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Iconic Space and the Rule of Lands¹

MARIE-JOSÉ MONDZAIN

Translated by Rico Franses

In the following extract, Mondzain examines the way in which the spiritual hegemony of the Early Christian and Byzantine church was transformed into political power. The primary tool used in this endeavor was the icon. The representation of the holy figures of Christianity as space-occupying physical beings puts into play a series of spatial operations which aided in the exercise of temporal, imperial authority.

Christianity's true genius lay in its attempt to rule over the entire planet by organizing an empire which drew its power and authority from the linking together of the visual with the imaginal. The Church, founded by Paul, was apparently the first to provide a response to the problems under consideration here, which are those posed by iconocracy. This concerns the entire apparatus (*dispositif*) which, in giving its flesh and its form to something, the very essence of which is a withdrawal, invisibly takes possession of all earthly, visible things. We have just examined the question of the speculative energy involved in this enterprise; now we must turn our attention to its pedagogical and political effectiveness. By virtue of the economic² unity of the system, the operation of an uninterrupted pathway between the spiritual and temporal worlds was made possible. When considered from the point of view of the economy, they are one and the same world.

The incarnation of a God appearing in an image in the form of a son establishes both a new theology and a new politics. The Pauline conception of the *eikôn tou theou*, the Son who is an image of God (and who constitutes a body which founds a new kingdom), inspired the Church to a doctrine in which images were given the responsibility of making institutional space visible. Under the abstract title of the universal this space develops a worldly or planetary calling. Catholic³ thought (which would be reducible to universality

in the terms of Greek categories) envisages no more and no less than the conquest of the world beyond the barrier of time, borders, and languages. We are today still the heirs and propagators of this iconic empire, and we should attempt to understand how the practices of the icon have perfused its smooth and efficient operation.

In promoting the visibility of God in his Christic incarnation, and in identifying it simultaneously as the ecclesiastic institution, St. Paul laid the iconocratic field open to the designs of empires. This from the Epistle to the Colossians: "Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature. For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers. All things were created by him and for him. And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, of the Church (*hé képhalé tou sômatos tês ecclêsias*)" (1:15–18).⁴

How did the icon succeed not only in making apparent an institution, but, by its very spatiality, in rendering visible and real a fertile, primary system for the invasion and domination of land?

The icon itself, by virtue of its physical and plastic reality, constitutes an extraordinary treatment of space. Each graphic decision carries both doctrinal and institutional meaning. We have already seen⁵ both its pedagogic use, and its capacity to convince people immediately of its own truth. However, it also puts in place a real and remarkable material apparatus (*dispositif*) that is shot-through with a design for the appropriation of Christianized territory. The question it poses is distinctively modern, because it is nothing other than that of the empire of the gaze, and of vision, which is an alternate phrasing for what I have called "iconocracy."

By "iconocracy," I mean that organization of the visible which provokes a belief, and which could also be called a submission to the gaze. I choose the term deliberately. Customarily, those who destroyed sacred images are called iconoclasts, and those who defended them iconophiles.⁶ I prefer to talk of *iconophiles* whenever I consider the spiritual and philosophical arguments which determined the battle in favor of icons, and of *iconodules*, that is to say slaves to the icon, whenever the stakes are considered from the pedagogical and political point of view. *There is no iconodule but for the iconocrat*, there is no slave but for the master. In the battle for mastery and the control over iconic production, the two camps accuse each other mutually of being slaves to the idol, because each wants to seize power. However, one thing is certain: one commits a serious error, showing a radical incomprehension of the spiritual and political problems of iconicity, whenever one talks of iconolatry. As for the iconoclast, it is clear that his hatred of the icon has its source in the unshakeable attachment to what he considers to be the pure, true image.

The image in its capacity to strike as a lightning-bolt in the service of power does not content itself with suspending the word and overwhelming by silence.

It proposes here and now, in the corporeal world, where it addresses the issue of the Incarnation, a definition of the entirety of space where power is deployed. The Church, following Paul, interpreted the image of God as the advent of a glittering reign, as *basileia*, a *plan of the occupation of space*.

The philosophical exercise in which Michel Foucault engages on the subject of a painting by Diego Velázquez is well-known. The chapter entitled “Las Meninas” in *The Order of Things*, which opens his whole meditation on representation, is in fact the subtle description of a painting approached as a staging, a production. This is a classic scenography of looks which are exchanged, reveal themselves, and hide themselves in a pictorial space which has become a metaphor of royal space. But the monarchy in question is not so much that of King Phillip IV of Spain, as that which founds the sovereignty of the gaze of the painter Velázquez, and which orders the visible to become invisible in a double elision of the places of the king and the subject. Foucault’s exercise consists in discovering in the image the visible structure of an imaginary space, and the institutional logic of an invisibility which is found to be submitted to iconic organization. Nevertheless, in this analysis, nothing returns, strictly speaking, to the nature of the iconic itself. In Foucault’s view, Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* exposes something describable and new, the secret of which a methodical and reasonable *ekphrasis* would, to some extent, deliver. In this sense, the brilliant analytic description could make one believe that it has left nothing unexplained, and that it dispenses the philosopher from a confrontation with the object itself. This may seem exaggerated and paradoxical; however, one does derive from Foucault the sense that the contemplation of the painting yields a pleasure which is in excess of, and almost of a different nature than, the satisfaction one derives from understanding that painting. The pleasure (*jouissance*) of the drawing, of the forms, of the color, in a word, of all the pictorial devices, is added to the deciphered enigma of its meaning, “as though adding to youth its flower” (Aristotle 10, 4.30).⁷

However, one could well disagree deeply with the idea that both the problems posed by painting, and the solutions that each work offers, are quite so independent of everything which makes the painting at the same time visible and readable. The plastic value of the painting, the ensemble of material procedures, would then be only the surplus-value of its meaning.

