

Orthodoxy and the Mystery of the Person: Interview with Olivier Clément

Translated by Michael Berrigan Clark

In August 2005, the website Nouvelles clés (New Keys) published an interview with Olivier Clément by Alain Valade and Jean Puy. Although the site, dedicated at the time to content from many spiritual traditions, has since altered its focus and is no longer accessible in its original format, this interview with Olivier Clément remains of interest. Clément's responses show the breadth of his knowledge of world religions and offer surprisingly apt predictions about the Orthodox Christian world.

Resolving the mystery of the person may seem too ambitious a task for humanity, although individuals may have some intuitions concerning it. Do you think the return of certain ancient ideas, such as reincarnation, is something of an optical illusion?

There is only one life. But since we are not separated from anyone, we can have a privileged connection with one or another deceased human person with whom we are "one." We can "remember" what happened to that person. "This happened to me, yet not to me, since we are in communion." I know a monk of Mount Athos whose spiritual father is Saint Isaac the Syrian—who lived, nevertheless, in the 7th century.

And with whom he feels a strong connection?

Absolutely. There's an example of this in [the Russian spiritual classic] *The Way of the Pilgrim*. After the death of his elder, the young hero continues to communicate with him. One night, while he is tormented by a question, the elder appears to him in a dream. He says to him, "Open your *Philokalia*," and, still in the dream, marks the margin of the text with a piece of charcoal. When the hero wakes up the *Philokalia* is there, open, with the charcoal mark in the margin. And why not? I believe we are linked to

the dead by a spiritual or fleshly line of descent that we carry in ourselves: our ancestors, our spiritual fathers. It's not exactly reincarnation. There is resurrection, and the possibility of communion and memory, living memory, with one or another being from the past with whom I am close and whom I carry with me in some sense. I think that originally, even in India, the word reincarnation did not mean what it has come to signify today. For one simple reason: in ancient India it was believed that the human condition has assumed the whole sensible cosmic reality within itself, and consequently, there was no risk of being reincarnated as a toad or a star since humanity is already toad and star. Ancient India, therefore, thought that the self could, after death, in the case of an individual not having attained the absolute, slip into other states of universal existence: demonic or angelic states, capable of being reflected on the earth in some creature or another, either hideous or sublime. From that basis, a distortion and a materialization arose in the notion of reincarnation. Instead of thinking that the soul of the deceased had entered into the domain of universal existence (which is an angelic existence) symbolized, for example, in the beauty of a swan's neck, it became common to say that the deceased had become a swan. I believe that this shift in meaning occurred.

But aren't certain early Christians said to have taught reincarnation?

No. They taught metempsychosis; that a soul passes through multiple spiritual stages after death. Something that reconnects with the vision of ancient India. For several Church Fathers, it is very clear: there is an exodus of the soul through various angelic or infernal states. There are several lovely stories on the subject, a little ridiculous in their form or expression, but significant nonetheless. They tell how, at every passage from one state to another in the invisible realm, one confronts a border guard of demonic customs officers, who seize the unfortunate soul and remove from it everything relating to their sphere of influence. It might seem that they would annihilate the soul, but in fact they purify it. And so the soul continues on its journey. It crosses the customs barriers and finally, totally purified, it is able to enter eternal light.

These are the themes of the Tibetan Book of the Dead or the Epic of King Gesar of Ling!

We need all of these various expressions. We must look at all that. The truth is inclusive, not exclusive. The theologian [Sergei] Bulgakov used to say: "When one speaks of the various religions, there exists a pan-Christianity." It must be widened in order to become "pan"! I believe some Roman conceptions of the state of the soul after death have ruined everything with the idea that, automatically and without our being able to do anything about it, we enter the beatific vision, slip into hell, or go off to purgatory.

Sheikh Bentounès told us recently concerning the topic of pluralism: "Today, we have discovered the importance of biodiversity. Cultural

diversity has always been a rich resource. Why shouldn't diversity in metaphysical approaches also be a source of richness?"

