

BOLLETTINO

DELLA BADIA GRECA DI GROTTAFERRATA



TERZA SERIE

VOL. 20 - 2023

BOLLETTINO DELLA BADIA GRECA DI GROTTAFERRATA

Periodico del Monastero Esarchico di Grottaferrata (Roma) fondato nel 1926. Con la II serie (1947-2003) diviene una rivista internazionale rivolta allo studio della cultura religiosa dell'Italia meridionale bizantina e post-bizantina. Con la III serie (2004-) estende l'interesse al monachesimo, alla storia, alla liturgia, all'arte e alla spiritualità delle Chiese ortodosse, anche dell'Europa centro-orientale.

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I contributi sono sottoposti a revisione, secondo la formula del doppio anonimato, da parte di due esperti italiani o stranieri.

Abbonamento

Italia € 45 — Estero € 50 c/c postale n° 27128008

IBAN: IT57 Z076 0103 2000 0002 7128 008

BIC/SWIFT: BPPIITRRXXX

intestato a: "Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata"

Corso del Popolo, 128 - 00046 Grottaferrata (Roma)

Gli Indici del *Bollettino* (1967-2023) sono consultabili on-line
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THE ICONOCLASM OF THE ICON

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Iconoclasm

Recent years have seen an increase in the use and abuse of the term iconoclasm. The new popularity of the term is due particularly to the discussions which have become more widespread, in contexts neither purely nor primarily academic, on the subject of Islamic iconoclasm – or rather, on the political use that the fundamentalist fringes of contemporary Islam have made of the idea that “destroying images” (this is the etymological meaning of the term, from the Greek εἰκών, image, and κλάω, to break) is central to the origins of Muhammad’s religion.

This idea has become widespread in the West, especially in the wake of the dissemination of a document published at the beginning of the century in a very turbulent region of the East: Afghanistan. When the Taliban destroyed the great statues of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in March 2001, on the orders of Mullah Omar, they issued the following statement:

Those statues have been and remain sanctuaries for infidels, and infidels continue to worship and venerate the images. Allah Almighty is the only true sanctuary, and all false sanctuaries must be torn down.

This statement led, over the following two decades, to the widespread belief that there was an iconoclastic background to the destruction of monuments later carried out by ISIS (the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), the jihadist organization that dominated the landscape of the Middle East in the 2010s. Beginning with the destruction of the statues in the museum of Mosul, ancient Nineveh, this then extended to entire sacred architectures, churches, monasteries, and archaeological sites such as that of the ancient city of Palmyra. The ostensible religious motivation

for this destruction thus also involved “false sanctuaries”, and no longer just “idols”.

The reference to «images» in the Koran was specifically connected with the cultic struggle against idolatry. The famous verse against «idolatrous stones» (V, 90) must be framed in the context of the preaching of one God in a polytheistic society, and the veneration of these «idolatrous stones» is regarded as being on the same level as other reprehensible practices such as drinking wine. It is important to remember that in the Koran there is, therefore, no theory of images or definitive position on the subject.

The condemnation of images as “impure” is found later, in the various corpora of the ḥadīth. There are, however, differences between the Sunni tradition, which is more rigorous, and the Shiite tradition. It is to the greater freedom of the latter that we can attribute the immensely significant development in Muslim Persia of an art form very much based on image, albeit profane: that is, the miniature. There was little tendency amongst ancient Islamic theologians to apply aniconism universally. For example, the work of Al-Qurtubi, the great thirteenth century exegete and Imam of Cordoba, demonstrated that the ulema were open to images, even three-dimensional ones, primarily drawing on Koranic passages.

The truth of the matter is that the issue of images has never been central in Islam, as it has been in Christianity. On the contrary, it was Islamic tolerance towards images that preserved masterpieces of Christian art, such as the pre-iconoclastic icons in the monastery of St Catherine of Sinai. Sacred images, following certain rules, have also been present throughout the history of Islamic art, such as the glowing depictions of Muhammad’s night journey to Jerusalem, his ascent to heaven, and his visits to paradise and hell. Oleg Grabar has demonstrated that the iconographic tradition of the Prophet has existed for at least eight centuries, and despite what one might have been led to believe at the beginning of 2006, during the so-called “cartoons crisis”, in the literature of the ḥadīth there is no ban on the depiction of Muhammad or other prophets. The problem there was primarily socio-political rather than theological, as experts pointed out at the time: the cartoons of Muhammad were considered an issue not because they represented a sacred figure, but because they were blasphemous; and they were from countries with issues relating to Muslim immigration, such as Denmark or France.

Let us, therefore, put to one side the current understanding of religious iconoclasm as relating to Islam, which is more common in public discourse, and consider instead the iconoclasm attributed – equally inappro-

priately – to the Byzantines by historians of the Western Middle Ages. It is, in fact, typical of the Roman Catholic tradition to view the long and sophisticated theological duel over the question of images that took place between the eighth and ninth centuries in Byzantium as simply a result of a “heresy”, namely that of “iconoclasm”, which led to the violent and indiscriminate destruction of the sacred images which had become increasingly part of popular Christianity, particularly but not solely in the countryside, and often, but not exclusively, under the influence of monastic circles.