What brings us to reflect on the technique of the icon is precisely that which takes us beyond the technical means of a scenography. The technique of its material production, “the factory of the meadow” (*la fabrique du pré*), as Francis Ponge said (Ponge 1971), is a productive unwinding of meaning. The manipulation of materials and styles, the placing of color and strokes, bring with them stakes which are as much spiritual as political. Foucault skirts the biggest difficulty that discourse about images encounters, in addressing himself to images which generously offer their representativity to the philosopher.

However, the icon, not representing what it renders visible, issues a summons to philosophy with an enigmatic specificity. Will we allow it to take hostage something which, in the history of painting, consequently looms as an enigma specific to painting?

One could well explain things differently, saying that one should understand by painting that which links the invisibility of the image with the question of incarnation. What is it that takes bodily form in the visibility of an image? The preceding pages⁸ outlined the mimetic and kenotic consequences of the relations which link the flesh of the icon with the body of the resurrection. Then our path led to an examination of the iconic doctrine in holy, sacred space. Now our reflections must lead to a consideration of the icon in public space, and its economic existence with regard to established power. Here we must compare thinking about the icon, and its material technique, with the conception of a territory which is invaded, or submitted to rule.

Those who were devoted to icons, in presiding over their manufacture and uses, maintained the inseparability of what was at stake in imaginary terms, and the material form of the icon. For example, consider the question of repetition; the Byzantine image presents a fundamental generic difference in this respect from the image of Velázquez. In *Las Meninas*, both a unique work and a masterpiece, a repetition arises from an internal temporality in the mirroring operation of the image. The problem of duplication is included in a rhetoric of signs which will readily bring pleasure to the viewer, not to mention semiological exultations. *Las Meninas*, however, resists and remains a picture, which is to say, an enigma whose power will never be exhausted by the intelligibility of its signs.

The repetition in the Byzantine icon, on the other hand, is both institutional and real. The icon must recopy a model which, most of the time, is another icon, to which it is totally and invariantly subservient. From this arises the necessity, going back from icon to icon, to decree certain images as being foundational and miraculous. Alternately phrased, to the question of whether, in every image, the notion of imitation requires the existence of a real or even imaginary model, and whether the problematic of the true and the illusory demands consideration by an ontological tribunal, Foucault responds adroitly, thanks to Velázquez, by the drafting of a specular scenario in which the comings and goings are organized from the starting point of the representation of a mirror in a scene where the looks cleverly intersect as they exchange the sovereignty of their respective fictions. The native exteriority of the scene is abolished in the rhetorical interiority of painting itself.

The Byzantine economy, however, is entirely different. Byzantine iconography creates a repetitive and fertile plastic world, where the mirror is the invisible quiddity of being, *not represented* because not representable. What is

shown puts in place the visible formula of that which will ensure the stability of an empire. In opposition to what Ernst Kantorowicz pinpointed under the title of the sovereignty of the artist in the Renaissance (1984, 31–57), I propose a kenotic practice of virgin space, in which is incarnated the sovereignty of an institution which will make of the flesh a body, *corpus Ecclesiae*.

The iconophile Church and imperial power respectively produced irrefutable signs and emblems of their power. It remains for us to show by means of a few examples how the transition from a plastic space to a territory could be carried out. It is the icon which harbors the generating principle and concept of this transition. In effect, the problem is the invasion of profane space by an instance of power which, firstly, would have had to restrict itself to its churches and monasteries. Secondly, it would have had to limit its right to concern itself with moral life, religion, and salvation. Such was not its intention. Pauline thought, besides its spiritual message, carries with it a universal, conquering message which no wealth or power of this world was able to escape. The role of the icon in this conquest still appears to be determining and foundational.

The association of the icon of Christ and the Virgin with imperial power dates neither from the Quinisext council nor from the relapses of the iconoclast crisis; nevertheless, there is no doubt that the meaning of this association was radically modified during the crisis and after it.

In order to clarify my point, I will take three examples: imperial coins, and two specific representations of the mother and child, the Virgin of Tenderness and the Virgin of Blachernes.

1. COINS AND SEALS

The invasion of the space and area of trade by the image of power is a theme which preoccupies evangelical thought itself. The episode of “reddere Caesari” which is found three times in the Evangelists is well known: it appears in Matthew (22:21), Mark (12:17) and Luke (20:25). This is the text of Matthew: “And they brought unto him a penny. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar’s. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:19–21).

It is crystal-clear in this passage that the image engraved on the coin marks the space of an exchange and an obligation. The text of Matthew therefore clearly distinguishes spiritual power from temporal power. We have every reason to believe that this distinction was fairly faithful to Jesus’ thought and to the spiritual nature of his teaching. However, what becomes of this tradition with St. Paul? This is his text: “For this cause pay ye tribute also; for they are God’s ministers, attending carefully upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour” (Rom. 13:6–7).