I agree completely. We must begin by listening in order to understand, and not dismiss with the back of our hand.

On that topic, how is interfaith dialogue progressing for Orthodox Christians?

Before the Russian Revolution, such dialogue had already begun. The extraordinary Archimandrite Spiridon [Kislyakov], whose writings on missionary work in Siberia have been translated, used to say that he held the Buddhist sages in such high esteem that he hardly dared to speak to them of baptism!

Did this openness include the primordial traditions, the shamans who speak of the relationship of humanity with the cosmos?

Father Sergei Bulgakov, perhaps the greatest Orthodox theologian of the 20th century, held very admirable opinions on this topic. He was a Marxist theorist before the revolution, later converted to Orthodoxy, was ordained a priest, was then expelled by Lenin in 1922. He founded the Saint Sergius Institute in Paris, where he died in 1944. According to his teaching, called sophiology, all the earth seeks to express itself, to encounter the divine wisdom. Bulgakov states further that it is necessary to reintegrate the old myths and pagan symbols into Christianity. In my view, this is absolutely essential.

Do you see this as an invitation to reconciliation?

We carry within ourselves the archaic foundation of life, the cosmic sense of the spiritual. Any reconciliation must carry this nuanced proviso, however: that the goal must remain one of communion, not fusion. This becomes a poetics of personal communion and of communion with the living God, who must be thought of in negative terms: he is beyond everything we can say about him.

And the progress of current interfaith dialogue?

A dialogue with Islam is taking place at Antioch, in Lebanon, and in Syria, where there is a worthy attempt to translate Christian categories into the language of the Koran. Having said that, the Orthodox Church is currently locked in place, and it is clear that fundamentalist circles [*milieux intégristes*] are not at all inclined to interfaith dialogue.¹ In California, a fanatic American convert to Orthodoxy, Seraphim Rose, has written incendiary books in which he treats Buddhists, Hindus, and everything that is not Orthodox according to Seraphim Rose as diabolical and worthy of damnation. This sort of talk does not get us very far!

Has fundamentalism [intégrisme] affected the entire Orthodox Church?

The churches are divided. In Russia, the discord centers around the problem of the liturgical language, Slavonic, a beautiful language, created at the end of the first millennium by Byzantine missionaries. It played a foundational role in the development of the Russian language, but the people no longer understand it. Reformers would like to make some simple liturgical adjustments: discreet russification of Slavonic, increased participation of the people in liturgical celebration, a less imposing iconosta-

sis (the partition covered with icons separating the nave from the sanctuary). They would retain the traditional texts, the beautiful liturgy, and the para-liturgical practices (so often very touching) such as the blessing of food. But all of this would be rendered more intelligible.

On the other side, fundamentalism flourishes, and is on the rise for a number of complex reasons. The conservatives and fundamentalists currently seem to have the upper hand. The patriarchate is moving in this direction. All the people working for renewal in both liturgy and patterns of thinking have been systematically excommunicated in recent years. At Ekaterinburg last May, books by the best Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century were burned, on the orders of a young bishop who considered them far too modern!

Why this radicalization?

It is due in part to disappointment with the West. After perestroika, the underbelly of American culture arrived: fast-food, sex, money, drugs, religious cults. This provoked a reaction and a retreat, with a nostalgia for a state church and, in a certain extreme-right milieu born from communism, nostalgia for an antisemitic and nationalist church. A fair number of people in the Church hope that the state will protect them if they take power along with it.

How will all this end?

In the long term, I am optimistic, although only 55% of Russians claim they are baptized. Many were baptized in the aftermath of perestroika but have gone missing since. Practicing faithful now represent one and a half percent of the population.

¹ The French terms *intégrisme* and *intégriste* are only imperfectly rendered as *fundamentalism* and *fundamentalist*. The English terms are more colored by the Anglo-Saxon context of biblical literalism and anti-scientific theorizing. The French terms tend more to connote cultural separatism and church/state cooperation and coercion.

Was this just a flash in the pan?