Iconomachy

If we wish to give a precise definition of so-called “iconoclasm” (from εἰκών, images, and κλάω, break), we can call it a “breaking of images” or “breaking *with* images”. The purpose of the image, εἰκών, in Greek thought was to provide, in the sensible world in which the εἰκών existed, a projection in this world of its pure intelligible form in the world of “ideas”. In the allegory of the cave, at the end of Book VII of his *Republic*, Plato explains that the sensible world is an ephemeral and imperfect reflection of the world of ideas, which is the real world. The two planes are connected only through mimesis, or imitation. In Plato’s view, the value of figurative art was the lowest because it was far removed from the world of ideas: it produced copies of copies, images of images, and thus possessed the least cognitive value.

On the other hand, leaving to one side Greek philosophical speculation, the idea that the divine could not be depicted was already present in Judaism, and was inherited by the “Jewish heresy”, Christianity, which had grown up in the shadow of the synagogues for two centuries. Primitive Christian symbols are typically aniconic: the symbols of the fish and the cross. Just as in the Biblical narrative, proto-Christian literature and the activities of the early Church are dominated by the polemic against idols. The Apologists and then, from the second half of the third century, some of the most famous and authoritative Church Fathers, such as Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Clement of Alexandria, condemned the worship of εἰκόνες – for the most part, statues.

These two traditions – the philosophical condemnation of the figurative image, and the religious condemnation of the εἰδωλον – converge when, from the fourth century, Christian theology develops a largely Platonic internal structure. From Judaism’s primitive iconoclasm, motivated by the

struggle against pagan cults – the same struggle shared with Islam – we move to a philosophical-theological iconoclasm, which originates from Plato. With the Christianization of Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought, from at least the end of the fourth century there is a philosophical awareness that the world above – Plato’s hyperuranium, Christ’s kingdom of heaven – cannot be present to the *psyche* (soul) and therefore cannot be “re-presented” (depicted) except through a process of internalization. This is the beginning of an underground current of thought which will emerge openly to the surface four centuries later when the ambiguity surrounding the theological definition of “images” becomes an issue to be solved once and for all.

It would be more accurate to refer to this period as iconomachy, *iconomachia*, as the Byzantines did, meaning “contest” over the image, rather than as “iconoclasm”. A dispute which officially began in 726, when the *basileus* Leo III allegedly – according to a legend that has, however, recently been disproven – removed the icon of Christ from the Chalki, the bronze door of the imperial palace, and which formally ended in 843, when the Council of Constantinople, convened by Michael III and his mother Theodora, reintroduced the cult of images. Historians distinguish between the first and second periods of iconoclasm, given the almost thirty-year interval between 787 – when so-called “iconoclasm” was banned by Empress Irene, with the help of the pope of Rome, at the Second Council of Nicaea – and its reintroduction by the *basileus* Leo V the Armenian in 814. In the end, “iconoclasm” was “abolished” in 843 – at least, perhaps from a political standpoint, but not from a philosophical one.

Fundamentally, this controversy, which divided Byzantium, was not about icons *per se*, but rather about their truthfulness. According to the view of the so-called “iconoclasts”, the εἰκόνας venerated by the faithful were “false images”, above all because the truth of what they purported to represent – namely the sacred figures and the reflection of the divine in them – is unknowable. Now, this latter assumption was also shared by the so-called “iconodules”. As evidenced by the insistence on the subject in the *Expositio fidei* of John of Damascus, the very champion of iconodulia, the theorist referred to by all those who supported the veneration of icons, not to mention all later Byzantine theology of the icon, both sides agreed on the fact that the human intellect cannot understand the divine and, thus, portray it.

John of Damascus clarifies many times that the divine can only be defined apophatically, by negations (ἀποφατικῶς). What we say affirmatively

of God (καταφατικῶς) «does not indicate his nature but his attributes (τὰ περὶ τὴν φύσιν)». For this great Father of the Church, active in the fertile cultural environment fostered by the patronage of the Umayyad caliphs of Damascus, the divine is not only inexpressible or indescribable, but also, and more specifically, «uncircumscribable», which in the Greek word ἀπερίγραπτος has a particular “graphic” reference, which we will find in the conciliar definitions.

Let us, however, refrain from delving too deeply into Orthodox dogmatic theology, which, by bringing into the discussion of the representation of the divine person the great themes of the Incarnation and the dual nature of Christ, turns the duel of the eighth and ninth centuries into a continuation of the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth century councils. Let us focus instead on the image itself. We might argue that so-called Byzantine “iconoclasm” was not so much a “destruction of icons” as a “destruction” or “deconstruction” of images more in a conceptual than a material sense. It is true that icons were physically destroyed, in some areas and in some periods, but, beyond the political and politico-ecclesiastical currents, it was above all a philosophical demolition: an intellectual “dismantling” of images, which pushed Plato’s reservations to the extremes of their logical consequences in the search for a solution to the dilemma of the representation of pure intelligence, or rather that which – to use John of Damascus’ definition of the divine – is «above all being».

The Council of Constantinople in 843 did not «eliminate iconoclasm», as is often stated. Rather, when all was said and done, the image itself would be neither forbidden nor permitted. In itself, it would not be judged true or false. Out of the intellectual struggle known as iconomachy would emerge a new possibility: an image that is not intended to «depict» the sacred figure but rather to represent abstractly «the hypostasis in which it is inscribed», referring to the definition (*horos*) which appears in the Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea (787); or rather, to establish a system of inner correspondences with its suprasubstantial entity. The Byzantine debate of the eighth and ninth centuries would validate the non-figurative understanding of sacred images, and by doing so mark a turning point in the process that would open the way, after a long latency, to the abstract art of the 20th century.

