ARE ICONS IDOLS?

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Abstract: *This paper will investigate the differences and similarities of icons and idols in light of the insights from Russian theology and contemporary phenomenology. Starting from some examples from the Bible, which explicitly bans all idolatrous representation of God or other gods, this paper will discuss the ways in which the arguments of twentieth century critics are constructed so as to save the icon from the sin of idolatry. This paper does not attempt to give a definitive final answer to this question but to review and interrogate the validity of the above-mentioned arguments.*

Keywords*: icon, idol, presence*

The problem of the idols dates back before Christianity and it occupies an important place both in the Old and in the New Testament. If the idols are mentioned several times and from multiple perspectives in the Bible, the icons are mentioned less and most of the times as symbol of Christ and His role of representing God on Earth. The question of icons is directly related to the problem of the representability of God, another thorny issue which is tackled with mainly by the apophatic tradition – Dionysus the Areopagite, Clement of Alexandria, etc. According to the apophatic thought, it is impossible to represent God not only in images but also in words/concepts. In the Christian religion, God is predicated as spirit (Corinthians 2: 3) and thus radically separated by the body represented in the iconographic or idolatrous representation. This idea leads in its turn to the question of what kind of body is represented in the icon – is it the spiritual body (*caro spiritualis*) as Henry Moore defined the body of the angels or the body of the resurrection of Christ as the Apostle Paul shows we should refer to Christ's presence on the Earth.

Nowadays idols are referred to quite liberally, they have become a natural presence in our lives, it is for instance considered normal that the youth should have idols. However, the Bible is firm in the condemnation of idols. In the Old and New Testaments, the idols appear in two important instances: as graven image (the Second Commandment and other instances) and as main sins (lust for wealth: "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Ephesians 5:5), "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3: 5). In this paper we will discuss the first instance of the idols, the one which appears mainly in the Old Testament because we are interested in the relation between icons and idols. We will not attempt to give a final answer to this question as is has not yet been settled not even in the present day. In the following we will discuss the ways contemporary phenomenology and Russian theology have tried to absolve the

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icon of the sin of idolatry the iconoclasts were accusing it of. We will begin by looking at the ways the idol is presented in the Old and New Testaments.

As is well-known, the Old Testament forbids the creation of a graven image in its second commandment: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am o jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of then that hate me; and shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments." (Exodus 20, 4-6). In this commandment we can see how God seems to try to avoid turning us into the slaves of soulless objects. It is important to note here that the idols are completely separated from all God or His representation could be. The idols are the image of some *things* in the sky or on earth. This commandment and this delimitation appear in other places in the Old Testament for instance: "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols*"* (Isaiah 42: 8*).*

The Old Testament also tells us that the idols are powerless, they are simple objects created by the human hand:

> Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field,
> their idols cannot speak;
> they must be carried
> because they cannot walk.
> Do not fear them;
> they can do no harm
> nor can they do any good. – (Jeremiah 10: 5)

Everywhere in the Old Testament, the idols are harshly criticized. In Kings 2 17: 15 the false character of the idol is highlighted again; in the Psalms, the idol causes bloodshed; there are prophecies of one day when all the idols would be cast away (Isaiah 31: 77). In Jeremiah 10 there appears again the idea that the idols are inert objects, they can do no harm nor good but in Jeremiah 50 it is said that the idols induce madness; the idols are also a teacher of lies (Habakkuk 2: 18). The idea that the idols would disappear one day appears in Acts 7: 15 too.

All this proof must have led to the various iconoclast reactions in Europe and in Islam. Nonetheless, the icon survived. It appears in the image which is described in the Bible as idolatrous – images of wood, gold and silver – and people bow to it. What were the arguments of the Orthodox religion for maintaining the icon we will see in the following through the discussions of the Russian School of Theology from the beginning of the 20th century.

According to Pavel Florensky, the icon reiterates the mystery of the incarnation of Christ, it appears in the hermeneutic act as a representation of God. In Florensky's view (Florensky, 1996:152), the icon has nothing abstract, it is characterized by concreteness and it does not re-present but reiterates the act of the incarnation of Christ. As Florensky sees it, both theology and metaphysics meet in this idea of the icon as incarnation of Christ. However, we can also ask whether the miracle of the incarnation is used here as a pretext for the perpetuation of pre-Christian elements. Florensky states that the icon as reiteration

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of the incarnation must be understood as representation of real appearances. The hermeneutic act accomplished by contemplating an icon is the iconostasis which is akin to angelophany in that it is similar to the experience of revelation. In Florensky's view, iconostasis is formed of the following stages:

