve put your finger on something important. Clément says that with the Old Testament we begin the account of the lives of human individuals, real living, breathing human beings, in time. And then he says the Incarnation is the central event in human history. And then, elsewhere he says that history cannot be understood without an understanding of the Trinity. Can all these three propositions be simultaneously valid? Perhaps I’ve not properly understood something, or maybe this is something that needs further clarification – one of the unresolved questions posed by *Transfiguring Time*.

Clément also says that the value of time is inextricably linked to God’s intent for man. For instance, he quotes St. Methodius of Olympus (then adds his own thought): “Man in his freedom is superior to the heavens and to the sun, which slavishly carry out the will of God’... but human destiny transcends that of the universe.”

Time in the New Testament Church

RTE: Now that we have come to the Annunciation and Incarnation, there is a fascinating statement in *Transfiguring Time* where Clément hints at the memory of the early Church. “To the extent that we are far removed from the awareness of deified time as revealed by the Church, it is difficult for us to imagine the splendor of time for the early Church....” How would early Christians have thought about worship in time and eternity?

JEREMY: If we think about the conditions under which people worshipped: We Orthodox still retain “The doors, the doors...”, calling for the closing of the doors during liturgy, which was only for the baptized, and “I will not speak of your Mysteries to your enemies.” These are memories of a time in which to be instructed in the beliefs and practices of the Church was a very serious thing. Once you owned these beliefs, you were prepared to die rather than to give them up. The presence of eternity must have been very close.

The image of early Christians worshipping in the joy of the Resurrection is a powerful one – they were united in the common cup and the conse-

crated bread of the Eucharist, which made the ecclesia one body. This was a society of expectation. They lived in expectation of Christ's return. Clément wrote about those epic memories and wants us to reach for that.

RTE: Although Clément had reservations about the claims of Christianity in the years preceding his baptism, he mentions, "hardly ever being parted from the Gospels and the New Testament." He was drawn by the early Church and seems to have experienced Scripture as a sort of icon.

JEREMY: Yes, and he always defended the absolute authenticity of the New Testament accounts. He edited an edition of the four Gospels with an extremely interesting introduction and notes, and he unhesitatingly states that "the gospels are the record of the memory of the early Church." Theories about later interpolations and editions abound among biblical scholars, and there may be a handful of passages for which this is true, but Clément would say, "Don't explain it all away in your search for the historical Jesus." Some academics would say that as an historian-theologian Clément should never have strayed into exegesis because "you just don't do that."

He attacks much of the literature on the "historical Jesus" and insists that the Resurrection appearances are among the oldest texts and that they describe a reality. In support of this, he refers to a French anthropologist, Marcel Jousse, a Jesuit scholar whose studies of oral tradition and group memory explain how rhythmic patterns in speech enabled illiterate people to accurately retain vast accounts of what had happened in previous centuries. These accounts are passed on with very little change. Jousse reconstructed what he believed to be the Aramaic voicing behind the scriptural narratives to show how they were transmitted through a rhythmically-structured form of oral tradition.

If you understand the strength of the oral tradition, you simply cannot insert a whole new narrative; someone will catch you out. So, Clément says that we have to read the New Testament as real, but not as a news narrative. For him, the scriptural language is a form of communion – as you say, almost an icon. The word of the New Testament already belongs to the Parousia, to the future age. He also says to really understand it you must have been introduced to the Mysteries, the sacraments, to Holy Communion.

In a coursebook for one of his classes at Saint-Serge, Clément expresses the idea that theological language crucifies the intellect with the attempt to

hold conflicting ideas together. For Clément, theological language is an icon in which something is revealed, yet it also functions like a Zen koan: two concepts cannot hold together, yet they do hold together; so, you are crucified in mind and begin to understand something that is beyond words. This is a very interesting frontier of his thought. Translating this coursebook, *The Presentation of the Orthodox Church*, is my next project.

Time, the Fall, the Ascent

RTE: Many of the early Christian and patristic writings quoted by Clément deal with the effects of the Fall and how this is countered in Christ. In his introduction to *Transfiguring Time*, he writes:

Time is kind of a permanent miracle.... But this changed with the Fall: The paradisiacal time of ascent is now the time of Satan's fall... no longer the passage from non-being into being. It is instead a passage from being into an...insatiable, and ever more ferocious drive toward annihilation...time made up of many dead instants, of lost time, of never again.

