

# Olivier Clément, Theologian of Modernity

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Translated by Michael Berrigan Clark

Please allow me to begin with a digression of a personal nature. When I shared the title of my contribution, it was suggested that I identify the works of Olivier Clément upon which my efforts directly depended. I replied that I would refer to several of his works, principally *Dialogues avec le Patriarche Athénagoras* (1969, 1976), *Questions sur l'homme* (1972), *L'Autre Soleil* (1975), *La Révolte de l'Esprit* (1979), *Anachroniques* (1990), and "*La Vérité vous rendra libre*": *Entretiens avec le Patriarche oecuménique Bartholomée 1er* (1996).<sup>1</sup> In addition, I make use of a work in Greek translation entitled *La Théologie après la mort de dieu* [*Theology after the Death of God*] which, in addition to its general interest, has a personal value for me. Indeed, it is this book, relatively unknown in French, that first brought me to the work of Olivier Clément when I was sixteen years old. This book was published in 1973 in Athens and exists only in modern Greek. It constitutes the seventh volume of a theological collection, *Synoro* [*The Frontier*], published between 1970 and 1973 under the care of the Greek theologian and philosopher Christos Yannaras. This collection contributed decisively to the renewal of theology in Greece and to the exchange of ideas between Greek Orthodoxy and the theology of the diaspora and Orthodox thought of the West. This book is made up of two long essays in

Greek translation. The first is entitled "*Dionysos et le Ressuscité*," and was initially published in 1968 following the revolt of May 1968. It attempts to respond to contemporary atheism from a Christian point of view. Clément's arguments are notable for being both flawless and original. The second essay, entitled "*Le sens de la terre*," found its way into Clément's book *Le Christ, Terre des vivants* after being published in *Contacts* (1966). In it, he outlines a Christian cosmology in dialogue with ontology, technology, and modern science.

Clément's Greek book had an enormous impact in my country from the moment of its publication. As the poet and translator Kaiti Chiotelli remarked at the 2010 colloquium on Olivier Clément, the book continues to make quite an impression (both positive and negative) right down to the present day. It is considered an audacious and honest theological reflection that enters directly into discussion with the challenges posed by modernity and contemporary atheism, as represented especially by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. These three, according to Clément, have formed the most dynamic synthesis of atheism. It is in part thanks to this book that I came into contact with theology and my own identity and theological bearings began to take shape.

This contribution to a colloquium at the Saint Sergius Institute on the work of Olivier Clément was published in French in *Contacts* 267 (2019). The article has been only lightly abridged by the omission of some footnotes of little interest for the general reader.

<sup>1</sup> Some of these texts have been translated into English, as *Dialogues with Patriarch Athenagoras* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2022), *On Human Being* (New City Press, 2000), *The Other Sun* (Gracewing, 2021), and *Conversations with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I* (SVS Press, 1997).

Although I put it aside and have had little occasion to consult it over the last forty years, I recently discovered it again and found it entirely fresh and current, as I was preparing for another colloquium on the relationship of Orthodox theology and contemporary science. It seems to me that Olivier Clément was very happy with his Greek book, which he included in the lists of works “by the same author” in his later books.

In spite of my personal attachment to this book, I don’t claim that it is the only one of his to take note of the challenges to Christian thought

raised by modernity. On the contrary, the theme of modernity and related questions are found at the center of his theological concerns—although rarely identified as such—to such a degree that he may rightly be called “the theologian of modernity.” Once familiar with his family origins, his intellectual and spiritual itinerary, his conversion, and his philosophical and theological associations, one understands his affinity for the question of modernity.

Furthermore, Olivier Clément was the spokesman for an Orthodoxy open to the modern world, to art, and to science. There will never be another observer so critical of the sclerosis of Orthodoxy and simultaneously so amazed at the treasures of its liturgical heritage, its ascetic and monastic traditions. Although a critic of Western civilization’s dead ends and spiritual neurosis, he never succumbed to the temptations of anti-occidentalism and the anti-ecumenical spirit, as many other Orthodox theologians did—either for theological reasons or as fallout from the Yugoslav civil wars and the anti-Orthodox campaign that followed in the media and the public arena. Clément remained a convinced ecumenist for his entire life, and was often reproached for this reason by ultra-conservative Orthodox. He defended the idea that the Christian East and West constitute the two lungs of the Church, an idea already developed by Father Georges Florovsky in the 1940s and earlier.

