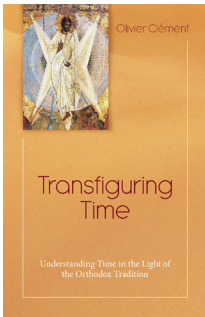


Transfiguring Time

Jeremy N. Ingpen

The author's translation of Olivier Clément's *Transfiguring Time* was published by New City Press in January 2019.



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

The great French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément was born in the village of Aniane in the Languedoc region of southwestern France to a non-religious family. "I grew up in an environment in which Christianity played no part. I was not baptized, and received no religious instruction." Attracted first by poetry, especially that of Rainer Maria Rilke, and then by the Bible, he spent his twenties exploring the religious traditions of India. "For ten years I searched through this vast world of religions and myths. I was drawn to all of it. But I found myself trapped between the spirit of India, where all is sacred, divine, and immersed in the ocean of divinity, and my sense of the uniqueness of the human person."¹

It was Vladimir Lossky's *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* that showed Clément another way. Lossky's chapters on the Trinity, and man made in God's image, thrilled Clément. "The Trinity appeared to hold the solution to the impasse: a total unity, greater by far than that spoken of in India, and completely different." At the same time, he began to read the great Russian writers, including Dostoevsky and Berdyaev. "I discovered Christianity and I asked myself what I should do with this discovery."² Baptized as an Orthodox Christian in 1952, Clément went on to study with Lossky in Paris, while teaching history at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. In 1965 Clément was invited by Paul Evdokimov to join the faculty of Saint Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris, where he taught for over thirty years.

Clément wrote his first book, *Transfigurer le Temps: Notes sur le temps à la lumière de la tradition orthodoxe*, when he was thirty-seven. It carries all the excitement of his fresh encounter with Orthodoxy and the fathers of the church. In it, he draws on his deep study of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Indian myths to differentiate the conception of time and eternity in these traditions from the Christian, and specifically Orthodox, understanding of time and eternity. The print run was very small, and the book disappeared from view, almost without a trace. It was referenced only occasionally.³ This translation will bring Clément's early work to a new generation of readers.

According to Monique Clément, the author's widow, *Transfiguring Time* is a bridge between Clément's research in the years before his baptism and his immersion in the Orthodox faith. It is also a meditation on history, and engaged with the main currents of post-war French thought. The book gives an Orthodox perspective on questions that Albert Camus was exploring at the same time from the perspective of an atheist.

Starting from an examination of the understanding of time as cyclical repetition in pre-Christian religions, Clément teases out the status of the human person and of human experience in these vast cyclical systems that "burn up" time in annual ritual festivals, and that deny the autonomy of the individual. In his view, by the time of the ancient Greeks and

¹ Interview with *La Croix*, 2001, quoted in Nicolas Sénèze, "Olivier Clément, grand penseur orthodoxe du XXe siècle, est mort," *La Croix*, January 16, 2009.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Transfigurer le Temps* received a favorable review by Yves Congar, *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, 35.2 (1961): 194.

the gnostics, increased knowledge and self-awareness was accompanied by an increasing sense of entrapment.

Clément reveals key Old Testament stories, by contrast, to be explorations of human freedom, and of the growth of understanding of God's working in time and in human history. The cyclical and cosmic events of ancient religions are transformed "from primitive celebrations of a cosmic liturgy to memorials of God's work." Thus, in the Old Testament he sees the beginning of historical time, in which there is both remembrance of the past and expectation of the future.

Then comes the incarnation, which, for Clément, is the central event in human history. "The cyclical time of nature and the historical time of the covenant contract into, or in the words of Saint Paul, are recapitulated in Christ. . . . The incarnation draws in and transfigures all human and cosmic reality." The incarnation opens up the possibility of the fullness of the human person. This is an event that contains all time: Christ said "I am the Alpha and the Omega."

With the resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost begin the "deified time of the Church." For Clément, as for Saint Ignatius, the Church is constituted as Christ's body in the world, whenever Christians assemble in communion. The deified time of the Church both exceeds and encompasses the earlier conceptions of time. Ancient cultures' nostalgia for paradise is given

a new form, reopening paradise to mankind. "Christ is more than paradise, as, by extension, is his Church: the light of the eighth day already shines there."

Clément concludes with a profound exploration of the working of the Holy Spirit in the world. He anchors this in an uncompromising adherence to human freedom, which includes the freedom to reject God, and in the idea of the humility of God: God standing at the door waiting to be invited. Clément sets a very high bar for the role of Christians in the world, who "by force of their prayer, through their act of being present and then through their participation in creation . . . fight to transform the earth into sacrament and to transform culture into an icon of the heavenly Jerusalem."

The concepts explored in the book—paradise, eternity, eon, act, freedom, liturgy, and sacrament—are constantly reexamined and rewoven into a fuller understanding in the light of the incarnation. Clément's text resonates with biblical imagery and with the language of Orthodox hymns and troparia. His work has lost none of its freshness and relevance. While providing an extensive analysis of the conception of time and eternity in archaic religions, Greek philosophy, and Eastern religions, *Transfiguring Time* stands on its own as a meditation on the meaning of time and eternity, rooted in both the patristic tradition and in the newness and shock of Clément's encounter with Christianity. ❀

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Jeremy N. Ingpen retired from a career in nonprofit management and consulting and is currently translating works of French Orthodox theologians in addition to fabricating stained glass windows and restoring antique equipment. Three of his stained glass windows are installed at St. Jacob's Orthodox Church in Northfield Falls, Vermont, where he is a parishioner.