This is a sobering passage. How does Clément square this with the view of the created world that God called good?

JEREMY: A little further on he says, "What we are speaking of here is fallen time," and then he goes on to explore the possibility of escaping this through the Church, through Holy Communion. We have this world to use and we have the freedom to use it as we choose. One road leads to this fallen hellish condition and the other to a transformation of person and of time. It is up to us to choose.

RTE: How do these roads play out?

JEREMY: In his chapter on hell, Clément says: "I may not speak of hell for anyone other than myself." He quotes one of the Church Fathers who says that for some people the divine energies bring about transformation, transfiguration, and blessedness, while for others the same light reveals their own

Opposite: The Fall and Exile from the Garden. North door of iconostas, Nizhni Novgorod, Russia. (Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.)



sinfulness. If they are not willing to give up their sin, they will experience the light as something like an inner fire, whether at the moment of death or in some extended existence.

RTE: Yet the psalmist says, “If I descend to the depths, you are there.”

JEREMY: Yes, Clément goes on to say:

If the divine light reaches to the very depths of darkness, a person cannot shut that light out except in their own being, in that darkness they themselves create. And even if they turn aside and plunge into the heart of their own nonbeing, they will discover the crucified one.

It is important to distinguish the nonbeing that is the depth of human darkness from the “He brought us from nothingness into being.” These are very different things; they are not on a continuum.

RTE: Clément experienced fallen nonbeing when he was confronted with the tragedy of death as a schoolboy. He finds a way out through the New Testament and the writings of early Church Fathers such as St. Irenaeus of Lyon who heard the preaching of Polycarp, who had known St. John the Theologian. Just a few generations after the Resurrection, Irenaeus is writing that God drew man away from the Tree of Life and put death as a limit to man’s transgressions, hinting at a further good there.

JEREMY: Yes, and it is Irenaeus who adds that if we hadn’t been expelled from the garden, if we had been stuck in front of the Tree of Life, it would have been unbearable. The exile was an act of kindness. In this new existence, death offers us the possibility of a transition to a world where we shed all of these illusions and have a chance at a real ultimate encounter. (“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face....”) To sense the divine in nature, to fall in love, to stand astonished before a work of art or another person – all of these offer the chance to experience transfigured time, even if momentarily, in a foretaste of the Kingdom, of the Parousia.

RTE: It is interesting that the word *Parousia* not only refers to the Second Coming, but has the Greek sense of any impending arrival or presence. Can we see these as small universal communions allowed by God so that both Christians and those not yet part of a fully eucharistic faith can meet trans-

figured time in the midst of daily routine? Like a compass, guiding us in the right direction?

JEREMY: Yes, we are only fully persons in our attempt to reach God and in our communion with other people. The revelation of Christian time and the revelation of personhood go along with what we said about personhood being lost in the vastness of Hindu or Buddhist eternities. In Lossky's and Berdyaev's reading of the Church Fathers, the person is irreducible. Lossky differentiates persons from individuals, who can be lined up side by side like atoms. Personhood includes communion with others and an essence that is unknowable.

Clément makes the analogy between the ultimate unknowability of God and the unknowability of persons. To understand this, I like to use the icon of Holy Saturday, which portrays the harrowing of hell. Christ is holding the hands of Adam and Eve and behind him is a black disk. Dmitry Andreev, who has painted this icon for our church, told us that the circle does not represent darkness and nothingness, but rather the unknowability of God. God is knowable in his energies, but unknowable in his essence. Clément applies this same idea to the person.

He relates this understanding to the practice of the Jesus Prayer (he prefers the term "Prayer of the Heart") where, in the process of the prayer descending into the heart – the reintegration of seasoned prayer – we have the image of a fully human person, of a nous in touch with both God and human intellect. Clément's *On Human Being* addresses personhood at length, as does his book on Solzhenitsyn.

RTE: As you said, Clément is in the spiritual lineage of Paisius Velichkovsky and the Optina elders, as well as St. Silouan of the Holy Mountain and Fr. Sophrony Sakharov, all who were practitioners of the Prayer of the Heart. Does Clément write about the prayer in relation to time?