Here, there is no longer any question of separating God and Caesar. The profane exchanges and the spiritual obligations are mingled in a list which has designated every collector or receiver of taxes as being given their responsibility by God (*leitourgoi theou*). It is no longer a question of giving Caesar his due, but of taking his place. In what way did the icon play a determining role in this takeover?

One can turn here to the work of André Grabar on the imperial cult in Byzantium (1936). The Christian cult did no less than import the whole system of the cult of the emperor, in order to render it to Christ and the *Theotokos*, the mother of God. Emperors and empresses had themselves represented in the company of Christ, the Virgin and saints, both in the profane world, and in holy places.

The first object to show the emperor and Christ side by side is a consular diptych dated to 540. The field of numismatics, however, allows us to pinpoint the appearance of the face of Christ on the currency to the period after the meeting of the Quinisext council. This concerns a "revolution" during the reign of Justinian II. Until then, the gold *solidus* represented on its obverse the bust of the emperor, and on the reverse the iconography of a Victory carrying a cross, which subsequently became the cross potent on steps. It is in 692–695 that Justinian II famously released *solidi* described in the following way in the catalogue of the British Museum: "Obverse: Justinian II, facing, bearded. Wears crown with cross and long robes of lozenge pattern; in l., small *mappa*. Reverse: Bust of Christ facing with cross behind head. Hair and beard flowing; wears tunic and mantle; r. hand in act of benediction; l. holds book of Gospels."

This "revolutionary" appearance is nevertheless preceded by the representation of Christ and his mother on seals surrounded by an oval frame which is nothing other than the shield of the Victory figure. The images inserted in these circles or ovals are therefore called *imago clipeata*: shield images.

These choices of emblems, these sigillographic and numismatic novelties, show clearly the association of the iconography with the founding signs of economic life and political institutions, in objects whose essence is circulation itself. Thus the holy image circulates throughout the interior of the Empire, whose limits it assumes, because the empire, in turn, determines the borders of its validity and its worth. Furthermore, the circular form of the seals and coins refers not only to the consular shield of the Victory, but also to the enclosed disc-shape which denotes both totality and infinity. It is found again in the icon of the Holy Face which shows Christ on his circular, cruciform nimbus.

These effigies, carrying the double symbolic value of both mercantile worth and Christic presence, go from hand to hand and place to place, traveling the entire Empire, and marking by their passage and use a network of exchanges, obligations, and credits. It is not therefore by chance that the iconoclast emperors immediately marked their reign by the release of a new coin, the iconography of which spread an idea which was political in nature. Former

models are resumed, which represent on one side the image of the emperor, and on the other the cross potent on steps. But alongside these one finds a coin which, for the first time, suppresses the cross in order to make room for the son of the emperor, Leo III on the obverse, and Constantine on the reverse. This is not a matter of purely and simply suppressing the cross which was, in fact, the sign favored by the iconoclasts to replace the icon. It concerns, rather, the circulating of a model of the transmission of power which owes nothing to arbitrary choice, usurpation, or charisma. The hereditary and dynastic hand-over of power constitutes an entirely different notion of monarchical continuity, and forms part of the iconoclast conception of power. In fact, in Byzantium, dynastic continuity remained extremely precarious, although dynastic desire reappeared on several occasions. Privileging the relation of father and son, at the expense of the filial relation with the mother, refers to the Old Testament legacy which makes the king the direct emanation of paternal will, directly transmitted from the divine will to the birth of the princely heir. The maternal, ecclesiastic institution saw clearly the threat which weighed upon its foundational role in the sacralization of temporal power, and was determined not to lose it. The coronation ceremony would therefore reestablish the signs of the institutional transmission of civil power by the maternal authority of the Church.

Let us note meanwhile that shortly after the triumph of orthodoxy—which is to say the triumph of the image—whereas it took some time for the icon to regain a broad dispersion and resume its dominance, there was an immediate release by Michael III of coins carrying the effigy of Christ. Alternately phrased, the triumph of the icon is, without the least doubt or delay, interpreted as a close association of the Church with temporal sovereignty. No power without an image. The figure chosen and circulated, that of Christ and his mother, is the one which had acquired particular power during the crisis. Even outside the domain of icons themselves, Christic iconography constitutes a representational formula for the inscription of the visibility of that which makes the law.

The *reddere Caesari* became in a few centuries a *reddere Christo*, which must be understood as a “give to the Church.” The image is therefore in the same situation as the coinage itself, a substitute for value, cash circulating, waiting for nothing other than to be placed in international circulation. It is not a metallic yardstick, because what it causes to circulate is not the abstract equivalent of merchandise whose value can be estimated in material production. It is the material object in which an abstract value, one which is completely imaginary, reposes. In this sense it resembles more fiduciary signs which incarnate, without the least fanfare, the effects of faith and of credit, than bumbling, stumbling cash, always restricted as much by the borders of a territory, or habit, as by time.

2. ICONS OF THE MOTHER AND SON

In order to understand further this economic and globalizing effort, I will pause at two traditional iconic models in the representation of the *Theotokos*: the Virgin of Contact, *Glucophilousa*, still called the Virgin of Tenderness, and the scene known as the Virgin of Blachernes, heir to the Virgin orants. In this latter image, the Virgin points to her son at her breast, but does not touch him. These two icons are laden with meaning, as much in the field of spirituality and Christology as in the putting into play of the space in which temporal power is decided. In each of these cases, what becomes of the graphic lines which make up the face or the body?

