

CORNELIA A. TSAKIRIDOU, *The Orthodox Icon and Postmodern Art: Critical Reflections on the Christian Image and Its Theology* (Routledge Research in Art and Religion). New York – London: Routledge 2025. 190 pp., 39 figs. – ISBN 978-1-032-18113-4

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This volume consists of six chapters which the author characterizes as ‘critical reflections’. ‘1. The Icon and Postmodern Thought’ considers a number of formal convergences as well as contradictions between icons and modern art, with reference to BAUDRILLARD, BARTHES, LYOTARD, LEVINAS, MARION, WALTER BENJAMIN, and others. ‘2. The Image and Postmodern Art’ turns to ‘ontological’ questions and seeks to define the ‘logic’ of images through a retrieval of Byzantine theological categories (e.g., *perigraphē*, *stasis*, *kenosis*, *chora*, etc.). ‘3. *Perichoresis* as a Theotokian Aesthetic Concept’ furthers the engagement with Byzantine theological categories, constructing (from liturgical texts) analogies between the role of the Virgin Mary in the incarnation and icons. The appropriation of Byzantine theological *loci* continues in ‘4. Patristic Images and Neptic Encounters’, which expands on the themes of the preceding chapter with attention to the notions of *methexis* (participation) and *homoiosis* (likeness) in John of Damascus. ‘5. The Intermedial Icon’ returns to some of the questions touched on in Chapters 2 and 4, delving into film and photography, while ‘6. Cappadocian Iconology’, considers the term ‘icon’ in the anthropology of Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and the Macarian corpus. The book includes thirty-nine reproductions of mostly religious images from late antiquity to the present. The quality of the reproductions (most of which are black-and-white) is generally excellent, though some, such as the two black-and-white images of the Poganovo icon on p. 15, are unhelpfully small.

The book may be fairly described as a collection of interdisciplinary philosophical essays that explore questions of art and aesthetics with attention to Byzantine icons. It is not, strictly speaking, a work of Byzantine art history or Orthodox theology, but rather a philosophical engagement with artistic, aesthetic, and theological themes and questions. As such, it is an ambitious and often creative interdisciplinary work, but like all such projects runs the unavoidable risk of hindering the very integration it seeks to model.

We may think of a sentence composed of different languages, variously inflected by their underlying grammatical structures, so that the terms of one discourse are reframed by their insertion into the exoskeleton of another, not unlike the mixed-language constructions of immigrants in a new land. There are very real barriers between languages, and very real barriers between disciplines, and crossing them in order to occupy multiple territories is never easy. Fluency in one disciplinary language or discourse does not necessarily translate into fluency in another. Interdisciplinarity may be successful in providing a solution to a particular problem, but it does not necessarily scale beyond that problem. To quote the philosopher Seneca: *Nusquam est qui ubique est* (Letter 2).

Byzantine art historians, for example, might take issue with the way the author treats the 'icon' as a kind of entity with its own agency, as if icons were autonomous, living beings. Images are said to be 'dynamic entities ... that are active in physical and noetic spaces' (p. 7); icons are said to 'descend to the depths of the sufferings that afflict human beings and their world' (p. 7); they are said to become 'ontologically disoriented' (p. 7); to be 'open to new technologies and media' (p. 19); to 'take notice' and 'borrow' from 'Mannerist and Baroque motifs' (p. 19); icons 'not only affirm but challenge and subvert the authority of monarchs' (p. 19), inasmuch as 'they possess psychical and visceral energies' (p. 20). 'Painted figures partake of multiple states of existence at the same time' (p. 70); icons 'realize the communion of nature and human beings with divine life' (p. 70); the icon of Mary 'not only embodies an eschatological moment but also participates in it' (p. 73); 'Mary, in the fresco of the Pantanassa *Nativity* carries in her mind the noetic analog of the icon that contains her' (p. 75). 'Images are ontologically disposed to openness and participation in the world' (p. 114). These are just a few examples, some of which seem to be mere metaphors, others a mode of philosophical abstraction, others the author's subjective response to particular images, including the projection of philosophical and theological concepts into artistic forms. The problem is that the reader is left guessing which of these is operative at any given time.

The well-known tendency of Byzantine thinkers to blur the line between the signifier and the signified, between representation and living presence, places the image in a wider understanding of embodiment, so that icons are not simply derived from human reality but become, in a sense, a condition for the possibility of that reality. From this point of view, the icon is no longer an instrument but an actor. As the locus of a divine or saintly presence, Byzantine icons arguably have a greater claim to agency than

Greco-Roman or Renaissance portraits, but with this we have left both art history and philosophy for religious faith, unless we are simply describing the roles assigned to these images by their respective cultures, but this does not seem to be what this book is doing.

Ascribing agency to icons – when such ascription is not mere metaphor, projection, or pathetic fallacy – seems to unwittingly reinscribe vitalistic, magical, and animistic notions of images. Such a view tends to reify the image and overlook its status as a human creation or artefact. And if by agency we mean the capacity to act intentionally toward a specific goal, endowing icons with such a capacity or intentionality will not be uncontested. If, on the other hand, we simply mean a kind of pictorial agency, which may be embedded in a larger pattern of cause and effect, then this is not an agency possessing conscious goals and desires, choosing between alternatives, and striving toward a self-selected outcome. How and why do we experience images as actors and not simply as objects? Unfortunately, we are not given answers to these questions nor is there a sustained conceptual exposition of these key ideas.