This theological openness of Clément to the modern world allowed him to adopt, contrary to many other Orthodox theologians of his time, a positive attitude with regard to modernity and secularization. In numerous writings he expressed a preference for the separation of



church and state, even for the French concept of *laïcité* [the unique French understanding of the primacy of the secular in the public sphere], and defended the biblical and specifically Christian origins of secularization, science, and modern technology. Against the majority of his contemporary Orthodox theologians and, even more remarkably, in contrast to today's theologians and church hierarchs, Clément was not afraid of secularization, which he considered simultaneously "the daughter of Athens and Jerusalem," considering the topic calmly and constructively, citing both negative aspects and beneficial effects.<sup>2</sup> As he noted in the *Entretiens avec le Patriarche Bartholomée*:

It would be false and dangerous to see only the negative aspects of secularization in order to denounce them and dream instead of a new Christendom. In the secular world, which is here to stay, even if considered only as a rampart against various fanaticisms, there are many hints of its origins in the Greek and the biblical world. Respect for the other, liberty of the mind, the best of pluralistic democracy . . . all that, said Bartholomew I, is rooted in the biblical revelation of the person and the distinction made by Christ between the Kingdom of God and that of Caesar. We Christians, therefore, do not experience secularized society as a foreign entity, and we must try to *reorient* it from the inside. It is essential to take this word *reorient* in its fullest meaning; if Eastern Europe must in one way or another complete its apprenticeship in "laïcité," then Western Europe must rediscover, partly at least thanks to Orthodox witness, its

own interior "Orient." It is indeed impossible to confront problems exclusively according to their economic, social, or political dimension; it is equally necessary to consider their moral and religious depth. God is neither the enemy nor the competitor of humanity. In Christ we discover that God alone is human. Wherever this God is poorly understood, no human being can be understood in integral fullness.<sup>3</sup>

Clément had no illusions about what preceded secularization and modernity; he never sought to glamorize either Byzantine civilization (which he described eloquently on many occasions) or the medieval West that he knew so well from his background as a historian. With a clear mind he brought to light the consequences of the politicization of the Church, of its attachment to imperial ideology, of its transformation into a politico-cultural regime under the form of "Christendom."

Since Theodosius the Great, and taking a clear turn for the worse in the West in the time of Charlemagne, the God of the Church has become an imposed God. In the Middle Ages, people were most often converted as a group, not through so many personal adherences but as hierarchical political communities, on the orders of their noble masters. The German tribes—who took up the same methods—were forced to baptism at sword point. Everywhere, even in lands freely Christianized, the image of God became lumped together with the image of the emperor or the earthly king, by a quasi-regression to the Old Testament model. God became the keystone of the social

<sup>2</sup> Olivier Clément, "La Vérité vous rendra libre": *Entretiens avec le Patriarche oecuménique Bartholomée 1er* (Paris: J.-C. Lattès, 1996), 214.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 219–20.

edifice, the prohibitions of a hierarchical and patriarchal society were sacralized, their transgression denounced as sin. . . .

The process of secularization liberated the Church from its moralizing role; it became less and less responsible for sacralizing social prohibitions. . . .

In the time of Christendom, the temptation was to sacralize society in a static manner, allowing eschatological tension to weaken. The Church accepted that the state would constrain individual consciences, although there were, to the honor of the Gospel, characters such as Nil Sorsky, who reminded the authorities that they ought to pray for heretics, not burn them. Despite the witness of the spiritually-minded, the normal tension between the Church and the world was falsely transformed, in the very heart of the Church, into a separation between clergy and laity. At the end of the Western medieval period, some even spoke of two bodies of Christ; and, at the same time period, the Christian East saw the overdevelopment of the iconostasis.