Each step of the iconographic technique, each material element of the icon, is invested with a double spiritual and temporal meaning. The icon is a map of the occupation of space, an interpretation of the Incarnation in which each element has a purpose. The fact that the vocabulary of icons duplicates itself corresponds to the express vocation of the icon. Its repetitive essence consists, by virtue of its very visibility, in the implementation of a dual conception of the invisible world (Mondzain-Baudinet 1987). The visible is one, but the invisible is two. The image, in its unary evidence, offers a non-contradictory demonstration of that which, without it, could not be simultaneously thought without contradiction. The invisible is double because it addresses itself to the question of being from its position as non-being, at the very moment where it allows a glimpse of its non-being in the luminous flesh of an object. The icon is a symbol: which is to say that in the economy of its *map of the occupation of space*, it is also aimed at being a *map for the occupation of the spirit*. From now on the desire of all rulers will be to have in hand the key to all signs and all symbols. Realism and theatrical specularity have no place at all here. The icon is an apparatus (*dispositif*) for the inscription of the *hic et nunc* of the institutional presence. This presence is itself designated as the instance which makes the body appear as the incarnation of duality. Henceforth, duality is the very being of meaning. Shortly after the iconoclastic crisis, the Church was finally able to base itself on the principle of *dyarchy*, which is to say the sharing of temporal power with the emperor, and to appropriate for itself symbolic hegemony by assuming on earth the power of God.

Périmètre, or circumscription, is a line which imprisons and reduces that which it contains at the limits of space and time. The graphic, but not perigraphic, line will be considered here from the point of view not from the phenomenological void which constitutes the gaze, but from the indeterminate retreat of borders which limit all space of whatever sort.

Gregory Nazianzus writes, "Whoever does not believe that St. Mary is the mother of God, is divided from divinity. Whoever claims that Christ passed through the Virgin as through a canal, without having been formed in her in

a way that is both human and divine, divine because it was without the activity of a man, human because it was according to the normal process of pregnancy, he too is a complete stranger to God" (1, 16).

However, in the preceding paragraph, Gregory enumerates the contrary attributes which characterize the hypostasis "at once terrestrial and celestial, visible and spiritual," then "*khôrèton kai akhôrèton*." The "Sources chrétiennes" translate this as "perceptible and imperceptible." More precisely, it means "that which occupies space, and does not occupy space," "space" here being *khôra*, which is to say the place that one occupies in the visible world. Thus, Origen says that to be born of a woman is what permits every man to say that he occupies space (*khôra*) (3, 29).

Thought about the Son is thought about the image, thought about the image is thought about place and space (the icon), thought about space is thought about the bodies of women under the double sign, already broached, of virginity and maternity. How will the iconic matrix become swollen with space over which to rule, and give expression to the full power of an institution in which real women would have hardly any place, because their strength manifests itself as the pure, empty substrate of a power that they do not share?

A. THE VIRGIN OF CONTACT

The space designated by the term *khôra* refers to the body in its capacity as both content and container. This is because the verb *khôrein* (*khôran êkhein*) means both things: to occupy a space, and to contain something. In other words, to say that the iconic line shows the *khôrèton* is to say that the form is something in which the contents are allowed to be seen thanks to the visible edge of its container. This form which constitutes an edge is the zone (*zonè*), which is, in Greek, the peripheral belt of contact between the womb of the mother and the body of the child. It is therefore important to affirm that Christ did not pass through his mother as one traverses a canal; that would suppose two forms: the form of the canal and the form of Christ. No: the virginal womb and the child are one and the same form. The actual womb of the Virgin was, properly speaking, the enclosure of that which is infinite, limitless. Drawing is therefore the perfect feature for determining the space of that which has none, the *akhôrèton*. It makes manifest an unfathomable enigma: the virginal womb gives its form and its borders, its limits and its characteristics to a son that she does not touch or enclose.

Such is the ecclesial space which is prepared in the icons of the Virgin and child. In these icons, the mother and child adopt different postures. One of the best known is the Virgin *Glucophilousa*, or the Virgin of Tenderness, which shows the areas of contact at their maximum. The two bodies are in-mixed, tied together, and the faces stuck together, cheek to cheek, to the point of the extreme distortion of the neck of the child. Here, there is an iconography of

interior space, where the humanity of Christ appears completely in the contiguity of the faces. This almost inclusive contiguity of the face of the child in its mother's is accompanied by an extreme care in making all other anatomical references disappear in the geometry of the folds of the clothing. In the *Vladimirskaia*,⁹ there is no longer a corporeal envelope. The fall of the drapery is formed by the strict organization of geometric planes. A linear, repetitive architecture is formed, where successive waves are inscribed, fitting into each other closely, and spreading the circular and centrifugal effects of occupied space. The rendering of the folds shows us not only an unusual interpretation of human anatomy, but an invisible extension of the tucks and folds of the world in the graphic architecture of a body without shade.

