

Louis Massignon, Olivier Clément, Thomas Merton, Christian de Chergé: Radical Hospitality, Radical Faith

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Introduction

A concatenation of ecclesiological and experiential occurrences connects the lives of Louis Massignon, Olivier Clément, Thomas Merton, and Christian de Chergé.¹ Massignon and Clément reflect aspects of modern Eastern Christian thought: Massignon “converted” to the Eastern Catholic Melkite tradition and Clément to Eastern Orthodoxy,² while Merton and de Chergé “converted” to monasticism as monks of the Cistercian Order. All lived, however, within the framework of “interior monasticism”³ and the eschatological awareness eloquently expressed by monasticism. Interior monasticism is an

¹ Louis Massignon (1876–1962), Olivier Clément (1921–2009), Thomas Merton (1915–1968), Christian de Chergé (1937–1996).

² See my articles “Olivier Clément On Orthodox Theological Thought And Ecclesiology In The West,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 10 (2010): 116–29; “An Eastern Orthodox Perspective on Europe and Catholicism: A Study in the thought of Olivier Clément,” *Journal of Eastern Studies* 63 (2012): 235–254; “An Orthodox View of the Papacy: Olivier Clément’s Response to *Ut Unum Sint*,” in *Orientalia et Occidentalia* 13 (2013): 103–16.

³ Paul Evdokimov, *Les âges de la vie spirituelle*, (Paris: DDB, 1964), translated by Sr Gertrude SP as *The Struggle with God* (Paulist Press, 1966), 113. See Peter C Phan’s studies of Evdokimov, *Culture and Eschatology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985); “Evdokimov and the Monk Within,” *Sobornost* 3 (1981): 53–61. See also Olivier Clément’s affirmation of Evdokimov as a teacher and friend in *Orient-Occident: Deux Passeurs* (Paris: Labor et Fides, 1985).

important term coined by Paul Evdokimov⁴ to whose thought on monasticism we will return to later in this essay. Within the personal stance chosen by each of the four men in their early adult years, a spectrum that ranged from atheism, self confessed dissolution, and young faith, each experienced a meta-noic encounter with Christ: as Clément observed in his spiritual autobiography, “He who sought for me, found me.”⁵

These four pioneers were born in France, and subsequently influenced by its geographical and cultural landscape. Twentieth-century French society had reached a high level of *laïcité*, a consequence of the Enlightenment and secularised politics following the Second World War. The national religion of France is Catholicism but Catholics are a minority group within a non-Catholic and *laïc* milieu.

This paper reflects on the vocations of these four Christians within the context of the ecclesiological and political circumstances of their time, and their significant and authentic contribution to changes within the Catholic Church that led up to and beyond the Second Vatican Council. Each contributed creatively to the great ecclesiological and theological movement that enabled the Church to view itself in a new way and to listen to the “other.” This new openness of the Catholic Church towards interreligious dialogue with Jews and Muslims and ecumenical discourse with other Christian churches was truly remarkable after centuries of religious polemic and persecution.

The Catholic Church can be compared to a great ocean liner that requires time and space to manoeuvre a change of direction. The remarkable convocation of the Second Vatican Council by Pope John XXIII enabled the Church to begin the process of an inner renewal. This was proclaimed strikingly in such documents as *Nostra aetate*, *Lumen gentium* and *Unitatis*

⁴ See my “Ecclesial Thought and Life Trajectories: an Ecumenical Dialogue 1: Olivier Clément, Eastern Orthodox Theologian and Thomas Merton, Western Catholic Cistercian Monk,” *One in Christ* 45 (2011): 35–54; “Ecclesial Thought and Life Trajectories: an Ecumenical Dialogue 2: ‘Olivier Clément and Paul Evdokimov: *Deux Passeurs*,’ *One in Christ* 45 (2011): 297–312.

⁵ Olivier Clément, *L’Autre Soleil: autobiographie spirituelle* (Paris: Stock, 1975), 9.

redintegratio. In the first of these, e.g., we read that “upon the Moslems, too, the Church looks with esteem” (no.3)⁶; in the second, we are told that “the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these are the Moslems, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God” (no.16).⁷ The Church, at Vatican II, put Judaism and Islam in a special category by recognising Christians, Jews and Muslims worshipped the *same* “one and merciful God.”⁸

The ecclesial and theoanthropological thought of Massignon, Merton, Clément and de Chergé developed and evinced a prophetic witness of lived radical hospitality and radical faith that reveals the true meaning of dialogue with Muslims, *inter alia*. Let us consider the context and biographies of these four.

Part One: Ecclesiological Context and ‘Dialogue of Civilisations’⁹

Islamicist Louis Massignon (1876–1962) became a Melkite Greek-Catholic priest¹⁰ late in life, Cistercian monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968) converted to Catholicism in 1939, lay theologian Olivier Clément (1921–2009) became an Orthodox Christian in the Russian Orthodox Church in Paris in 1951, and Christian de Chergé was ordained a Catholic priest in 1964, entered the Cistercian Order in 1969, and became abbot of a Cistercian community of monks in the Atlas Mountains of Algeria. Through authenticity, integrity and prayer they became spiritual ascetics who embodied mystical accep-

⁶ *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 16. See Anthony O’Mahony, “Catholic Theological Perspectives on Islam at the Second Vatican Council,” *New Blackfriars* 88 (2007): 385–398.

⁸ For a comparative study of the three monotheisms see French scholar Roger Arnaldez’ reflections in *Trois Messagers Pour un Seul Dieu* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1983); English edition: *Three Messengers for One God*, trans. G.W. Schlabach et al.(Notre Dame, IN: UND Press, 1994).

⁹ Fabio Petito, “In Defence of Dialogue of Civilisations: With a Brief Illustration of the Diverging Agreement between Edward Said and Louis Massignon,” *Millennium Journal of International Studies* (2011): 1–21.

¹⁰ Anthony O’Mahony, “Louis Massignon as Priest: Eastern Christianity and Islam,” *Sobornost*, 29 (2007): 6–41.