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in conversation

the icon in orthodox christianity, art history and semiotics

Birgit Meyer

A material approach to religion does not reduce religion to sheer matter, but understands material forms as a potential locus for the genesis of a sense and sensation of transcendence. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the processes through which material forms achieve a special status beyond their matter-of-fact existence, this special issue proposes to turn to the notion of icon. The icon is the artifact par excellence that is physically present, and also conveys the presence of what it depicts and what is not present in the same way as its own physicality. To its sympathetic beholders it conveys the presence of something absent through the suggestion of likeness. But it may also evoke strong iconoclastic impulses that insist on its sheer materiality and mere artificiality, dismissing all claims about the icon as mediator of divine presence as idolatry. While for the former the icon is an object that enshrines a sacred surplus, for the latter it is a mere illusion. Clearly, in order to be appreciated and experienced as an icon, there is need for an

object that conveys an absent presence, and also a preparedness to see this object as such. The icon is both object and category.

As argued in the introduction to this special issue, icons are a productive point of departure because they form an interface between matter and meaning; they are not simply carriers of meaning, but make it present objectively (via matter), sensuously (by appealing to the senses) and intellectually (by making sense). This implies that a focus on icons invites us to synthesize various theoretical strands—on materiality and human–object relations, on art and aesthetics, and on semiotics—that often are kept apart. As a step in the direction of such a synthesis, in this In Conversation section we present three distinct, yet partly interrelated notions of the icon in Orthodox Christianity (Sonja Luehrmann), art history and picture theory (Hans Belting) and Peircean semiotics (Robert Yelle). From various angles, these contributions help us grasp the genesis of iconicity. Intriguingly, while the fields of picture theory and semiotics have much to offer for fleshing out a material approach to religion, the icon—as religious object and category—also is an indispensable figure for these fields. The genesis of a sense of presence is by no means just a religious phenomenon, but central to politics and aesthetics of world-making at large.

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