Icon

However, let us take a step back. If we examine the complexities of Byzantine thought on the subject, we realize that the Platonic position on the image has sometimes been simplified if not misunderstood by modern philosophical accounts. Platonic philosophy does not condemn all images, and therefore all art, as is sometimes implied. The only images condemned are those which cling to *phenomena* (in Greek, φαινόμενον, *phainomenon*, literally “what appears”), rather than engaging with the intelligible world, that of ideas. A different type of image, which emerges from the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus, the philosophical system upon which Byzantine Christian theology was constructed between the fourth and fifth centuries, does precisely the latter, if only partially. Between the eighth and ninth centuries, in the philosophical duel of the *iconomachia*, when all the fiercest intellectual and even political-cultural energies clashed over the question of images, the Platonic-Plotinian vision would reach its height.

If the realm of ideas, which is the only true one, constitutes the model that nature imitates, it is also true that, as Plotinus explains, the artist does not make a copy of what is in the world of *phenomena*, which is a copy of the realm of ideas; he does not produce an image that is, so to speak, a “copy of a copy”. A passage from the *Enneads* may serve to clarify this position, which is fundamental to understanding the real subject of the philosophical duel in Byzantium in the eighth century:

If someone despises the arts on the grounds that they imitate nature, they must first be informed that the things of nature also imitate other models. It must also be understood that artists do not simply imitate what is visible, but raise themselves to the ultimate causes from which nature springs; and that they also draw out from themselves many creative additions to compensate for what is lacking. The fact is that they possess beauty within themselves, like Phidias, who made his Zeus without using any sensible model, but imagining the divinity as it would be if it consented to appear before our eyes [i.e. in accordance with an inner truth which reflects the intelligible].

Thus, art does not create by imitating visible reality, which in turn imitates something else, but goes straight to the “true” image, when it «elevates itself to the ultimate causes from which nature springs». A true artist – who we can say produces “icons” rather than “idols” – goes beyond the realm

of *phenomena*, supplying what is lacking in that realm by drawing directly from the realm of ideas. As Gilbert Dagron points out, this is «a pattern more or less continuously repeated, with simple variations in editing or intonation, in the Greek philosophical arsenal». It is also an idea found throughout Byzantine Christian theology, not only within those strands of it which tend towards aniconia or “iconoclasm”.

In Byzantine philosophy, later adopted by Russian philosophy, an image which, while appearing in material form, possesses a transparency which reveals something of the ideal, supernatural world – be it metaphysical or psychological – is thus acknowledged and called by the name εἰκών. But the kind of image which was called an icon in the Byzantine world, and then later in the Russian, is fundamentally different from a normal image. Not only is there a «permanent opposition» between the two (Dagron), but in Russian there are two different words for image, in order to distinguish icon painting, called *ikonopis*’, from the other kind of image, known as *živopis*’.

Orthodox theologians and artists interpret sacred images as vehicles for elevating us to the “ideal” realm, like Elijah on the fiery chariot. It is no coincidence that this “rapture” is depicted countless times in Byzantine and Russian icons. Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, describes “ideas” in this way: «colourless, formless, and intangible essences, which can only be contemplated by the intellect [...] essences that are the source of true knowledge». Images, according to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, are «visible representations of mysterious and supernatural spectacles», which have a peculiar implication: they bring about a transformation of the spectator; they are a “Tabor of the gaze”. They act upon the people who contemplate them in the same way that the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor acted upon the apostles, by imparting the ability to see the pure, spiritual reality beyond the poverty of material existence. In the words of the Damascene:

Μεταμορφοῦται τοίνυν οὐχ ὁ οὐκ ἦν προσλαβόμενος, ἀλλ’ ὅπερ ἦν τοῖς οἰκείοις μαθηταῖς ἐκφαινόμενος, διανοίγων τούτων τὰ ὄμματα, καὶ ἐκ τυφλῶν ἐργαζόμενος βλέποντας.

There is no Metamorphosis in the sense that it adds something to what is already there, but rather because it manifests what is already there: it opens the disciples’ eyes and transforms them from blind to sighted.

It is no coincidence that the theme of the Transfiguration, or Metamorphosis, is also one of the most frequently depicted in iconography, and to

the highest standards. As Evgenij Trubeckoj wrote in 1916, «the icon is not a portrait but rather a prototype of a future transfigured humanity».

The face

Whether one is dealing with a mosaic or a sacred image, the true image is not found in the design or in what one perceives immediately. Consider the face, which is so important in icons. *Vultus* (from the disused supine *vultum* of the verb *volo*, to will) is both the most sacred and the most false of all images. According to Platonic philosophy, reflected and perfected in the Byzantine theory of icons, the only representation of a human, or anthropomorphic, face that is not illusory, elusive and empty, and therefore misleading, idolatrous, or even diabolical (διάβολος from διαβάλλω, the misleader, the oblique) is that which represents something that transcends the *mimesis* of appearance, which by definition is contingent and misleading. It is precisely the total falsity of any literal reproduction of the face that makes necessary the creation – laborious, complex, necessarily artistic – of what is known in sacred art as a “holy face” and in profane art as a “portrait”, the sacredness of which lies in overcoming the signifier in order to reach the universality of archetype signified.