Questions can also be raised about the author's use of Greek patristic theological terminology, including the word *perichoresis*, which is a technical term designating the relationship of 1) the two natures of Christ and 2) the three persons of the Trinity. The basic meaning is that the two natures and the three persons coinhere or interpenetrate (*perichorein*) without confusion of natures or substance. For Greek patristic writers, the reality of God was a mystery and the word *perichoresis* was the conceptual contour of a truth that was beyond the grasp of the human mind. (As these writers were fond of saying: 'We know *that* these things are true but not *how* they are true'.) The doctrine, therefore, is more of a heuristic device than a predictive or explanatory model, and it seems problematic to use it to describe relationality divorced from mutually shared natures or being in one divine person or essence.

In Christology, the term has greater specificity, since *perichoresis* denotes the permeation into human nature (and its natural will) by a divine subject for the purpose of deification. According to the seventh-century theologian, Maximos the Confessor, who was the principal architect of the doctrine, *perichoresis* is the consequence of a divine actor's initiative in the economy of salvation, not the association or convergence of natural qualities through their mutual interactions. *Perichoresis* is not, in other words, an instance of generic association, mutuality, or reciprocity, as if it were a

principal of physics, and to conflate the two without qualification is confusing. To uproot the term from its basis in shared being drains it of its force, and to apply it to relationships that are the result of natural necessity is to effectively render the term meaningless, as if one were to analyze the artistic features of an icon and say: ‘yellow and blue are involved in a perichoretic relationship moving toward an eschatological green’, which is both unnecessary and unnecessarily obfuscating.

This particular use of *perichoresis* seems to be based in part on a questionable reading of Maximos the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 17.<sup>1</sup> In this passage, the Confessor alludes to unions of opposites in the physical world – the cosmos and the body – whose parts are preserved in unity through an ‘interpenetration (*perichoresis*) of opposites in accord with the mixture’. This is an unusual use of *perichoresis* by the Confessor and dates to a period before his involvement in the Christological controversy, when he sharpened his understanding of the term. At the same time, the subject of *Amb.* 17 is not physical bodies but the intelligible principles of their being, that is, the divine principles (*logoi*) underlying created bodies, which are simply the Logos’s mode of presence to creatures, and thus not anything created or material. Moreover, *Amb.* 17 emphasizes the inability of the human mind to understand what these *logoi* are in themselves or how they exist and function within creation. The Confessor’s use of *perichoresis* here is thus not the standard view, and as the exception to the rule can only be extended into other areas by special pleading.

Similarly, the claim is made that ‘taken to its logical implications’, John of Damascus’s *On the Divine Images* ‘suggests a perichoretic relationship between figuration, the divine holy persons depicted in an image, and the venerating viewer’. That these items are united by their iconic character is well known, but to link them together through *perichoresis* seems to overstate the relationship the Damascene establishes for them. In fact, the word *perichoresis* appears only once in *On the Divine Images*,<sup>2</sup> where it occurs in a standard Christological formula having no connection to the structure of icons. Thus, the use of *perichoresis* here is an imprecise and confusing application of a technical term, which the author presents as the term’s ‘enhancement’.

The appropriation of the word *perichoresis* is part of the larger construc-

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1. Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 2, p. 390.

2. BONIFATIUS KOTTER (ed.), *Contra imaginum calumniatores orationes tres*. Berlin 1975, p. 109, line 61

tion of a kind of personal jargon that often obfuscates rather than clarifies meaning. The result is an extremely dense and idiosyncratic text that many readers will find difficult to read. Here are some examples: ‘Exemplary icons have enargic and/or neptic qualities’ (p. 6); ‘*Nepsis*, on the other hand, characterizes images that give aesthetic form to the divisions and tensions that affect human beings and nature in eschatological moments’ (p. 6); the ‘terms *eikon* and *homoiosis* refer to the noetic and agapeic extension of human beings toward God’ (p. 7); ‘*perichoresis* conveys the ontological enhancement of beings through the grace and the paradox of their plerotic participation in divine life’ (p. 8); ‘Attention to gender prompts an exploration of how various feminine and masculine modalities assume aesthetic form and contribute to the eschatological significance and liminality of icons’ (p. 14); ‘Ontological and eschatological antinomies resonate inside and beyond the icon’s space’ (p. 54); ‘ideological incursions in images are the result of their immanence, but they do not exhaust their ontological and theological potential’ (p. 58); the ‘plasticity of *perichoresis*, its organismic and Marian underpinnings, and its aesthetic significance’ (p. 74); a wall painting provides an ‘example of how *perichoresis* can become symmetrical by combining a physical and noetic modality’ (p. 72); ‘the association of *perichoreo* with the paradox of divine hiddenness point’s to the concept’s capacity to incorporate liminal realities. It also draws an immediate parallel with the noetic saturation of physical form in iconography’ (p. 77); under dramatic and eschatological pressure, the image loses its spatial limitations’ (p. 112); ‘This critical approach to the Orthodox icon is supported by the ontological disposition of images toward openness and transformation and the function of their boundaries as points of closure and engagement with the world’ (p. 165).

This sort of prose will not be to everyone’s taste, and it is unfortunate that the book’s positive contribution is obscured beneath such cumbersome rhetoric. That philosophers speak obscurely and indulge in grand statements is nothing new, but neither is it necessary.

A minor infelicity: TSAKIRIDOU considers Hesychios of Sinai a writer of the ‘sixth or seventh century’, but recent scholarship has established that he was active no earlier than the 800s.

#### **Keywords**

theories of the image; Eastern Orthodox iconography