

Transfiguring Time

Understanding Time in the Light
of the Orthodox Tradition

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Understanding Time in the Light
of the Orthodox Tradition

by
Olivier Clément

Preface by
Ilia Delio, OSF

Translated by
Jeremy N. Ingpen


New City Press
Hyde Park, New York

“In this insightful and definitive translation of Transfigurer Le Temps, Jeremy Ingpen introduces the English-speaking readership to the wonderfully complex world of Olivier Clément. One of the greats of the Paris theological school, Clément was a prolific and revered French lay theologian, who published some thirty books and a hundred articles devoted to theology, history, and spirituality of the Orthodox Church. In Ingpen’s translation, Clément is revealed as a thinker of a great openness of mind, someone who understands well the problems of modernity and post-modernity. A powerful voice for Orthodoxy in France, whose messages resonated far beyond France and Europe, Clément labored within the intellectual tradition laid down by his mentor Vladimir Lossky. In one of his earlier works, Transfiguring Time, Clément explores the working of the Holy Spirit in the world, and outlines his vision of transformational Christianity, a tradition deeply rooted in Patristic thought. Combining readability with a wealth of thoughtful insight, this translation will prove indispensable to those seeking a solid understanding of Olivier Clément’s theological and philosophical thought.”

Lasha Tchantouridzé, PhD,
Professor of Church History, St. Arseny Orthodox Christian
Theological Institute, Winnipeg, MB, Canada; Deacon, St. Jacob
of Alaska Orthodox Church, Northfield Falls, Vermont

“Jeremy Ingpen’s translation of Olivier Clément’s Transfigurer Le Temps is an important contribution to our modern understanding of the theological/metaphysical dimensions of time and being. Clément’s views, solidly grounded in the thought of the early Church Fathers, and rightly including a background of classical references, are all the more impressive for his study of time and eternity in the context of other religious perspectives; Buddhist and Hindu thought are covered in quite some detail. Besides reviving this virtually forgotten French text, this translation reveals its importance as a profound meditation on religious history in general. The question of time and its relation to the meaning and understanding of Christi-

anity, and that of space and the temporal dimension relative to the transcendental, remains one of the greatest mysteries confronting the human mind. Even in this day of quantum mechanics, information theory, and practical physics, scientific descriptions of time still elude concrete determination. Clément's unique approach reviews and unravels the threads of the Christian transfiguration of time in and beyond the purely temporal domain and should therefore be of utmost interest and concern to a wide range of thoughtful readers. With gratitude we applaud this presentation of this significant theological work, at last available in the English language."

Rodney Purcell Devenish,
Buddhist Meditation instructor and founder of Kunzang Samten
Yangtse Hermitage, Denman Island, Canada

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Preface

On April 6, 1922, a significant conversation took place between the leading philosopher of the day, Henri Bergson, and the renowned physicist, Albert Einstein.

It was a momentous occasion and one that would ultimately affect how we understand the nature of time. The debate was charged with vehemently opposing views: Einstein claimed that time was simply physical and psychological while Bergson claimed that Einstein's theory of time prevented us from realizing that "the future is in reality open, unpredictable, and indeterminate."¹ Bergson was so adamant in his position that his authority on the matter influenced the Nobel Prize committee who, in fact, did not give the Nobel Prize to Einstein for his work on relativity but for his work on the photoelectric effect. "Thanks to Bergson," Jimena Canales writes, "we now know that to act on the future one needs to start by changing the past."²

This is precisely the point Oliver Clément makes in *Transfiguring Time*. Instead of a scientific or philosophical approach to the question of time, Clément pursues this fascinating dimension of reality from the point of religion. Unlike the cyclic religions of birth, death, and new life, the author looks to the particular way Christianity makes sense of time as eternity inserted into history. He asks, "How can that which is always present come into the world?" Whereas theologians usually ponder how eternal being can become something other than eternal being, such as in the Incarnation, Clément asks how the eternal God can enter into time and become dependent on time. The Incarnation is a time-dependent event, the mystery of the "acceptable time," the *kairos* prepared by the Eternal God and enacted by the Word made flesh. Time and matter are bound up together, which ren-

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1. Jimena Canales, "This Philosopher Helped Ensure There Was No Nobel for Relativity," *Nautilus*, April 21, 2016, 4.
 2. *Ibid.*, 1.

ders time more than a physical dimension of light, as Bergson realized; eternity is enmeshed with time so that there is a simultaneity of time and eternity at every moment. The cosmos is intrinsically temporal in such a way that time is part and parcel of nature's creativity. In the perpetual transition from non-being to being, the created is embedded in change and temporality so that the future is integral to nature's becoming or, better yet, nature's transformation.