A face is sacred or holy (*sanctus*, “authorized”, necessary) whose features refer to “another world” rather than the world of *phenomena*. Deriving the features of a holy face from its human representation is made possible by a process of abstraction that purifies the image of its natural characteristics and transforms the face (*facies*, exterior appearance) or visage (*visus*, from *video*, that which is seen, therefore in itself a lie) into a *vultus* (that which is produced by a *voluntas*, that is, the will to create a representation). From tribal masks to the Mona Lisa, including not only Byzantine icons but also Greek vase paintings (with their frontal representation only of the hypnotic fixity of those who are beyond life or experiencing the “*stasis*” that results from being outside oneself, *ek-stasis*, as Jean-Pierre Vernant teaches), what identifies this face is the gaze.

A “true” image is not the image one looks at, but rather the image by which one is “regarded”, the image in whose gaze one is caught up. It is a gaze that draws us towards another dimension, bringing us closer to the mystery of existence; that leads the viewer to liberate themselves, by means of that intermediary, from the physical characteristics and, tearing the veil asunder and crossing the threshold, to move beyond the facile nature of the

facies, the superficial appearance, to the complexity of the *idea*: the mental image, the inner representation of a profound εἶδος.

In ms. *Vladimir* 108 of the Moscow Synodal Library, dated to the end of the tenth century, we can see the characters of the Byzantine “sacred face” in the εἰκονισμοί (registers of personal descriptions of icons) relating, for example, to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Basil of Caesarea.

Dionysius (the Areopagite, feast day on 3 October). Height medium, frail, skin tinged white to yellow, slightly snub-nosed, wrinkled eyebrows, sunken eyes, always self-absorbed.

Basil the Cappadocian (feast day on 1 February). Tall, straight, thin, dark skinned, yellowish face, aquiline nose, arched and frowning eyebrows, severe air suggestive of one who questions himself.

The Byzantine face is the face of one who has “departed from the world”. It is a detached face, with eyebrows arched in an impassive expression, but at the same time slightly questioning. This is an ascetic, anorexic face, with a slight funerary quality in the shadows under the eyes, in the indication of bones beneath thin skin. It is a face marked by the struggles of existence, convulsions of intelligence, spasms of neurosis and insomnia. For this reason the face of an icon is never lacking the wrinkles or folds that here are a symbol of the highest beauty. There is no smooth face to an icon, since it expresses an ideal that is the exact opposite of what we seek after in our contemporary icons, from cinema to advertising: a Byzantine icon expresses the overcoming of the external world and the value of an interiority acquired through descent into the mystery that transcends the flesh but is immanent in the *psyche*.

It is clear from the indications of the εἰκονισμοί that the elements we have listed above, and which we find unchanged in icons that are geographically and chronologically very distant from each other, are not only intentional, but have been contemplated and elaborated with almost mathematical precision. As a result, a code emerges between physical clues and metaphysical symbols, guiding the viewer to a different level of comprehension, urging them to read the physical data transparently, transforming their gaze and orienting it towards a dimension other than the one they are experiencing.

The icon is thus placed at the beginning and at the end of that «great pendular movement», as Dagron defines it, that, according to the terminology of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, «goes from symbolism to classicism to return to those

symbolic forms that Plato had longed for or foreseen the return of, simultaneously positive and negative, bearers of meaning that they can never fully express, and which are sacred due to their very inadequacy». Building on this, Dagron offers an unforgettable definition of the icon as a «portrait in its purest form, that is, a representation of a person who is shown for himself, designated rather than painted, present rather than represented».

The contemporary neo-Platonist James Hillman went so far as to describe the icon tout court as the «portrait of the soul», the unveiling of not only the person, but also of the *psyche*, both individual and collective: not just of our soul, but of the world soul. If it is true, as Plotinus writes, that it is the inner image that creates what we see as a visible entity, then the “true image”, the one the Byzantine theologians were looking for, «is that of the inner form, the psychic form, the form of the soul. A form that binds together different visibilities and gives depth to the visible, thereby making it the very visibility of the soul». The “true image” must serve as a means of reactivating contact with our soul and activating a different level of psychic energy.

To this Hillman ascribes a concrete effect on the viewer, similar to that found in Byzantine theories of the image: «A true image, what we may rightly call an icon, is static, it ceases movement. It is suspended. Its purpose is to focus, to concentrate». Hillman mentions the idea of «stasis of the mind» as it emerges from the discussion between Stephen and Lynch in Joyce’s *Portrait of an Artist*, where Stephen Dedalus ascribes to Thomas Aquinas the idea that the beautiful and the true determine «a stasis and not a kinesis». For Hillman any image is false that promotes movement or action (mercenary, pornographic, or propagandistic images, or, in today’s world, advertising images, such as urge us to do this or that). A “true” image, “icon”, is one that instead produces a stasis of being, which induces a departure from the self, suspends space and time – a state of estrangement which, as if lending us other eyes with which to look at our lives, encourages us to rectify them. In this sense Hillman interprets the “sanctity” which the Byzantines attribute to sacred images as relating to the way they provide an inner model for behaviour. And he moves with dizzying speed to connect this with his interpretation of the final, enigmatic line of Rilke’s poem the *Archaic Torso of Apollo* – «Du mußt dein Leben ändern!» «You must change your life!» – as the warning that every true image issues to those who see it, or are seen by it.

The Orphans of the Icon

From this overview, short as it is, it is clear that the icon is not a work of figurative art. During the Byzantine eighth and ninth centuries philosophical debate on the image, which was subtle and widely misunderstood, two approaches – on the one hand proto-Christian aniconism, first Jewish and then Islamic; on the other the Platonic distinction regarding images together with the Plotinian theory of artistic representation – became allies in challenging the permissibility of figurative art. The controversy surrounding icons did not end with an indiscriminate theological rehabilitation of the veneration of images, but with the invention and meticulous codification of a “new” image. An artistic depiction could only be considered licit and non-idolatrous if it did not attempt to represent the figure naturalistically. In defending the salvific potential of this (and only this) form of representation, the definition of εἰκών united depiction and graphic symbol.