If the Constantinian era is today long gone nearly everywhere, the reaction against it remains on the same level, “progressivism” replacing “fundamentalism” without the ability to overcome the principal Constantinian temptation: the shift from a mystical (and eschatological) conception of the Church to a sociological conception.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth noting that, according to Clément, the emancipation from this reductionist conception of

Christianity—a conception that has, among other effects, tarnished the image of Christ the liberator—has not been carried out against modernity, but rather as a consequence of it. More precisely, it has been made possible through constructive dialogue with modernity’s most distinguished representatives—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud most significantly, but also Feuerbach, Marcuse, Reich and others. As noted above, all the liberation movements (whether personal, social, political, or artistic) took place outside the Church, outside historic Christianity altogether. Our theologian made use of poetic language and went beyond both the theocentric perspective of the Middle Ages and humanism deprived of all spiritual sense, seeking their synthesis, that is “divine-humanism,” a key idea running through his theological work. As he wrote in the aftermath of the May 1968 upheaval:

And so the witness of Christians in today’s society is turned toward divino-humanism. A religion of God against humanity, a religion forgetful of the “royal” creativity in the Holy Spirit, has unleashed both the purifying revolt of the great reductionists and prodigious explorations of human nature. But today humanity cut off from the Spirit is threatened by death, not only spiritual but also physical. It is essential that modern humanism find its place clearly within divino-humanism, in which Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud will appear also as precursors. At the heart of a humanity on the path to unification, one dreams of a Church once again undivided, uniting the ethical and cultural dynamism of the Christian West to the unshakeable faith of Orthodoxy, itself in a mediating role with a more distant East.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Olivier Clément, “Dionysos et le Ressuscité,” in M.J. Le Guillou et al., *Évangile et révolution au cœur de notre crise spirituelle* (Paris: Centurion, 1968), 78–79, 87–88, 115–16.

<sup>5</sup> Olivier Clément, *Questions sur l’homme* (Paris: Stock, 1972), 144.

And elsewhere:

Among these thinkers [the Russian religious philosophers] the theme of divino-humanity intervenes. Christendom sometimes thought God to be against humanity, modernity almost always humanity against God. But God and humanity are not opposed; they are united and commune together in Christ, without separation or confusion. Divino-humanity is the place of the Holy Spirit and of the creative liberty of human beings. Such a light does not impose itself, but shines gently from the Word, from the Eucharist, from the face of so many unknown saints whose compassion remakes daily the fabric of existence torn apart by the forces of nonbeing.<sup>6</sup>

It is through the key concept of “divino-humanity” and through ideas originating in Greek patristic theology and Russian religious philosophy that Clément tackles another crucial matter raised by modernity. This is the question of God’s omnipotence and the apparent limitation of it by the development of science and the emancipation from ecclesiastical tutelage of philosophical and literary thought in the modern era. Clément recalls that the creation of humanity—that masterpiece of divine omnipotence—has a *kenotic* character and implies, paradoxically, a risk on God’s part. In it, divine omnipotence transcends our conception and representation of omnipotence, limits itself, and assumes the supreme risk of making way for another liberty. Clément undertakes an extraordinary theological reflection on this kenotic act, in a passage of the highest literary as well as theological value:

One must speak of the act of creation in terms of both omnipotence and the limitation of omnipotence. By one of these aspects, the creation of humanity is a voluntary *kenosis* on God’s part; several patristic adages emphasize that God can do anything except force humanity to love him. One must be even more precise; freedom is not *something* that God created (which would only push the problem further back and reinforce the atheist accusation), it is rather the reality of *someone* whom he allows to exist, a reality that connects with the limiting concept of original nothingness. It implies a “retreat” on God’s part in order for the other to exist. The other—that is, the possibility of love, but also that of rejection and hate. The other, which for God represents an infinite vulnerability, an acceptance of longing and suffering with no turning back. The other—that is, the Cross, arms forever open, the side forever pierced, so that from it might flow the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist. The life-giving Cross is the only response to atheism’s accusation concerning freedom and evil.