The Incarnation breaks open this profound reality of time and discloses the future of the material world as the capacity for radical transformation in God. Time, therefore, is not an innocent bystander to space, a mere measurement of change; rather, time is the most intimate dimension of personhood, both individual and cosmic personhood; it is the rhythm and fundamental polarity of creation.

Clément draws on the richness of the Christian tradition to show the depth and breadth of time as the most fundamental aspect of the God-world relationship. By doing so, he illuminates a metaphysical depth to time that is missing from scientific descriptions of time and space. Rather than simply being a dimension of space relative to the speed of light, time is the dimension of creativity and change that is inextricably linked to the revelation of personhood and love. The destiny of the cosmos is entwined with time so that just as the cosmos is oriented toward fulfillment in God, so too time is oriented toward fulfillment in eternity. Clément writes beautifully of this fulfillment as freedom from the barrenness of winter, from suffering and death, for God will wipe away all tears and heal the wounds of the fragile heart. Eternity does not swallow up and dissolve the personal; rather eternity is the transformation of the personal into the full flowering of life, the continuing encounter face to face with the Living God, who is ever newness in Love.

Ilia Delio, OSF
Villanova University

Part One

Cyclical Time

*O Destiny, you preceded all the gods
you were readied before all creation;
faithful only to yourself
you are the nakedness of the first origin,
a form that enters everywhere,
cold destiny, both creator and creation,
uniting event, knowledge and awareness.*

*You mask everything in your fearsome revelation -
god descends as a crystal fleece that dissolves into thread
in the empty dome of the dream.¹⁵*

The non-biblical religions, which, following Père Daniélou, we shall call “cosmic” religions, have a sense of time that is radically opposed to that of modern man. They are animated by a nostalgia for paradise that leads them to consider history as a fall, preventing the return to the original condition, a return to the paradise that dwells on the other side of the material world, or rather, that is the obverse of the material world and of time.

Nevertheless, there is ambivalence about the meaning of the passage of time. For the archaic community, cyclical repetition is the means of a return to paradise. For the individual ascetic of the advanced cultures in which myth has given way to rational systematization, the passage of time becomes, by contrast, the sign of hell itself. In the archaic conception of time, time is

15. Hermann Broch, *The Death of Virgil*, 1945.

consumed and regenerated through the common feast, through liturgy. In the rational-ascetic conception of time, time is transcended by gnosis. The first conception leads to the orgy, the second to intellectual disembodiment, or *entasis*.¹⁶

16. *Entasis*: disembodiment or absorption into eternity

1. The Archaic Conception: Repetition as the Return to Paradise

For primitive society, authentic time is the dawning moment of creation. At that moment of grandeur of the origins of time, heaven was still very close to earth and one axis of the world—tree, ladder, or mountain—allowed free passage from one world to the other. This first blessedness, often represented symbolically by the flight of birds, disappeared as the result of a fall, of a cataclysm that separated heaven from earth. In the state of paradise man could meet the gods and speak the language of the animals. Thereafter he was isolated from the divine and from the cosmos.¹⁷

The whole effort of archaic man was therefore to seek an end to his fallen state in order to be once again in paradise. For paradise has not disappeared completely. It is hidden. It is not reduced to that original instant from which fallen time takes us ever further away: it is also a *state* that is masked by time and that can be rediscovered. All the same there is a fundamental stumbling block. Since the passage of time and the victory of death cannot in reality be abolished, the return to paradise cannot in reality be achieved. The never-satisfied nostalgia of archaic religion therefore leads, on the one hand, to an imitation of the life of paradise that confers on certain privileged moments the taste of escape from a fallen world: and on the other hand it leads to a systematic obliteration of the passing moment through rites of purification and regeneration, an obliteration of that time that is indeed separation and death but which is also innovation and history.