However, this new, unequivocally non-figurative status of icons, authorized by theology and affirmed by Byzantine culture, according to which icons are the interface between the visible and the invisible, the very proof that the two worlds can come into contact with each other, was not understood in the West. Not, that is, until the beginning of the 20th century, when this theology of the icon, formulated in Byzantium in the eighth and ninth centuries, would be referred to by the early twentieth century Russian theologians Trubeckoj and Florenskij.

The latter’s essay *Iconostasis* opens with the following lines:

According to Genesis 1, God created the heavens and the earth, and this division of creation into two parts has always been considered to be fundamental. Thus, in the Creed we call God “creator of all things visible and invisible”. These two worlds, the visible and the invisible, are in contact. However, the difference between them is so great that the issue of the boundary that brings them into contact with each other cannot fail to arise.

The borderline is our *psyche*, where «life in the visible world alternates with life in the invisible world» in a series of states. The most common is the dream, while the rarest is mystical ecstasy, during which «the soul inebriates itself with the visible and, losing sight of it, becomes ecstatic».

«Rublev's Trinity exists, therefore God exists» was the syllogism Florenskij used in the 1920s. According to this theory, the icon «is either always greater than itself if it is a heavenly vision, or it is less than itself if it does not open up the supernatural world to the consciousness» of the viewer. Since the purpose of icons is to lift the *psyche* towards the spiritual world, if this purpose is not realized within the beholder, the icon will remain merely «a remote sensation of what is beyond, as seaweed still smelling of iodine is a testimony to the sea», to use his powerful description.

The rediscovery of icons in modern aesthetics runs in parallel with the birth of modern abstract art, which, first in Russia and then in France, based itself openly on the model of the icon painters. In the early 1910s, icons became the obsession of the Russian intelligentsia: those artists who, after breaking with naturalism and, in some cases, arriving at abstractionism, presented themselves as «orphans of the icon». As is well known and much discussed by both historians of modern art and scholars of Byzantine art, Henri Matisse in Moscow in 1911 called upon artists to find their models in icon painters rather than Italian masters. As soon as he returned to France, he discussed this with friends, including Picasso. If Matisse was the first twentieth-century Westerner to encounter the icon, which immediately influenced his painting, in the meantime the Russian avant-gardes based their research and experiments not only on the aesthetics but also on the theory of the image, the kernel of an idea left behind by Byzantium.

The debt owed to icons is evident in the work of the constructivists and suprematists, as well as in the work of artists such as Vladimir Tatlin and Natal'ja Gončarova, who began their careers painting icons. As early as 1902, works of the Byzantine tradition were displayed alongside contemporary works in the private collection of Ilija Ostruchov. A number of paintings by Russian painters of the 1910s and 1920s, such as Kliment Redko, can still be seen in the Tretyakov Gallery alongside their medieval Orthodox antecedents, which also served as their direct sources of inspiration.

The revolutionary work of Vassili Kandinsky, who created abstractionism through a programmatic approach based on the experience of icons, belongs to the same period. «Kandinsky's art, which we call "abstract" because it rejects the notions of nature and object in favor of another visibility», Dagron writes, «has a strong connection with the type of iconic representations that orthodoxy has enshrined in the religious sphere, but which the modern artist uses for different purposes». If the parameters of Kandinsky's Byzantine inspiration can be read in his *Concerning the*

Spiritual in Art and also in his *Glances into the Past*, the most immediate document of this journey without return are the «wild stages» of his work on St. George. As a result of his work on tradition, Kandinsky was able to define a new function for art and to discover «the inner truth of the image and a less opaque vision of reality», writes Dagron, similar to that of the icons hanging on the walls of his atelier.

In his «rejection of materiality in an art of “total spirituality”, in the objectification of art that makes the artist a mere instrument serving the purpose of representing the intimate structure of the world, in his rejection of the third dimension, in his desire to keep the image on a flat surface», the Byzantinist cannot fail to recognize the authenticity of Kandinsky's Byzantine inspiration. Dagron concludes: «It is through its refusals, that is, through its latent iconoclasm, rather than its widespread religiosity, that the icon has been able to define the great goals of modern art».

Since the beginning of the last century aniconism has been the end point of our aesthetics: of contemporary art, of abstract art. Through Russian philosophical reflection, which provided the foundations for abstractionism, the reasoning that originated in Byzantium in the eighth century is fulfilled, after tracing a long invisible parabola, only in the 20th century. In the contemporary era, art is motivated and guided by the “latent iconoclasm” of the icon, releasing itself from its religious dimension and bringing back into the secular arena its declaration of war against the proliferation of idols: the widespread dissemination of “false images” in the mass society that emerged from the revolutions of what we call modernity.