The virginal clothing is as beautiful as the heaven and the earth, as vast as the universe. Simultaneously, the space (*khôra*) of the virginal body where Christ finds the form of his fleshly periphery, the membrane which defines his terrestrial place, and the space of the consecration of the ecclesial body are identified with each other. The *Glucophilousa*, the Virgin of Contact, is the scene in which the body manifests the sacralization of the contact, the contagion. Contact is a characteristic fact of this iconic formula. Everything which it "touches" is seized by the effect of its uncomplicated presence in a contiguity which is made into a continuity. The icon is not content merely to show this contact; it creates it in the very thaumaturgy of its presence. There is a constant relay, and mutual delimitation, between looking and touching. Most mosaics cannot be touched, but icons are often close to the eyes, carried about, carried on one's person. The development of portable icons only increased this space of contact and contagion. Wherever there is an icon, the gaze of God is present. It does not need a sacred architectural institution. Outside the church, it transports this holiness symbolically to all places, and makes it exist invisibly and with supreme power wherever it is found.

The iconic institution which could not be framed or pinned down is the small-scale model of an ecclesiastic institution; it permits the production of rules for an open and profane space, which the Church can traverse in all senses and appropriate for itself. Against this invasion, the iconoclast emperor, careful to preserve his temporal prerogatives, states clearly that only those things which are consecrated and interlinked with sacramental space are holy. . . . He wants to restrict the power of the clerics to the limits of the Church, and the Church within the borders of his own empire. For the iconophile, on the contrary, everything which the icon invades becomes sacred, and therefore the property of ecclesiastic power. The icon is centrifugal and invasive: by propagation, it spreads the infinite principle which it includes, without limiting it. Thus the church, a sanctuary built in the image of the Marian body, cannot become *horos, peras*, an enclosed and circumscribed precinct. Furthermore, the limits, the borders (*horoi, perata*), of the empire cannot ever become in turn the boundary-markers of a temporal power reduced to a national ter-

ritory. In other words, within a framework in which the stakes are political, the vocabulary of the drawing-lines of the icon, which categorically opposes *graphè* and *périgraphè*, is the chosen instrument of the institutional inscription of a lifting of the limits on the propagation of ecclesiastic power.

Owing to the principles of iconic production in the country's interior, the Church develops an independence with regard to all interior limitation, and thus an openness to regions beyond the profane space of this world, which it can endlessly convert. The icon does not have a frame, nothing enframes it. Only the plastic principles of the inscription of the Word govern it, giving it its ecumenical and catholic (that is, international and universal) power. The process of the globalization of the image across the whole planet has begun. It is the mode of the universal communication of truth, and it becomes the legitimate property of all places and all nations where it establishes its "opto-power."

B. THE VIRGIN OF BLACHERNES, THE VIRGIN OF NON-CONTACT ("PLATUTERA")

This iconic model goes back to an old type of Virgin, called Virgin orants. These Virgins have their hands open towards the heavens, and face forward to the viewer. However, at the beginning of the ninth century, after the triumph of orthodoxy over iconoclasm, the *Theotokos* is shown in the position of an orant, wearing on her breast a miraculously suspended bust of a nimbed Christ. The Virgin does not touch it. André Grabar justly remarks that the nimbus, so unrealistically suspended, is no longer the triumphant shield of the *clipeata* icons. Created after the triumph of orthodoxy in 843, this late image "could not possibly represent any real scene. Even those images, some of which are very old, which show the Virgin actually holding a type of shield on which the young Christ is represented, do no more than imitate Roman images of highly-placed people who themselves carry the triumphal *clipeus* with a portrait. The image of Blachernes itself does not reflect any possible reality, as the medallion with the bust of Christ is not held up by any physical means" (Grabar 1957, 254). Grabar concludes that the scene concerns a representation of the Conception. Yet how can this icon, which does not show anything real, be referred to as a representation of the Conception, and therefore as the founding moment of the Incarnation? The body of the Word is detached from the clothing of his mother, the nimbus functioning as a transparency of the womb of the Virgin. Here as well, the economic thought behind the choice of icons must be articulated. The iconic models do not refer to realities; all are imaginary and all are interlinked in a unifying conception of celestial truths and temporal realities. Here, I would rather return to the qualifications which refer to this iconic model: "*platutera tôn ouranôn, khôra tôn akhôrôn*," which is to say,

“larger than the heavens” and “space of that which is not in space.” These epithets refer to the body of the Virgin, carrying the body of God, in the position of the orant. The Russians called this Virgin “The Virgin of the Sign”; it could also be named the Virgin of Inscription, of the Graph. This iconic type simultaneously shows the inclusion and the absence of contact. In order to contain the body of God, a body larger than the heavens was needed, a space for that which did not have any, a place for that which is everywhere, a visibility for something which nothing could see. The pairs of oxymorons follow one another in order to formulate the double nature of the Word; this, in turn, will be used as the capital which will establish the double power of the ecclesiastic institution. The invisible Church is therefore invisible in two senses. The one is spiritual, the other temporal. The borders of the visible are at the same time those that impose the invisibility of the spirit and the incommensurability of restricted territory. The ubiquity of the gaze of the Virgin, as the title of the icons indicates—*peribleptos*, she who sees everything all around—generates the ubiquity of the ecclesial gaze, which seeks to reign over the totality of heaven and earth and to overrun whatever imposes limits on human kingdoms. It must see everything. Thus the iconic gaze is synoptic. Not only is it the epiphany of what no eye can see, but it keeps watch over what no eye could ever fall upon. Circulating, circular, encircling the infinite, the icon is addressed to all, in all times, in all places, and in all idioms. Breaking the spell which punished Babylonian pride, it finds again the foundational polyglotism of the spirit, which was redistributed by grace to each person on the day of the Pentecost.