Let's not forget that in the Orthodox world, a very strong connection ties the church to the nation, a connection the church blessed, strengthened, and upheld, notably under the tsarist regime and in the countries subjected to the Ottoman Empire. One feels in the former Eastern Bloc nations a need to retrieve a national continuity, a memory and a sense of belonging, more than a personal faith. This has not resulted in many new faithful Christians. Furthermore, there was no one to welcome them and catechize them. As conservatism currently has the wind in its sails, an enormous number of young and open minded intellectuals, intelligent and profound in their thinking, have no possibility of expressing themselves fully in the church. They do so on the margins. With them, a great new Orthodox thought is being reconstituted, but it will take a long time before they can enter the Church and modify its general policies. In the short term, I think they will undergo many ordeals. The times are hard.

Is a great reform council like Vatican II possible for the Eastern Church?

Currently, no. Attempts at adaptation to a certain modernity were abandoned at the beginning of the [previous] century. A council was prepared in 1905 in Russia, but the emperor Nicholas II, far too timid and fearful, didn't dare convoke it officially. It finally met at Moscow in 1917 and 1918, between the fall of the tsarist regime and the setting up of the communist dictatorship.

It outlined a sweeping internal reform of the Church, proposing in particular a greater responsibility for the laity in parish life and the election of bishops

by the clergy and the people, with the subsequent consecration of the bishop by his peers. Benjamin of Petrograd, elected by the people during the revolution, was metropolitan until Lenin had him shot in 1922. Likewise, there were interesting efforts in Constantinople. Then everything was crushed by politics—the Russian revolution, of course, but also the Turkish revolution, which expelled the Greeks living in Asia Minor. The patriarchate was greatly weakened and unable to push to completion the vague attempts at reform. On the contrary, a kind of fundamentalist constriction settled in its place. In Russia, and then in the other communist countries, confronting persecution became a necessity. To that end, one closes oneself off, one stiffens resolve and falls back on what one already possesses. The most notable bishops were deported or killed. Those who remained in place during the most recent decades—in the time of stagnation—were also stagnant, but remained in power. To gather a council today, therefore, would not necessarily be a good thing. We must wait for younger generations to come forward in these countries and allow a new mode of thinking to be established. I believe this will happen. We must be very patient.

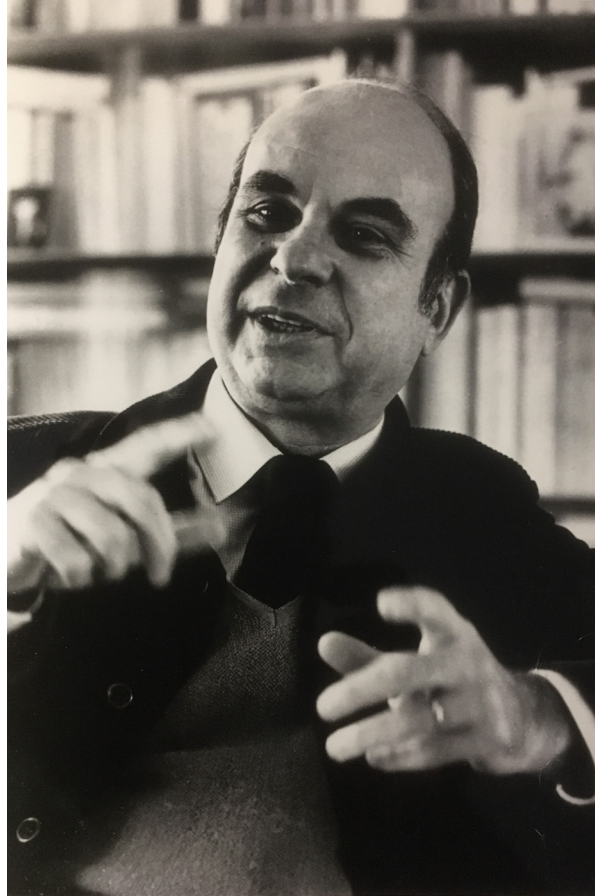
We know that Rome has largely built its symbols around Good Friday but that Byzantium has emphasized Easter Sunday. What do you think of this difference?