> In this separation, there are two moments that yield, in the artwork, two types of imagery: the moment of ascent into the heavenly realm, and the moment of descent into the earthly world. At the crossing of the boundary into the upper world, the soul sheds, like outworn clothes, the images of our everyday emptiness, the psychic effluvia that cannot find a place above, those elements of our being that are not spiritually grounded. At the point of descent and re-entry, on the other hand, the images are experiences of mystical life crystallized out on the boundary of two worlds. […] Once we understand this difference, we can easily distinguish the 'moment' of an artistic image: the descending image, even if incoherently motivated in the work, is abundantly teleological; hence, it is a crystal of time in an imaginal space. The image of ascent, on the other hand, even if bursting with artistic coherence, is merely a mechanism constructed in accordance with the moment of its psychic genesis. When we pass from ordinary reality into the imaginal space, naturalism generates imaginary portrayals whose similarity to everyday life creates an empty image of the real. The opposite art – symbolism – born of descent, incarnates in real images the experience of the highest realm; hence, this imagery – which is symbolic imagery – attains a *super-reality* (Florensky, *op. cit*: 44-45).

The crystal in time Florensky mentions is the moment which separates the iconostasis from idolatry. Through this hermeneutic act of the one perceiving the icon, there emerges a fundamental separation between icon and idol. The idol lacks transcendence. It only represents itself and even more so in an ostentatious manner. The icon signifies outside itself, to the One that generates it and to the one that contemplates it, making possible a dialogue through which faith is predicated in the moment of the incarnation. As is well known, the icon is purely symbolic, its colors – blue, red, gold – symbolize purity, self-sacrifice and the Christic glory. As compared to the idol, it unites and does not separate (see the etymology of the word symbol: sym-balein, the union of two different things). Thus the icon makes possible the encounter between man and God through the figure of Christ. The idol, on the contrary, distances us from God; moreover it places us in a position of transgression towards God's commandments. The icon, on the other hand is characterized, as hermeneutic mode, by listening/obeying, it is an exercise in the angels' attitude towards the Father.

Another Russian theologian who discussed the icon's validity is Sergei Bulgakov. According to Bulgakov, when we speak about icons we should not depart from the apophatic premise which predicates the impossibility of representing God, but from the sophianic perspective which entails the representation of God as incarnation in the world as His image:

"We should not start from the *apophatic* thesis of the invisibility of non-representability of God, but from the *sophiologic* one, according to which God is

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representable and the world is configured in His image. God has traced His Image in the created world and it is therefore possible to represent Him (Bulgakov, 1996: 54).

Indeed, if we start from the premise of the representability of God in the world, the icons come to manifest a new mode of relating to God through which man is called to participate in and to bow to the images of God in the world: Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, the angels. Bulgakov starts from the Greek philosophy in particular the Platonic and Plotinic ones according to which every thing in the visible world has a correspondent in the world of Ideas and the icons thus represent God's correspondent in the material world:

This is how we should understand one statement which is frequent in the writings of the Fathers: that all the prototypes have their image; or an even more profound expression in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: 'The visible icons are truly the visible of the invisible'. The sacred symbols are 'a production and representation of divine traits, the visible images of unspeakable and elevated contemplations. According to a definition by Saint John the Damanscene, every image is a revelation and witness to what is hidden (Bulgakov, *op. cit*: 46).

However, modern philosophy – starting with Nietzsche and ending with Derrida – has discussed how ancient philosophy was wrong in this idea of God's representation in the world because, in the perceptible world, God can only exist conceptually, as human re-presentation unattached to any subtle reality and thus in an idolatrous manner. Contemporary phenomenology contests this theology of presence professed by Bulgakov and Evdokimov. Here is what Jean-Luc Nancy said about images:

> Let us first recall that the commandment forbids the making of images ''of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth,'' that is, of anything at all. Above all, however, it forbids the making of *sculpted* images (the insistence on sculpture and on sculpting is striking, in all the texts related to the biblical corpus as well as those in the Talmudic and Hassidic traditions). The commandment therefore concerns the production of forms that are solid, whole, and autonomous, as a statue is, and that are thus destined for use as an idol. The question here concerns idolatry and not the image as such or ''representation.'' The idol is a fabricated god, not the representation of one, and the contemptible and false character of its divinity derives from the fact that it is fabricated. (Nancy, 2005: 30).

According to Jean-Luc Nancy, what is condemned in not the icon as representation of God but the fact that the idol predicates itself as presence in itself, as excessive presence that refers only to itself and creates no link between man and God. What contemporary phenomenology does not seem to state is that God separates Himself clearly from these graven images.