Sources and bibliographical references

Iconoclasm

The 2001 Taliban statement is reproduced and analyzed in P. CENTLIVRES, *Les Bouddhas d'Afghanistan*, Lausanne 2001, p. 14. On the Ancient Islamic Caliphate and the ideological connection established by contemporary fundamentalism cf. M. DI BRANCO, *Il califfo di Dio. Storia del califfato dalle origini all'ISIS*, introduction by F. Cardini, Roma 2017, pp. 21-32. For Islam's position on the image cf. S. NAEF, *Y a-t-il une « question de l'image » en islam?*, Paris 2004 [Italian translation: *La questione dell'immagine nell'Islam*, Milano 2011], pp. 12, 19-20, 21-22, 44-57. On the cartoons crisis, *ivi*, p. 124, and F. BOESPFLUG, *Caricaturer Dieu? Pouvoirs et dangers de l'image*, Paris 2006 [Italian translation: *La caricatura e il sacro: islam, ebraismo e cristianesimo a confronto*, Milano 2007], which shows that, of the three

monotheistic religions, only Christianity has satirical representations of God and the saints, and only since the 19th century.

Iconomachy

The allegory of the cave is found in Pl. *Rp.* 514a-520a. On the aniconism of the proto-Christian authors and the Early Church Fathers see, among others, L. CANETTI, «Costantino e l'immagine del Salvatore. Una prospettiva mnemostorica sull'aniconismo cristiano antico», in *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 13 (2009), pp. 233-262, esp. pp. 244 ff.; A. GRABAR, *L'iconoclasme byzantin*, Paris 1998², p. 21. For a wider discussion of aniconism, see D. FREEDBERG, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago-London 1989 [Italian translation: *Il potere delle immagini. Il mondo delle figure: reazioni ed emozioni del pubblico*, Torino 2009], esp. pp. 54-81. For a survey of the veneration of images in early Christianity see L. BRUBAKER, «Icons before Iconoclasm?», in *Morfologie sociali e culturali in Europa fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo* (Spoleto, 3-9 aprile 1997), Spoleto 1998, pp. 1215-1254; and also A. CAMERON, «The Language of Images: the Rise of Icons and Christian Representation», in *The Church and the Arts*, ed. by D. WOOD, Oxford 1992, pp. 1-42; D. GWYNN, «From Iconoclasm to Arianism: The Construction of Christian Tradition in the Iconoclast Controversy», in *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 47 (2007), pp. 226-251. On the issue of terminology and the “invention” of the term iconoclasm, and in general for a historical analysis of the reception of so-called Byzantine iconoclasm, the misleading treatment of the subject found in subsequent historiographical propaganda, and the legend-like nature of certain events relating to the subject, such as the removal of the icon of Christ from the Chalki, cf. the summary in L. BRUBAKER, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm*, London 2012 [Italian translation: *L'invenzione dell'iconoclasmo bizantino*, Roma 2016], esp. pp. 50-52; see also P. BROWN, «A Dark-Age Crisis. Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy», in *English Historical Review* 88 (1973), pp. 1-34 [repr. in *Id.*, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, London 1982]; *Iconoclasm. Papers given at the Ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies* (University of Birmingham, March 1975), ed. by A. BRYER, J. HERRIN, Birmingham 1977; P. KARLIN-HAYTER, «Iconoclasm», in *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, ed. by C. MANGO, Oxford 2002, pp. 153-168; L. BRUBAKER, J. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680-850: A History*, Cambridge 2011; R. CORMACK, «Looking for Iconophobia and Iconoclasm in Late Antiquity and Byzantium», in *Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond*, ed. by N.N. MAY, Chicago 2012, pp. 471-484; A. KARAHAN, «Byzantine Iconoclasm: Ideology and Quest for Power», in *Iconoclasm from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. by K. KOLRUD, M. PRUSAC, Farnham Surrey 2014, pp. 75-94; *A Companion to Byzantine Iconoclasm*, ed. by M. HUMPHREYS, Leiden-Boston 2021. On John of Damascus' statements on the unknowability and uncircumscribability of the divine see, for example, *Exp. fid.* 1, 4 (Kotter, p. 13). In regard to the use of

“graphic” terminology in references to the representation of the divine image, both in Damascene’s definitions as well as in the later conciliar definitions, see first of all the *horos* of Nicea II (Ἐγγραφομένον: Council of Nicea II, *Definitio de sacris imaginibus*, DS 601; the Greek text can be found, along with an Italian translation, in the recent, but not entirely satisfactory, study by E. FOGLIADINI, *L’invenzione dell’immagine sacra. La legittimazione ecclesiale dell’icona al secondo concilio di Nicea*, Milano 2015, p. 26); see also P.J. ALEXANDER, «The Iconoclast Council of St Sophia (815) and its Definition (Horos)», in *Dumbarton Oak Papers* 7 (1953), pp. 35-66. For more testimonies offered by the sources see the crucial book of M.-F. AUZÉPY, *La Vie d’Étienne le Jeune par Étienne le Diacre*, Aldershot 1997; and also A.-M. TALBOT, *Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight Saints’ Lives in English Translation*, Washington DC 1998; L. BRUBAKER, J. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era: The Sources*, Farnham-Burlington VT 2001; T. BREMER, “Verehrt wird Er in seinem Bilde...”. *Quellenbuch zur Geschichte der Ikonentheologie*, Trier 2015. The concept reached by the Byzantine theology of the image, that is to say that the icon should not depict the sacred figure naturalistically but abstractly represent «the hypostasis in which it is inscribed», is essentially the same as that expressed in the metrical epigraph of the Chalki, engraved during the patriarchate of Methodius, as pointed out in G. DAGRON, *Décrire et peindre. Essai sur le portrait iconique*, Paris 2007, p. 56; cf. also E. KITZINGER, «The Cult of Images in the Age of Iconoclasm», in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954), pp. 83-150; H. BELTING, *Bild und Kult*, München 1990 [Italian translation: *Il culto delle immagini*, Roma 2004]; L. OUSPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon*, Crestwood NY 1992 [Italian translation: *La teologia dell’icona*, Milano 2009]. Regarding the role played by the monastic component of the Byzantine Church in so-called iconoclasm see S. GERO, «Byzantine Iconoclasm and Monachomachy», in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 28 (1977), pp. 241-248; R. CORMACK, *Writing in Gold, Byzantine Society and Its Icons*, London 1985; A.K. Ηλιάδη, *Εικονομαχία και αντιμοναχική στροφή: Κων/νος Ε’*, Trikala 2003. For an introductory study of the relationship between Byzantine iconoclasm and medieval Western society see T.F.X. NOBLE, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*, Philadelphia 2011.