JEREMY: I don't think he makes that connection. He talks about the prayer descending into the heart and the reintegration of the human person – the chance we all have to reintegrate, to not be divided persons. With Frs. André Scrima and Ioann Kulighin he had the example of people who were extraordinary *pneumatikoi* – people transfigured by the Spirit. Clément believes that you can regain Paradise, or as he says, something "better than Para-



dise.” Because he didn’t grow up Christian, he said, he was free of the idea of returning to Paradise. Instead he reached for the Parousia. For Clément, prayer not only reintegrates the person, but saves the world.

RTE: Then, with this understanding, can we go back to the Fall? After saying, “The biblical revelation compels us to reject antiquity’s conception of time, as well as the contemporary mathematical concept of time,” Clément adds, “The time abolished by eternity is the bad time of separation....” Yet, if the Fall is a gift...

JEREMY: It is a gift, but this brings us back to St. Gregory of Nyssa’s passage about cyclical return – contrasting Christianity to archaic religions and the web of illusion: “All is vanity” says the preacher in Ecclesiastes. Berdyaev quotes one of the Church Fathers, who says something like: “Creation rebelled at the Fall because it had suddenly been made opaque and blocked away from God. It wanted to rise up against man, but God stayed creation and instead put it under the priesthood of man, to speak for it and articulate its meaning, its *logoi*.”

Yes, the Fall is a separation, but the fathers also clearly understood that in the Parousia, when time as we know it will be abolished, this separation will cease and God will be all in all. Clément then asks, “Does everything then stop?” Obviously, everything doesn’t stop, but we can’t speculate on how it is going to be.

RTE: As Augustine says, “God sent people out in the woods to collect switches for those who ask what happens after.” (*Laughter*)

Time Intersected by Eternity

RTE: What more can you tell us about Clément’s idea of deified time, the time after the Incarnation?

JEREMY: If we take the image of the Cross, we have time on two axes. This is liturgical time. On the horizontal axis we move from early time, say the time of Abraham, to the Second Coming. Along the way are the forefathers and the saints. This horizontal axis is the continuum of Christian time and tradition, but it is also intersected by eternity. Eternity is the vertical axis that

Opposite: Sand Hourglass. (Courtesy Michael Himbault)

appears in the Cherubic Hymn during liturgy, where we say, “Come down from thy dwelling-place...we who stand here representing the Cherubim.” This is an axis whose height we cannot imagine, but we also do not know how far down it goes. Perhaps it goes all the way down to the depths of the worst hell we can create on earth.

But the astounding thing about the worst hell we or others can create on earth is that Christ is found there. The account of one of the imprisoned Romanian thinkers, Fr. Nicolae Steinhardt, of finding Christ in the pit of hell and despair, is utterly astonishing.³

This is the vertical axis of time interpenetrated with eternity. Clément seems to suggest that in the Old Testament, there is only linear time moving forward, for he makes the distinction that it is only after the Incarnation that we move into the deified time which includes eternity. An astonishing concept – time interpenetrated with eternity.

Transformation and Transfiguration

RTE: In his chapter on “The New Structures of Time,” Clément says that our almost exclusive concentration on “before” and “after” actually devalues history by making the present, the only moment we can live in, “an insignificant instant.” He adds:

We have escaped from the engulfing static eternity of the non-Christian East only to fall into the sterile infinity of a mathematical series.... Eternity is oriented toward time and... sustains and marches with time toward encounter and fulfillment. In the biblical perspective, time is neither opposed to eternity nor is eternity reduced to time.

JEREMY: The larger context of these words is that this diminished theology of “static eternity” and “sterile infinity” lacks an adequate concept of the transfiguration of the world and the possibility of participating in the Parousia even now. For Clément, transformation and transfiguration are there for us in the act of receiving Holy Communion, in encountering another person and, through them, Christ. It is not enough to say that we are living in the end times, and if some hellish event comes along, to say, “Well, we’re in the end times, it’s okay. We’re all killing each other but in a little while we’ll get

³ Steinhardt’s memoirs, *Diary of Happiness*, will soon be published in an English translation.

to the right place.” No. The possibility of the Parousia is now: “Today is the day of Resurrection.”