The Virgin of Non-Contact is the figure in which the equivalence of inside and outside, the near and the far, is played out. She is the *Virgin of the Oxymoron*. Her womb is transparent, allowing one to see her entire economy, which is to say, her son. What her bosom presents, without containing, transforms the maternal body into a cosmic womb, in an unbounded, encompassing form. This mysterious suspension of the Word is the very image of the incarnational economy which sets the doctrine of the Incarnation (*caro*) in relation to the body (*corpus*) of temporal power. The Virgin of the sign is the Virgin of the conception of a concept.

The iconoclasts did not reject all images, but they did reject, very specifically, images of the Virgin, Christ, and the saints, as well as their cults. Careful to tighten the national borders and to decentralize administrative power, they set about controlling the empire by means of military and administrative reform. This was the reform of the themes, which entailed the distribution of land to the peasant-soldiers who defended the empire in protecting their lands. This forms another map of the occupation of territory, where the emperor delegates military, administrative, and fiscal responsibilities to strategists who are more his executors than representatives. Paul Alexander, in his analysis of

the iconoclast council of Saint-Sophia (815), insists on the concept of the emperor as *mimètes tou théou*, imitator of God (Alexander 1953, 35–66). This idea is supported by a whole Pythagorean tradition. If the iconoclast emperors put such zeal into their refusal of the icon, it is because they wanted to contravene the principle of dyarchy, which is the sharing of power with the Church, thanks to a radical separation of temporal from spiritual power. The iconic economy permitted, by contrast, a continuing practice of sharing and delegation. The principle according to which the king is the sole true imitator of Christ retained its force and appeared clearly in the *Eclogues* of Leo III. This implied a reading of Psalm 82:81 favorable to a mimetic interpretation of royalty. St. Jerome resists this interpretation, commenting, “God does not say ‘you are gods’ in considering only kings and princes, but all of us who have a body” (LXXXI, 1), while Eusebius, on the subject of the same psalm, prefers to think that *théoi* relates to *hègouménoi* and *archontés* (LXXXI, PG 23 988 B).

Kantorowicz insists on the large number of Fathers who interpreted the image, and imitation, of God from a legislative and juridical angle (1952). He cites among others the pope Damasus (366–384), “*Omnis res dei habet imaginem.*” He cites Basil on the subject of the interpretation of the homonymic argument: “the emperor and the icon of the emperor are not two emperors . . . ; in the case of the identity of the emperor with his icon, this identity is accomplished by *mimesis (mimètikos)*” (Basil XVIII, 45, 149 C). In the first and second centuries, it was the Pythagoreans who developed this idea. Thus, Sthenidas of Lokri: “God is the first king and natural legislator. The king only becomes him by imitation.” Gerhart Ladner remarks that the caesaropapist tendency never prevailed in Byzantium, except at the exact moment of the iconoclastic crisis, and even then, only in a highly complex way (1940). But even there, the caesaropapist concept should be questioned for its historic relevance. It would be better to say that what interests the iconoclast emperors is to become, in the name of a fight against the idols, the absolute masters of political, juridical, administrative, and military representation, and the only practitioners of earthly *mimesis*. For the people as a whole, the sign of the cross would have to suffice; for the clergy, the celebration of the eucharistic sacrament; for the king, administration and justice. *The people must make do with dissimilarity, the clergy must be content with consubstantiality. Only the emperor has access to similitude, and the iconoclast tekhnè could be nothing other than the art of governing.*

In other words, one could say that, for the iconoclast, the icon, far from being as empty as it claims, takes possession entirely of space by the *périgraphè*, as it proceeds to sacralize it. For him, all plenary illusion will be halted by a deserted sign, a truly open form, tearing space and leaving no edges. The void cannot ever be shown as contained, and form has a horror of emptiness. Thus iconoclasm developed a cruciform semiotic, which at once placed the emperor and Christ at the same direct intersection of the spiritual and temporal worlds, as well as at the crossroads of all directions which engender a given territory. It

is at these crossroads that the emperor places his statues. Although the cross is not therefore the only memorial to divine torture, it is the *sign* of a strategic space which refers not to mediation, but to the localized and efficient presence of generals and watchmen who will conquer and control the territory that they have under their watch. The semiotic is only the other face of domination.

It was imperative for the Church as an institutional body that the icon triumph. And triumph it did. Henceforth, for the Christian world, *the theocracy of the visible* becomes the key to all authority—a doctrine, both speculative and strategic, of exchanged looks and imposed visions. It appears that the Church knew how to support and defend an uninterrupted alliance of sovereign and sacred offices with economic offices. It thus submits itself to the service of war, which it designates as unsuited, by itself, to mediation, which is to say, to symbolization. These “ecclesiastic” phenomena lent their form to all the theories and practices which aim to produce conviction in submission, and blind adherence in servitude.

CONCLUSION

As is well-known, Christ said that his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). Such spiritual words, however, did not found any Church.¹⁰ Rather, the champions of iconophilia would engage in an active and efficient reinterpretation, worthy of Pauline rhetoric, on the subject of taxation. In effect, the adversaries of the Church could “stupidly” satisfy themselves with Christ’s phrase in order to thwart temporal power. Once more, we are reminded that the enemies of the economy understood nothing of the evangelic message, and most of all, of the necessity of understanding it economically.