In the original heroic time—the time of the paradisaical moment—the cosmos was organized and the rules of ordered behavior were revealed to mankind by the gods, by the ancestors, or by the heroes. The organization of the cosmos and the revelation of culture continue in secret, underlying and supporting both

17. Translator's note: *cosmos* in Orthodox iconography represents that old harmony of the natural world that was disrupted by the Fall and that is restored at Pentecost.

cosmic and social life. Thus the paradise of divine acts is changed into a heaven of archetypes that lends its cohesion and its ontological density to the universe and to human action. In this view, reality is for mankind *a repetition of archetypes*, that in one and the same movement is the restoration of the paradisaical moment and the unveiling of an eternal present.

“We must do as the gods did at the beginning”;¹⁸ “as the gods act, so does mankind.”¹⁹ Marriage and work only make sense insofar as they repeat the original union of the heaven and the earth. “I am the heaven, you are the earth,” says the Hindu spouse to his bride.²⁰ For the Dogons, the inner meaning of a weaving is to reproduce one of the forms of the original revelation of the Logos. Every creation (construction) repeats the creation of the cosmos and attempts to restore the world on its axis. Every sacrifice recapitulates and to some extent coincides with the original sacrifice—the dismembering of cosmic Logos.

Through ritual—and every human activity becomes ritualized—mankind attempts to participate through recapitulation in the paradisaical fullness of the archetype. Profane time is destroyed, or willed to destruction. But time continues. Therefore it is necessary to consume it periodically, or at least to mime its destruction.

That is the meaning of the new year rituals: they destroy the old year and recreate the world through a return to its origins. Purging and purification, chasing away demons, the sacrifice of a scapegoat, all represent the destruction of the “old year,” which is sometimes burned in effigy. The extinguishing of the flame symbolizes the return to original chaos: the relighting symbolizes the restoration of the universe. Likewise, carnival rites and orgies represent a return to the youth-giving fecundity of chaos. Masks and mummery provide a support to the souls of the dead who come to pay a visit to the living, since in this interval between two seasons communication between the seen and the unseen again becomes possible.

18. *Catapatha Brahmana I*

19. *Taittiriya Brahmana I*

20. *Atharva Veda*, XIV.

Consequently events in history, events that are not part of this cycle of repetition, are abolished. That is to say, history, the breaking forth of an absolute newness that cannot be repeated, and that is embedded in the uniqueness of the human person, is abolished. However, if the personal dimension of time is nullified, the cosmic dimension is not. It becomes the sacrament of eternity. Through this annual rhythm, eternity seems to unite itself to time in order to renew time. The span of human existence finds its meaning in making preparation for the feast, in making ripe that privileged instant in which mankind takes part in the universal return to the center of existence. Archaic thought does not distinguish between human destiny and the destiny of the universe. The rituals of the feast are not a celebration of nature: they are a celebration of the luminosity of the archetypal forms seen through the prism of universal time. They are the rhythms of a universe that has no other substance than to be the symbol of the invisible, a multiform theophany.

The cosmos with its splendid rhythms of day and night, of the lunar cycle, of the calendar year, appears to be a grand liturgy in which each return, of dawn, of the new moon, of the solstice, of spring, affirms the beneficent and ontologically nurturing presence of eternity—the creative union of time and eternity as in the paradisaical moment. The grain germinates, the sun goes beneath the horizon, the moon is reborn, as eternity takes possession of time past and regenerates it, regenerating in the same movement the life of mankind, if only one can know how to unite oneself to the miracle.

The cosmos, in all its parts, waxes and wanes to wax again, following the rhythm of life and death, of evolution and involution, as symbolized by the double helix. Death, in an unformed expectation of rebirth, is understood as return to the primordial, maternal waters, as is shown by the innumerable prehistoric tombs in which the corpse is laid with the knees drawn up to the chin, in the fetal position. There is no immanentism, no adoration of nature for its own sake in this religious intuition, not at least in the most ancient of religious conceptions. For primitive man regularity does not imply inevitability: the rising of the