That brings us back to your point about devaluing the moment. If we are always waiting for the future to arrive, we won't put everything we have into the present moment, and then we are living in a kind of myth. The only thing we have is this moment. All that we know about yesterday, or even about Abraham and the prophets, for example, or about the future, is now. We can dig into books or some fossilized materials, but we really only have now. And this is what the communists did so wrong. Their banners read, “Tomorrow we are building socialism,” but the response was, “Yes, but today we don't have anything.” Everything was deferred. The human being was completely and utterly devalued because “we are building socialism.” This goes back to the Gnostic hell where your knowledge chains you to despair.

RTE: After emphasizing the present moment, Clément adds another dimension: “Time, speaking metaphorically, is a creature and therefore, as is true of all creation, it is good and has meaning.” This idea that time is somehow alive is stunning. Should we no longer think of it as an abstract system outside of us?

JEREMY: Yes, but it may be more correct to say that time is part of creation. In the French, the word “creature” has a further shade of meaning – “being a part of that which is created” – which we have lost in English. But then if time is a part of creation, you can't ask, “What was God doing before time?” You can't think about what happens before time, nor can you speculate on what time will be after the Second Coming when everything will be transfigured. If we accept the Big Bang theory, we could say that from the instant that God begins to create out of nothing, time starts. There may have been timeless eons before that, but there is no chronological time before that moment. This is why we can say that time is part of the fabric of creation, and what Clément means when he says that we can't just consider time as a fourth dimension – because this just locks us back up in the sterile box. If we try to take time out of our experience, slicing and dicing it, and then putting it on the shelf as something outside of ourselves, it is no longer intrinsic to our being.

RTE: Speaking of the instant that creation began, what can you say about Clément's references to Sts. Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa writing on Plato's insight about the "sudden."

JEREMY: Clément says that the "sudden" is something that is at the limit. If you take an element that is at the limit of a phase change – water turning to ice, for example – the "sudden" is the moment of transition in which it is neither in its previous form, nor yet in the future form. He applies this both to creation and the Incarnation.

There is also a note about "the sudden" in Vladimir Lossky's doctoral thesis on Meister Eckhart which Clément edited. Eckhart says, "No matter that Christ's birth took place at a specific historical moment: it is an instant out of time at the limit of time and eternity." About this Lossky comments:

"This is the meaning that Meister Eckhart gives to St. Paul's "in the fullness of time he sent his own son" (Gal. 4:4). The fullness of time is the moment where there is no time. Let us recall that when Dionysios the Areopagite wanted to speak of the "suddenness" of the incarnation, he used the Platonic language of *exaphnais* – the irruption of the eternal that breaks into the continuity of time."

RTE: And Clement again – on the beginning of time:

This is the sense of St. Paul's words, "He chose us, in Christ, before the foundation of the world...." "Before" does not mean chronologically anterior. It signifies God's plan in the moment before time in which he turns toward the birth-giving of time.... It is God's "ideal will," his energy, that in the instant at which time opens, causes providence to roll forth.

JEREMY: Yes, and this is exactly where we return to the idea of the "sudden." We come back to the linear concept of time, and to Clément's criticism of Oscar Cullmann for asking what happened before time. In the passage you quote from, Clément himself seems to be treading perilously near to talking about what happened before time, but I think he is really only trying to relate the belief that the Word is present at the time of Creation. He later seems to intimate that the Incarnate Jesus was somehow also present at the time of

Opposite: Cover of Transfiguring Time by Olivier Clément.



Olivier Clément

Transfiguring Time

Understanding Time in the Light of
the Orthodox Tradition

Creation, but that is as far as I can go. I'm really not very good at theological speculation. (*Laughter*)

The Secular City and the Heavenly Temple

RTE: In his introduction to *Transfiguring Time*, Clément speaks of our contemporary dilemma with time, specifically our progression to the “secular city.”