God is not a thing, a rock, a perch above time. Nor is God an individual in the heavens who stares down at us from above. The limitless ocean of the superessential plenitude is interior, in God’s own self, a mysterious reciprocity. It is why the living God is bigger than our concepts of power, science, or eternity. Or smaller, like the grain of mustard seed, in whatever sense these concepts are capable of expressing the upside-down world of the Fall. God is the freedom who wills freedom

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<sup>6</sup> Olivier Clément, “Témoigner dans une société sécularisée,” *Service orthodoxe de Presse*, supplement to no. 130 (July–August 1988); reprinted in Olivier Clément, *Anachroniques* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1990), 58.

and makes room for it. His real transcendence is to be able truly to love. For God is “the lover of mankind,” as the Byzantine liturgy repeats so often. His genuine foreknowledge is to know the other as such, that is to say, to await the unforeseeable. His true omnipotence is to allow the rise of a freedom capable of bringing his own power to naught; creation is the shadow of the Cross.<sup>7</sup>

If divino-humanism is one of the key concepts in Clément’s theological synthesis, faith in the resurrection, the existential experience of it, and its implications constitute another theme that shaped the specific viewpoint from which he considered the challenges of his age. As he himself confessed in characteristic fashion:

I can never be thankful enough to the Orthodox Church for allowing me to know the Paschal joy that heals the secret wound of the soul. Everything else, whether related to daily life, secularized society, beauty, or encounters with religions and cultures, is made up of tales within the framework of time that this light, though subdued and filtered, renders outside of time.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of pluralistic societies, in large part de-Christianized, the temptation is great to dream of a new Christendom and to make faith in Christ and in his resurrection the keystone of the social edifice once again, despite the warnings of Clément and other theologians. In all countries of Christian tradition—and especially in those whose roots are in Orthodoxy—hierarchs and eminent representatives of the institutional Church, forgetful of the eschatological dimension of Christianity

and encouraged by ultra-conservative, fundamentalist groups, do not hide their desire to dictate Christian “morality” for the men and women of today in order to regulate society. This is why, instead of a conclusion, I prefer to finish by citing a few remarkable passages of Clément, all taken from his extraordinary essay “Dionysos et le Ressuscité,” that might put us all on guard against an ideological understanding of Christianity and orient our steps in the pluralistic and secularized societies of today:

Testimony [to Christ] today requires first of all a re-establishment or conscious and thankful acceptance of the eschatological tension between the Church and the world. In our secularized societies, Christians must struggle to “secularize” [*laïciser*] the exercise of power by relativizing ideologies, and simultaneously to enrich and deepen communal life, and there to awaken human beings to the mystery of their destiny, to nourish among them this “tension toward the highest life” about which the Areopagite speaks. . . .

Whatever the circumstances of History may be, whether social and cultural space is granted or refused to the Church, the latter can only, from this moment on, repent bitterly for having succumbed to the temptations that its master pushed aside in the desert; it can no longer define itself but by liberty. Christianity becomes again today what it should never have ceased being: the revelation of the person and of love. For the person transcends all conditioning and love does not hold itself back.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Clément, “Dionysos et le Ressuscité,” 86–87.

<sup>8</sup> Clément, *Anachroniques*, 7–8.

<sup>9</sup> Clément, “Dionysos et le Ressuscité,” 117, 118–19.

And in conclusion:

It would also be good for the clergy to abandon the regulation of society, even indirectly, by supplying advice or formulas. The “royal” mission, inherited and interiorized by each layperson in a secularized society, is related to the hierarchy in a relation not of dependence but of “symphony.” This mission rises from the free creativity of the Spirit. It is of the greatest importance that clerics cease agitating and chattering; if not, they will succeed in turning Christianity into an ideology that the world will set up alongside all the others. . . . Clerics must bear witness to the heart of each personal existence confronted by the problem of meaning; it is by awakening faith in the crucified One, by spreading his life, that they will raise up creative presences capable of struggling for justice without illusion, never giving up. Only this “subterranean” existence will allow them to proclaim meaning prophetically and so to constitute either “the moral conscience of humanity” or the indispensable stumbling block, for the servant is never greater than his crucified master.<sup>10</sup>

I leave to the informed reader the task of comparing these extracts of Olivier Clément with the current ecclesiastical situation and the theological message that predominates today in the Orthodox context. And so the reader may engage, far from triumphalist discourse, the question of who might rightly claim the mantle of Clément’s thought. ✱

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 119–20.



The Crucifixion, probably from Constantinople or Thessaloniki, early 14th c. Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens.



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