Icon

The “bifurcation” of Platonic thought on the image, *i.e.* the distinction between a *mimesis* that only produces *simulacra* and another which «gives form on canvas to a mental image truer than visible reality» (*Rp.* X 602c-605c; *Soph.* 233b-236e), and the evolution of the latter into Plotinus’ theory of art are both developed by G. DAGRON, *Décrire et peindre. Essai sur le portrait iconique*, Paris 2007, pp. 23-26. The quotation from Plotinus can be found in *Plot. Enn.* 5, 8, 1. On the development of Plotinus’ theory of art and on the variations of the scheme provided by the «Greek philosophical arsenal» on the image cf. G. DAGRON, *Décrire et peindre. Essai sur le portrait iconique*, Paris 2007, esp. p. 25 and p. 244 n. 23; p. 23; p. 18; see also M. BETTETINI, *Contro le immagini. Le radici dell’iconoclastia*,

Roma-Bari 2006; F. IVANOVIC, *Symbol and Icon: Dionysius the Areopagite and the Iconoclastic Crisis*, Eugene (OR) 2010. On the «permanent opposition» between *živopis'* and *ikonopis'* in the Russian Orthodox world see *ivi*, p. 18. Plato's quotation is found in Pl. *Phaedr.* 247c. Pseudo-Dionysius' quotation is reproduced in P. FLORENSKIJ, *Iconostas*, Moscow (1922) 1995 [repr. Oosterhout 2013; Italian translation: *Le porte regali. Saggio sull'icona*, Milano 1977], p. 61; see also P. FLORENSKIJ, *Iconostasi. Saggio sull'icona* (based on Russian 1995 revised edition), Milano 2008. The quotation from John of Damascus on Metamorphosis is from *Homelia in Transfigurationem* (PG 96, 564). The quotation from Trubeckoj can be found in E. TRUBECKOJ, *Icons: Theology in Color [3 Essays]* (1916), New York 1973 [Italian translation: *Contemplazione nel colore. Tre studi sull'icona russa*, Milano 1977], pp. 13-14: «The icon is not a portrait, but rather a prototype for the future transfigured humanity. Since we have not yet seen such humanity among today's sinful people but are only able to catch a glimpse of it, the icon can only serve as a symbolic representation of it».

Vultus

There was much speculation about the etymology of *vultus* among the ancients, cf. G.L. COHEN, «Latin *voltus* / *vultus* = Face, Expression (on Face)», in *Latomus* 38 (1979), pp. 337-344; further linguistic considerations and essential bibliography in A. PIRAS, «Le parole del volto. Spigolature storico-linguistiche ai margini di un campo semantico», in *Il volto nel pensiero contemporaneo*, a c. di D. VINCI, Cagliari 2010, pp. 47-63. On Isidore of Seville's etymology of *vultus* (*vultus* from *voluntas*, of which the *vultus* represents an external manifestation) cf. also M. BETTINI, *Le orecchie di Ermes. Studi di antropologia e letterature classiche*, Torino 2000, p. 324 n. 42. On the significance of frontal representation in archaic Greek vase painting, and in particular in the François Vase (VI BCE) of Florence Archaeological Museum, cf. the superb consideration of J.-P. VERNANT, *La mort dans les yeux*, Paris 1985 [Italian translation: *La morte negli occhi*, Bologna 1987]. The descriptions of the physical characters of apostles and saints and the ancient literature concerning them can be found in chapter VI (*Des mots à la peinture: apôtres et saints*) of G. DAGRON, *Décrire et peindre. Essai sur le portrait iconique*, Paris 2007, pp. 151 ff., where one can find both the information on the Vladimir 108 manuscript of the Moscow Synodal Library, in which the author identifies the oldest layer of the patristic εικονισμοί, and the quotations found in the text (pp. 156 and 160), together with an extensive iconography. On thinness and the hollow face, see also the εικονισμοί of John Chrysostom (p. 160) or of Ezekiel, Nahum, Joel (p. 169); sunken eyes are explicitly pointed out not only in the εικονισμός of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, but also in that of John Chrysostom (p. 160). The reference to Hegel's *Aesthetics* (esp. cap. II, on *Symbolism of the Sublime*, 2) and the definition of the icon as «pure portrayal» is found in G. DAGRON, *Décrire et peindre. Essai sur le portrait iconique*, Paris 2007, pp. 77 and 252 n. 44; p. 77.