The whole problem of the conceptualization of time is implicitly Judeo-Christian in its origin. The modern myth of progress is a naïve secularized form of the biblical expectation of the Messiah.... As Bulgakov demonstrated, the Hegelian dialectic inherited by Marxism is merely a degraded form of Trinitarian theology.... To the extent these concepts have been severed from their theological roots, it is not surprising to see a resurgence of cyclical conceptions of culture influenced by the natural sciences from Nietzsche's “eternal return” to the closed cultural cycles.... Such concepts have received additional support in our day from a deeper study of non-Christian Eastern thought.

JEREMY: Yes. In his final essay, “The Common Mission of Christians in the Secular City,” which is included as an afterword to Michel Evdokimov's *Two Martyrs in a Godless World*, Clément says, “In the secular city one has the feeling that there are no more temples.” He loves to talk about the passage in the Book of Revelation of the descent of the heavenly city with its crystal walls. “In the New Jerusalem there is no temple and there are no more priests. There is no sun or moon or stars, because the light is all from within; and within this world there are no temples because God is all in all.”⁴ And then he says “In our modern secular city, one also has the feeling that there are no more temples, or those that exist are hard to find and it is hard to work out what purpose they serve.” I think of walking by churches in New York City with a sign on the door: “Closed. Services at 10:00 am on Sunday.” But Clément says, even in the secular city “there are men and women, and human faces and these are the prophecy of the Kingdom.”

⁴ Rev: 21.10, 22-26.

RTE: Isn't this also an experience of "the sudden?" If the face is a tearing of the opacity of the world through prayer, kindness, love, looking into the eyes of a child, then we have another way to break through our fallenness. These are moments of suddenness where opacity recedes and life becomes transparent again.

JEREMY: Yes, this is a moment of encounter. There is a wonderful passage where Clément talks about three presents: "...in the present God presents Himself as 'a present'." (Fortunately, it works in French as well as in English.) There is a lot of talk now about presence in the moment, presence in encounter, and it is interesting to realize that these ideas were already there in 1958.

RTE: He follows that, saying: "Time provides the necessary space and distance for man to be other than God, without however becoming fully self-sufficient." The idea of time as something that God gives us to help our return puts it in a completely different perspective than seeing it as a static and even terrifying condition of our life on earth.

JEREMY: Or a treadmill that we are on until we reach the day of release when we are carried off to the other world. We cannot fully become a person without God, and are actually diminished if we try to do this with our own efforts. The other part of this proposition is that you can only be fully human "in communion," and by communion Clément means partaking of the Eucharist.

Through the Eucharist we receive a foretaste of the Parousia. The Church gives us the concrete experience of the Body of Christ in the Parousia at the moment of the consecration of the Gifts, and again in receiving Communion. Through Chrismation, the Spirit offers each of us the possibility of assuming a new life from within. But even so, the tension between fallen time and transfigured time doesn't go away. If it did go away, if after Baptism and Chrismation we received a perfect world and were never allowed to go wrong, we would have been deprived of our freedom, and therefore of our personhood.

"The Eucharist protects the world and already secretly illumines it. When Man-Adam rediscovers his forgotten kinship and draws life from Christ... in the union of Communion we are no longer separated." Here Clément says



that in Christ *homo sapiens* is revealed as *homo adorans*, a liturgical being who begins to be able to give thanks in all things – to *Eucharistify* the world, as the apostle says.

On Certain Limits of History

RTE: As we bring this to a close, will you comment on Clément’s chapter “On Certain Limits of History”?

JEREMY: Clément’s wife Monique said to me that *Transfiguring Time* is also a meditation on the meaning of history. Her phrase, *Le sens de l’histoire*, translates as “the meaning of history,” but it could also mean “the direction of history.” Here Clément returns to the essential, irreducible role of the human person and the human encounter. It is an absolute rebuttal of the Marxist historians of the 1950s-1960s who saw everything through the lens of economic inevitability with no room for human freedom, or the person. He wants us to move beyond the twentieth-century debate about whether history is driven by economic determinism or by individuals – for example, did Napoleon change history or was he just a creature of his economic and cultural context? Clément answers:

There is absolutely something more here. If we accept that the consequences of the Incarnation are rolling out in history, and the fullness of the human person is being developed because of it, this is much more than a contingent event by a single individual who accomplishes certain things.