The words of Nicephoros¹¹ give us a magnificent prosopopeia of Christ the king, reverberating like the drums of a triumphant despotism; the king of the universe announces that he is abandoning all the usual signs of terrestrial royalty in order to deploy an empire of his own symbols: a brilliant light; glory without limit and without borders; cosmic monarchy; ubiquity and perpetuity. The text resonates like the voice of the icon which crosses the borders of space and time:

Conversely to these terrestrial and mortal sovereignties in which glory without greatness lasts only for a while, such is not my kingdom. Mine differs from those kingships based in this poor world, in which the glory fades as the flower of the field (Isa. 40:6–8), and which are finally doomed to corruption and death. Furthermore, the unstable thoughts and opinions of the crowd have undermined their dignity; their power was subjected to infamy; they were not sheltered from innumerable evils and uncountable difficulties. In truth, no one who rules

the world and the life of this world is found in my kingdom. There is nothing which can be found in the story of these [terrestrial] kings; nothing of the votes of *demes*, nor of popular elections, where often human opinions prevail. None of the symbols which mark such rank are found with me, corruptible, perishable symbols: no purple cloak, nor crown set with gems, no scepter nor throne. No dazzling spectacle. You will not see a chariot covered in gold, nor the public honors of an escort. I have no troops armed with lances and shields, nor applause, nor acclamations coming from those who preceded me, nor those who follow me. In a word, nothing of what one is used to seeing in the sphere of terrestrial power, which are human things and without future, are found in my kingdom. Therefore, my kingdom is not of this world. Poor in appearance, humble to look at, this handful of disciples which I lead is a lackluster group composed of the poor and fisherman, but it is a sublime group which excels in everything to do with the spirit. I am the son of God, the all-powerful king of the universe. I am his most legitimate offspring, and his sparkling radiation (Gregory of Nyssa, PG 45, 140B). The same glory and honor is due to me as to my father. For I am the heir of the paternal glory. I share the same throne as he does. I possess the equal prerogative of royalty, to sit enthroned with the glory of the father. That is why I am the king and the master of the universe. My kingdom is therefore not of this world and my power does not resemble in any respect power here below. My freedom is not circumscribed. I am the master: I am the lord, not only of this or that people or land, or city, but I reign over angels and men, over the whole terrestrial universe, heavenly and subterranean. Unto me every knee shall bow (Isa. 45:23). The world puts itself at my feet, and there is nothing which escapes my hand. For my kingdom is without limit or end.

This is the truth and there is no other. This is what all the faithful confess to, and proclaim. Where would be the plans of Providence, which reign over the earth, and how would they govern the course of our life if there is not "In his hands . . . the deep places of the Earth"? (Ps. 95:4). He exercises his power over every thing: he administers everything, not only as God, but also as man. Therefore is it said, "I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession" (Ps. 2:8). It is also said, "God reigneth over the heathen" (Ps. 47:8), and again, "behold thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass" (Matt. 21:5, citing

Zech. 9:9); at Jerusalem it is said, "He is just, and having salvation" (Zech. 9:9). It is written again, "the just lord is in the midst thereof" (Zeph. 3:5), and again, "the lord shall reign for ever, even thy God, O Zion, unto all generations" (Ps. 146:10). (Nicephoros II, 396 A–397 B)

This astounding demonstration of power, which Nicephoros puts into the mouth of the image of the Father, reveals to us his true project: to make of the economy a program of universal conquest. It would require little in order for these words to be put today into the mouth of some ruler from the domain of science-fiction, or some fantastic doctor to whom one could assign the most devilish paranoia. But what is happening here? A charismatic voice arises in a tone of untroubled legitimacy to announce to us that, if his kingdom is not of this world, it is because the entire world is his kingdom. This ecumenical power is that of a symbolic deployment which founds the notion of an economy. The relation that all the "images" of the world maintain with those things of flesh and soul which make up humanity, always trespasses on the borders of nations in order to carry out an ecclesial *incorporation*. Does the failure of those diabolical doctors of science fiction not come from the fact that they always lack access to the image? Always invisible, disfigured, masked, monstrous and occult, as soon as one sees them, and they make themselves heard, their ruin is certain. Teratological figures of invisibility, they constitute an off-camera population who terrorize the living. They are diabolical. Much time passed before images of the devil were produced, because hell is first of all completely invisible. The powers of evil assume many faces, yet have none which they can call their own. They are *aprosopon*, exiles from the face and the status of personhood. We will see later a surprising historic example concerning the Jewish face.¹² The enigma of the icon, however, has nothing to do with the occult. This is also what opposes the icon resolutely to the talismanic image, which summons invisible forces in order to diminish and ward them off, thanks to the procedures which render them visible and audible. From there, they "change sides."

