

The Kingdom in Our Midst: Review of Olivier Clément, *Transfiguring Time*

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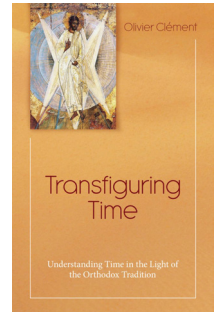
Originally published in 1959, *Transfiguring Time*, one of the early works of the French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément, finally appears in Jeremy Ingpen's lucid and lovely translation. Ingpen also provides a useful introduction, which helps the reader become acquainted both with the author's person and with the style and outlook of his writings—a welcome addition, as Clément's prose is notoriously dense and challenging. Yet it is also highly lyrical, and his citations of texts from the liturgy, the fathers, and other writers immensely illuminating. His *Roots of Christian Mysticism* is particularly rich in this regard. Above all, he is extremely discerning, so the investment of the encounter is always worthwhile. This is most definitely the case with his examination of time. It is a welcome addition to the works of Clément available in English.

Clément came to Christianity only as an adult, having been raised in Languedoc without any exposure to faith or the Church. This was the region in which Protestants hid from royal oppression, their "desert." The excesses of religious conflict and state sponsored religious persecution drove many away from faith. This was the case for Clément's family as for millions of others throughout Europe—something we often forget in the New World. Clément was trained

as a historian and taught at Paris's prestigious Lycée Louis-le-Grand. His profound learning is evident in the first third of this book, in which he takes us through the Asian traditions and their visions of time.

It was Vladimir Lossky's work that first introduced Clément to Christianity in the Eastern tradition. He was invited to teach at Saint Sergius Theological Institute by Paul Evdokimov, a member of its first graduating class and an important theologian in his own right. Like Evdokimov, he wrote in French, was ecumenically engaged, and drew on all the great world traditions of faith. He wrote a revealing study of Evdokimov and Lossky as visionaries bridging East and West. Toward the end of his life, he conducted lengthy interviews with Pope John Paul II, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, and Brother Roger of France's Taizé Community, publishing these as books.

Some will be surprised at Clément's striking breadth of sources and perspectives. While the last third of the book is devoted to Eastern Church sources, both patristic and Russian, Clément is generous in consulting Hindu, Buddhist, ancient Greek, and Judaic traditions. This is most evident in the first section of the book, in which he explores cyclical time. He ranges through the world's religious traditions, look-



Olivier Clément, *Transfiguring Time: Understanding Time in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Jeremy N. Ingpen (Hyde Park NY: New City Press, 2019).

ing at archaic efforts to see time as repetition, a cyclic course of seasons, day and night. He probes Greek myths, such as the narrative of Persephone, as well as Plato's *Republic*. He continues on to examine Hindu and Buddhist constructs of time. At this point, the Christian tradition is joined to this pondering of cyclical time, with Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor as his interlocutors.

This wonderful dialogue among traditions of faith continues in the second section. Here he focuses on the distinctive visions of time in the Hebrew scriptures and then in the New Testament and a train of writers following. One should not be surprised to hear as well from contemporary writers like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and Graham Greene. Clément is at home with early Christian writers such as the author of *The Shepherd of Hermas* as well as Cyril of Alexandria, Irenaeus of Lyons, and Augustine. He cites the Syriac divine office along with theologians of our time such as Rudolf Bultmann, Oscar Cullman, Georges Florovsky, Evdokimov, Louis Bouyer, and Sergei Bulgakov. Like others in the "Paris School," Clément is refreshing in his ecumenical and cultural generosity—the range of the authors he cites bears witness to this. And, like Alexander Schmemmann in particular, for him the liturgy is the *theologia prima*, the essential first source of theology. The liturgy and its texts figure prominently for Clément; he cites and paraphrases the Scriptures liberally, illustrating their proclamation of the tradition of the Church. In the second section, the linear view of time of the Hebrew Scriptures leads to his discussion of the "economy of the Son": In Christ and his resurrection, everything about time is changed, as is the course of God's plan. A "new

creation" comes with the incarnation and Christ's trampling down death by death.

Central to the third part of this volume is Clément's argument that in the Holy Spirit's economy, time is transfigured and so are we, in the resurrection and through Pentecost. Echoing Bulgakov, Clément is concerned not only with the historical Pentecost described in the Acts of the Apostles. The Christian life, rather, is a "perpetual Pentecost." In the liturgy, time is sanctified. We are transformed into the image and likeness of God—our deification. Time figures prominently in all the scriptures, from the creation in Genesis all the way through the Book of Revelation, where there is a completion. In its vision, we see time ultimately transfigured in the new Jerusalem and the *parousia*, Christ's coming again.

In time, the world sees swift passage and disappearance, the end of everyone and everything. But there is God's time in which we become ourselves, in which we are transformed in the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of God—Father, Son, and Spirit—in love for us. The conflicts and struggles of our individual lives as well as the clashes of history, of the world's time around us, also figure in this plan of transfiguration. Clément never takes flight into the last days and things. The kingdom of heaven is in our midst. Jesus in the Gospels proclaimed this kingdom and the good news in terms of harvest, planting, wedding feasts, mothers caring for children and baking bread, fishermen heading out with their nets, even tax collectors transacting government business. The path to the fullness, when God is all in all, leads through the everyday, through all the cruelty, violence, and misery we know all too