He wants the historian “to approach the depths of human experience and to grasp the different existential levels on which a person may be placed....” He wants history “to become an analysis of the circumstances in which freedom is exercised, rather than an analysis of the causes that are claimed to determine the scope of freedom.... In this way authentic history leads beyond the exploration of “natural conditions” to the discovery of personal freedom and the encounter with the other.” This is a theory of history that deserves serious pondering.

Opposite: Fresco of the Anastasis. Church of Chora, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Courtesy Till Niermann via Creative Commons)

RTE: It is also wonderfully patristic – the rolling out of the Incarnation into fulfillment. On that note, do you have any final words for us?

JEREMY: Well, this has been a great opportunity to explore a landscape that I spent four years getting to know while translating *Transfiguring Time*. Clément gives us a vision of our life in the Church, as “Paradise regained and the inauguration of life in the Resurrection, the miraculous suddenness of dawn and the light without end of the eighth day,” and of our encounter with our neighbors, “whose faces ... are the prophecy of the kingdom.” We have used a lot of superlatives in this discussion, but this is literally breath-taking stuff.

We will have another opportunity to read Clément in a conversational mode when the *Dialogues with Patriarch Athenagoras* are published this summer (2022).⁵ This book has been described as Clément’s masterpiece. In it we hear the voice of Patriarch Athenagoras:

Christ prayed that we all might be one, so that the world might be one, so that all may believe. Even now, trust has begun to replace the fear and distrust that has for so long gripped the Churches: or rather, that has ruled inside the Church, because there is only one Church. These summer months, Christians of every confession come to see me, from all over. We talk like brothers and sisters. We pray together. Love descends on the face of the Church and transfigures it.

Even though we have waited fifty years to be able to read it in English, the *Dialogues with Patriarch Athenagoras* have lost none of their immediacy and still speak directly to our concerns. They offer a vision of the world restored to transparency, like the waters of the spring at Blachernae under the protecting veil of the Theotokos. ✦

For Further Reading

Olivier Clément’s *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* is now in its 16th printing! Be sure to get the 2nd Edition, which has an index - very useful for looking up patristic citations. Clément’s spiritual autobiography, *The Other Sun*, translated by Michael Donley, was published by Gracewing in the UK. Clément’s *The Song of Tears*, also translated by Michael Donley, was published

⁵ In production. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, MA.

by SVS Press – both in 2021. Vladimir Lossky’s books, with the exception of his untranslated study of Meister Eckhart, are also published by SVS Press, including his autobiographical *Seven Days on the Roads of France - June 1940*. Olivier Clément’s final essay “The Common Mission of Christians in the Secular City,” was published as the afterword to Michel Evdokimov’s *Two Martyrs in a Godless World – Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alexander Men*, New City Press, 2021.

Clément’s study of Berdyaev was published by Desclée de Brouwer in 1991. His study of the face, *Le Visage Intérieur*, was published by Salvator in 2017 (1st edition, Stock, 1978). His dialogue with Mohammed Talbi is in *Un Respect Têtu*, Nouvelle Cité, 1989. Clément’s *L’Eglise Orthodoxe*, now in its 8th edition, has not been translated into English. Clément’s edition of *Les Quatres Evangiles* was published by Gallimard in 1998.

Nicolae Steinhardt’s *Diary of Happiness*, is forthcoming from SVS Press. There are plans afoot to publish André Scrima’s *Le Temps du Buisson Ardent (The Burning Bush)*, but it is yet to appear, and there is no sign of an English translation yet.

Cardinal Jean Daniélou’s *Bible et Liturgie* contains his essay on the eighth day of creation, (Editions du Cerf, 1958). Patriarch Ignatius IV’s writings can be found in *Resurrection and Modern Man*, SVS Press, 1985, and *Orthodoxy and the Issues of Our Time*, University of Balamand, Lebanon, 2006.

Alphonse Dupront’s work has not been translated into English – his 1987 *Du Sacré – Croisades et Pélerinages* (2nd edition, 2012) gives an excellent introduction to his work. Marcel Jousse’s *Anthologie du Geste*, which specifically discusses the language of the Gospels, does not appear to have been translated, but some of his other studies of folklore and language have been published by Routledge.