The West seems to have been very influenced by the theology of redemption developed by Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century. It considered original sin to be an offense of infinite magnitude because it was committed against God. The sufferings of an incarnate God were therefore necessary to repair it. These ideas

led the West to develop an entire cult of the merits and sufferings of Christ, which were therefore able to alter the disposition of the Father toward us and render him once again favorable to us. The East never defended this thesis. It preserved, notably in the Liturgy and in the fathers of the Church (the fathers of the Roman Church are not any different in this regard), this very simple vision according to which reparation for sin remains secondary. Rather it is a matter of God realizing his plan, which is the deification of humanity. God became man that man might become God. The East is not ignorant of the mystery of the cross, namely that God incarnate descended into the depths of evil and hell in order to fill everything with his light. But it is the light that is the essential thing. Today in the West, Anselm's conception is largely abandoned. Popular sensibilities however remain strongly marked by this narrative of the sufferings necessary for reparation. This is, I believe, something very serious and very important. The West had a tendency to forget the offer of deification. The possibility, however, is very real. In Christ, the era of the Holy Spirit opens. The Spirit's goal is to transform humanity, to penetrate it completely with divine light, to transfigure it and to help it become a humanity that transfigures the world.

It is very touching to hear you say: "As an Orthodox believer, I believe in the resurrection of the flesh."

This is the creed of the Apostles. What is a person if not a face given to the material world? I think the moment will come when the Spirit will move so strongly that hate, idiocy, separation, and cruelty will be swept away and the world will appear transfigured. Each one of us will be inscribed in the matter of the transfigured world,



and this will be the resurrection of the flesh—every person, in his or her unique properties, assuming the transfigured world. We have a premonition of this in what the Gospels say, in a stammering fashion, concerning the condition of Christ between his resurrection and his ascension, when he escapes from the modalities of fallen time and space, modalities that separate and isolate. He is, for example, present in several places at the same time.

And so "the glorious body" makes its entrance on stage?

The glorious body [Phil. 3:20–21] and the resurrection body are one and the same thing. The "person" draws from the glorified world a glorious body. And it is the glorified world that will be one's glorious body.

In that person, what is eternal? The body, the soul, or the spirit?

All three are called to eternity through the mediation of the person in God and through the transfigured cosmos. Everything will be transfigured, our body and our intelligence. Obviously, we cannot express this except through short narratives, often naïve or even idiotic. I'm thinking, for example, of a beautiful passage of [Dmitry] Merezhkovsky in one of his books. He speaks of an old man who says: "For me, the Kingdom of God, it's very simple. I loved my wife very much, so I think that she will be there and everything will be as it was in the most beautiful moments. And there will be no death, no separation. That's it." It is what we have a foretaste of in certain moments of joy and fullness. But these moments disappear and finally death comes. Imag-

ine that these moments do not disappear, that there is no more death!

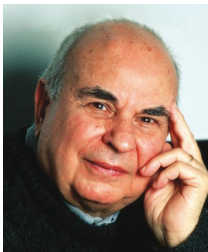
Do you think about all those who have left us?

They are all still alive. I think that the human person eludes death and that upon the human person everything is written and everything will be written.

[Jorge Luis] Borges said in the course of a lecture on immortality: "I certainly would not want to be named 'Borges' in the afterlife!"

I imagine so. And he will not be called Borges. It is not one's family name that matters. When one takes communion in an Orthodox church, the priest asks your first name and says: "The servant of God so-and-so partakes of the holy and precious body and blood. . . ." ☩

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Olivier Clément (1921–2009) was a French lay Orthodox theologian who devoted his life to the study of Christian spirituality and ecumenical rapprochement. Raised in an agnostic household, he was baptized into the Orthodox Church in 1951. For many years, he was a professor of moral theology at Saint Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris. He wrote more than thirty books.