



# Material Religion

The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief

ISSN: 1743-2200 (Print) 1751-8342 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfmr20>

## The Icon in Orthodox Christianity, Art History and Semiotics

Birgit Meyer

To cite this article: Birgit Meyer (2016) The Icon in Orthodox Christianity, Art History and Semiotics, *Material Religion*, 12:2, 233-234, DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2016.1172768](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2016.1172768)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2016.1172768>



© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 22 Jun 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 292



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rfmr20>

**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.

Birgit Meyer (PhD anthropology, 1995) is Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University. She is vice-chair of the International African Institute, a member of the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences, and one of the editors of *Material Religion*.  
b.meyer@uu.nl

234

Material Religion volume 12, issue 2, pp. 233–234

DOI: 10.1080/17432200.2016.1172768

© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.