However, on the side of demoniac invisibility, there exists a complementary tradition in the Christian imaginary. The devil knows the power of images, and is gripped by them. He disguises himself in visible form to seduce and to tempt. He apes God, shows himself and makes himself heard. Lying and diabolical images do exist. They are the ones that the holy man will confront during his fasting hallucinations in the desert. Whoever has been tempted only by the world still does not know true temptation: that of the false image, the diabolical image which comes to besiege the spirit and the flesh far from every earthly reality. The great variety of pictures inspired paradoxically by the diabolic seductions of the image are well known. Implicitly, iconic thought recognizes that between the clarity of doctrinal distinctions and the earthly vitality of the

imagination and desire, there is place for all manner of confusions and temptations. Is an image which bleeds and which heals you, at that point any different from an image which persecutes and kills you? As in the investigation of the economy, the investigation of iconic power meets its own spiritual limits and must appeal to a principle of distinction which has no place in the image. The later tradition of spiritual exercises, aimed at repressing the excesses of a "pseudonymous" and enticing imagination, bear witness to the uninterrupted concern of the institution in the face of iconic temptation.

Who would negotiate with life and history if they were assured of escaping everything which leaves a mark on our finitude, our weakness and our mortality? Who can escape desire? The image of God itself does not lack sinfulness, and the iconoclasts no doubt had good reason to mistrust and denounce it. Iconic doctrine is not only the first real thought about the freedom of the gaze in the encounter with painting, it is also the first meditation on idolatry, conceived no longer as a divergence from this or that religion but as an anthropological fact from which no one can escape.

In the prosopopeia which we have cited, the passage concerning the renunciation of all that makes up the visible glory of this world, for the universal and sovereign appropriation of the whole universe, is resoundingly clear. This is only an apparent paradox, because invisible omnipotence is based on the interpretation of the visibility of the incarnate image. It is the image of God demeaned in man which was saved by this image of the man who took his place in God. Henceforth, the image will be part of all the plans for redemption in the universe. It will prevail over all other modes of communication. It is the discourse of silence and submission, the word of emotion and conviction, the word of evidence and non-contradiction. If the image is all of this, one understands that it can no longer be left in the hands of all. The image demands a monopoly on its production, its programs, its messages. Only the master of the image, whom I call the *iconocrat*, will know what is right, good, and equitable to render visible in it, which is to say, to make known and to make believed in relation to it.

In connection with this, I quote Serge Gruzinski: "If the image comes up against so many stumbling blocks, it is because it is the manifestation of a structure which exceeds it everywhere. It is the expression of a visual order, and, even more, of an imaginary in which conscious and unconscious assimilation is synonymous with occidentalization" (1990, 331).

Since the invisible has universal value, all that is required is the production of a dogmatically sanctioned means of making it visible in order for all iconic hegemonies to be legitimated. Anthropology has confronted us with the relativity of our reason. To the vertigo inflicted by the discovery of the limits of a triumphant logocentrism, the image has come to bring the consolation of a federative, universal, and pacifying *tekhné*. There are arguments which claim that the Church has lost everything in our world because it no longer rests on

the same doctrinal and spiritual certitudes that it once did. However, this is to misunderstand the very bases on which despotisms of every kind rest today. It is to forget that the Church bequeathed a dual concept concerning duplication itself. The economy accounts just as well for the highest productions of art, as for the most oppressive uses of visibility. The voice which says that the image is “the best and worst of things” is made heard by ecclesiastic thought. Will we know how to respect the enigma in order to maintain our own liberty?

NOTES

We warmly thank Stanford University Press for their kind permission to print an excerpt from Marie José Mondzain’s *Image, Icône, Economie*.

1. Chapter extract from Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icône, Economie: Les sources byzantines de l’imaginaire contemporain*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1996: pp. 189–210. A full translation of this work is forthcoming from Stanford University Press. *Trans*.

2. The term “economy” in this paper is almost always used in a specifically theological sense. It refers not to financial or monetary matters, but rather to God’s overarching organizational plan for humanity. It includes concepts such as sin, salvation, and the role of the Incarnation in the unfolding of that plan. The first section of the book from which this extract is drawn is devoted to a study of the subject. The author also occasionally uses the term in its broader sense of “the operation or functioning of a system.” *Trans*.

3. The term “catholic” here is being used in its adjectival sense, and refers to matters which are of general or universal human interest. *Trans*.

4. All biblical citations in this text are taken from the Authorized (King James) Version.

5. In earlier chapters of *Image, Icône, Economie* (Mondzain 1996). *Trans*.

6. The reference here is to the iconoclastic crisis. From 726–787, and again from 815–843, all images of religious figures were banned. This was an era of intense religious and civil unrest, during which different political factions who declared themselves for or against icons vied for power. *Trans*.

7. In this article, quotes of Classical authors, early Church fathers, and other medieval writers are followed by a series of numbers. The numbers indicate a standardized sequence of subdivisions within the text, and can usually be found in any edition of that text. This is the conventional method for citing these authors, and is very similar to that used for biblical citations. Although it may appear confusing to contemporary readers unfamiliar with it, the system is always absolutely clear once one has in one’s hands a copy of the text. *Trans*.

8. See note five.

9. The *Vladimirskaya* is a twelfth-century icon of this type, made in Constantinople and sent to Kiev. *Trans*.

10. Matt. 16:18 only confers on Peter a spiritual authority, and entrusts to him the keys of the kingdom of God.

11. Nicephorus I (c. 758–828), Patriarch of Constantinople, was active in the

iconoclastic crisis as an energetic writer in defense of icons. While his *Antirrhetici Tres Adversus Constantium Copronymum* was translated into French by Mondzain in 1989 (as *Discours contre les iconoclastes*), no English translation exists. *Trans.*

12. See “Juif, face et profil” (Mondzain 1996, 253).

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