Paul Evdokimov restates the premise of presence which appears at Sergei Bulgakov: *It is God's presence among men which is beautiful, this is what ravishes and transports the soul* (Evdokimov, 1970: 17). But Evdokimov attempts to avoid the aporia of metaphysics or of a vulgar materialization of the spirit by postulating a total connection between man and the divine energies:

The beauty of God, just like His light, is neither material, nor sensorial, nor intellectual, but it gives itself through the forms of this world and allows itself to be

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contemplated by the eyes of the transfigured body. […] It is neither the 'sensible' mysticism of the Messalinians, nor the reduction to the intelligible one, nor a gross materialization of the spiritual, but the very concrete communion of the created nature of the *entire* [my italics] man with the uncreated (nature) of divine energies (Evdokimov, *op. cit*.: 32-22).

In Evdokimov's view, the icon foretells the parousia of the unseen God in a personal mystic moment but also in an apocalyptic future in which God will reveal Himself to humanity. (*ibidem* 155).

According to Graziano Lingua, the icon is not the same with the idol because:

> Iconic thinking thus puts into play an irreducible language of paradox where presence is absence, light is darkness, visibility and invisibility are held together because the icon reveals, while at the same time nor attempting to circumscribe the Divine. What is the idol but an image enclosed in the simple visibility, a saturation of presence which attracts the look and enchants the visible? In fact the iconic dimension of the image contests this simple presence interpreting the configuration as place of presence in absence, kenotic reality which displaces the arrogance of all seeing, continuing to show forms and colors. (Lingua, 2006: 17)

In the following we will discuss the way contemporary phenomenology, represented by Jean-Luc Marion approached the difficulties in the theological discourse of presence. Jean-Luc Marion attempted to rescue the icon by rescuing the idol itself:

> Must we however accept the idol as a true image of the divine? Undoubtedly yes but on condition of evaluating such a divine…we model a face to ask the divine to open itself in it, to behold us through it, to smile and to threaten. (Marion, 2007: 27)
>
> The idol does not delude, it makes us confide in the divine. It gives us warrantees about the divine and, even when it terrorizes us, it grants peace by identifying the divine with the face of a god (*ibidem* 28).

Here Marion seems to take the divine for God as we can see in the world of Apostle Paul: "For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." (Corinthians 8: 5, 6).

Thus, Marion's thesis is erroneous because it overlaps the presence of the divine with the presence of God and, moreover, it presents the idol as an acceptable representation of the divine, which is in contradiction with the Old and New Testaments. As contrasted to Bulgakov and Evdokimov who start from the premise of God's presence in the world, Marion starts from the premise of God's absence from the world (Marion, *op. cit*.: 29). He finds the main argument for this approach in Colossians 1: 15 which says that "Christ is the icon of the invisible God".

The main argument for the difference between icon and idol is, according to Marion, in the predication of distance: while the icon inscribes *in presentia*, the absence of God, the idol states a presence made necessary by the absence: "The icon expresses, as its specific trait, the nuptial distance which unites without superimposing the visible with the

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invisible that is, here, the divine with the human. The idol attempts to abolish this distance through the availability of a god made to live in the immobility of a face." (Marion, *op. cit.:*31). Marion proposes as a natural phenomenon of humanity the necessity to represent the invisible and the icon should be perceived as the image of human nostalgia for a hidden God.

Marion dedicates a chapter to Nietsche in his book *The Idol and the Distance.* Marion shows how Nietzsche affirms the death of God as signifying the transformation of the divine into idol by inserting an intermediary, be it only conceptual, between us and God. According to Nietzsche, the God of both ethics and metaphysics is idolatrous because they conceptualize the divine. However, the relation with God has to be concrete, *in presentia*, or an affirmation of nostalgia as apophatic theology states. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche speaks about "the concept of 'God' which represents a distancing from life, a critique and even despising life"; Nietzsche speaks of Gottbildung – "the psychological fabrication of God" (Marion, *op. cit.:* 60).

To conclude, we should say that both the theologians and the philosophers discussed here attempted to save the icon from the accusation of idolatry avoiding to approach the way in which the idol is presented in the two Testaments. Some of their arguments are valid – in particular the one on presence – but can an image be one with the presence of God in the world, be it an icon? And in what way can we put into practice the hermeneutic act discussed by Florensky and Bulgakov? How many of us experience a truly epiphanic moment upon bowing to an icon? Probably the most solid argument in the preservation of icons is that they reiterate the moment of Christian incarnation and the Christians are thus honoring that moment.

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