On similar topics see also O. CLÉMENT, *Le visage intérieur*, Paris 1978 [Italian translation: *Il volto interiore*, Milano 1978]; C. SCHÖNBORN, *Die Christus-Ikone. Eine theologische Hinführung*, Schaffhausen 1984 [Italian translation: *L'icona di Cristo. Fondamenti teologici*, Roma 2003]. James Hillman's consideration can be read in J. HILLMAN, S. RONCHEY, *L'ultima immagine*, Milano 2021, pp. 96, 107 and 110. The references are to J. JOYCE, *Portrait of an Artist*, New York 2003, p. 225, and R.M. RILKE, *Selected Poems*, Harper 1981, pp. 146-147. The poet's inspiration for this poem was the Torso of Miletus, preserved at the Louvre and contemplated by him in Paris, where his friendship with Rodin brought him.

The Orphans of the Icon

Florenskij's quotation can be found in P. FLORENSKIJ, *Ikonostas*, Moscow (1922) 1995 [repr. Oosterhout 2013; Italian translation: *Le porte regali. Saggio sull'icona*, Milano 1977], pp. 19 and 61-62. On Rublev's *Trinity* see, in *primis*, G. BUNGE, *Der andere Paraklet: Die Ikone der heiligsten Dreifaltigkeit des Malermönchs Andrej Rubljov*, Würzburg 1994 [Italian translation: *Lo spirito consolatore. Il significato dell'iconografia della Santa Trinità dalle catacombe a Rublëv*, presentation of S.S. AVERINCEV, Milano 1995]. On the «icon's orphans» cf. A. BESANÇON, *L'image interdite. Une histoire intellectuelle de l'iconoclisme*, Paris 1994 [Italian translation: *L'immagine proibita. Una storia intellettuale dell'iconoclastia*, Milano 2009], pp. 293-306 and 401-425. Matisse's *Intérieur aux aubergines*, painted in 1911 and preserved today in Grénoble, opens the illustrative apparatus of André Chastel's fundamental and much discussed contribution on the multifaceted Western debt to Byzantium and its art: A. CHASTEL, *L'Italie et Byzance*, posthumous edition curated by C. LORGUES-LAPOUGE, Paris 1999; cf. also *Byzantium/Modernism. The Byzantine as Method in Modernity*, ed. by R. BETANCOURT, M. TAROUTINA, Leiden 2015. On Matisse's encounter with the icon and what followed see G. LEARDI, «*Tout est dans la mesure. Matisse davanti alle icone russe nel 1911*», in *La Russie et l'Occident. Relations intellectuelles et artistiques au temps des révolutions russes. Atti del convegno (Université de Lausanne, 20-21 Mars 2009)*, éd. I. FOLETTI, Roma 2010, pp. 11-30. On the reception of the icon in the 1910s, when it became «a real fashionable phenomenon in Russia, and was studied because it is an unveiled masterpiece, an expression of first-class aesthetics, [...] a work of art as good or better, even more modern, than Western art production», see I. FOLETTI, «Tra classicismi e avanguardie: la ricezione dell'estetica bizantina in Francia e in Russia tra Otto e Novecento», in *Phantazontes. Visioni dell'arte bizantina*, a c. di V. CANTONE, S. PEDONE, Padova 2013, pp. 175-255, at p. 237 n. 136; an updated bibliography on the debt to the Russian avant-garde icon, *ivi*, p. 235 n. 132. On Ostruchov and his collection cf. D.S. LICHACHEV, *Le radici dell'arte russa. Dal medioevo alle avanguardie* [Italian translation by E. KOSTJUKOVIČ, Milano 2005], esp. pp. 327-339 («La cultura russa moderna e l'antica Rus»). Kandinskij's works can be found in V. KANDINSKIJ, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, München 1912 [Italian translation:

Lo spirituale nell'arte, Milano 2005]; ID., *Rückblicke*, Berlin 1913 [Italian translation: *Sguardi sul passato*, Milano 2006]. The «wild stages» of Kandinsky's work on St. George are recalled in I. FOLETTI, «Tra classicismi e avanguardie: la ricezione dell'estetica bizantina in Francia e in Russia tra Otto e Novecento», in Phantazontes. *Visioni dell'arte bizantina*, a c. di V. CANTONE, S. PEDONE, Padova 2013, pp. 175-255, at pp. 230-237; cf. also ID., *Da Bisanzio alla Santa Russia. Nikodim Kondakov (1844-1925) e la nascita della storia dell'arte in Russia*, Roma 2011, pp. 121-124. Dagron's quotations on Kandinskij are found in G. DAGRON, *Décrire et peindre. Essai sur le portrait iconique*, Paris 2007, pp. 81-82.

Abstract

During the Byzantine 8th and 9th centuries debate on the image known as iconomachia, two approaches – on the one hand proto-Christian aniconism, first Jewish and then Islamic, on the other the Platonic distinction regarding images together with the Plotinian theory of artistic representation – became allies in challenging the permissibility of figurative art. This subtle and widely misunderstood theological duel surrounding icons did not end with an indiscriminate theological rehabilitation of the veneration of images, but with the invention and meticulous codification of a “new” image. The Council of Constantinople in 843 did not “eliminate iconoclasm”, as is often stated. Rather, when all was said and done, an artistic depiction could only be considered licit and non-idolatrous if it did not attempt to represent the figure naturistically. The Byzantine debate would then validate the non-figurative understanding of sacred images, and by doing so mark a turning point in the process that would open the way, after a long latency, to the abstract art of the 20th century. In the contemporary era, art is motivated and guided by the “latent iconoclasm” of the icon, releasing itself from its religious dimension and bringing back into the secular arena its declaration of war against the proliferation of idols.