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STEPHANIE RUMPZA, Phenomenology of the Icon. Mediating God through the Image. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2023. 350 pp. – ISBN 978-1-009-31792-4

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On the basis of her doctoral thesis 'The Phenomenology of the Icon: Finite Meditation of an Infinite God' (Boston University 2019, adviser JEFFREY BLOECHL), STEPHANIE RUMPZA (researcher at the Université Sorbonne / Paris IV) has published an ambitious book in which she sets out to defend with the help of philosophy the legitimacy of Christian images. Icons play a central role in the liturgical life of Byzantine-Slavic Christianity, and RUMPZA presents a complex apology for their veneration. A unique feature of her approach is the addition of phenomenological arguments to the traditional theological ones.

RUMPZA blends philosophy and theology with patristic and Byzantine studies. She adopts the conceptual framework of German-French phenomenology, drawing primarily on the ideas of HANS-GEORG GADAMER and the French Catholic philosopher JEAN-LUC MARION, as well as JEAN-LUIS CHRÉTIEN, JEAN-YVES LACOSTE, and EMMANUEL FALQUE. RUMPZA's broad knowledge ranges from Aristotle to Kant, Hegel, and LEVINAS. Her familiarity with Orthodox icon theology is also extensive, including the works of SERGEI BULGAKOV, PAVEL FLORENSKY, LEONID OUSPENSKY, and VLADIMIR LOSSKY (who, unfortunately, is missing from the index).

The central issue of RUMPZA's investigation, which is stressed at every turn (beginning with the book's cover and subtitle), is the possibility of mediation between the infinite Deity and the finite material world and, within it, the possibility of the presence and comprehensibility of the divine for the finite human mind. She illustrates the difficulty of this problem with a famous, albeit legendary, anecdote about Augustine, who, when meeting a child trying to dredge the ocean with a sea shell, realised the impossibility of understanding the mystery of the divine by the limited capacity of the human mind. RUMPZA calls the implied difficulty the 'seashell problem.'

The study's ultimate claim is that the mystery of the icon offers a way to transmit divine presence to the senses and that by 'transfiguring' the vision, the icon can reconcile in a significant sense the ontological difference

between the infinite God and a human person. This mediation RUMPZA calls a 'game' or 'play' in the sense of an interaction between the 'players'. The icon not only represents or signifies to the eyes something that is not present (which other pictures can also do) but also manifests the antecedent presence of the divine vision directed to the worshipper. Even before the act of veneration, God 'gazes' through the icon towards the worshiper. The icon is defined as 'the invisible countergaze' (sic!) directed to the beholder, embodying the attention of God towards humanity.[1] It thereby becomes an invitation, more than a 'window to heavens', meaning that 'in the strictest sense, [it] aims to present us to the phenomenality of God's self-showing' (p. 159).

The book begins by introducing the 'seashell' problem from a philosophical point of view. The first chapter offers an overview of modern approaches to icons and goes on to describe the patristic developments in icon veneration. Beginning with the second chapter and continuing until the fourth, much of the effort is devoted to justifying the anterior possibility of venerating icons. In RUMPZA's view, phenomenology is 'well suited' to clarify the concepts of visibility and invisibility, and these preparatory steps are required since they 'necessarily underlie any account of the icon,' as explained much later (p. 246). The solution is achieved with the help of GADAMER's aesthetic theory, which, by reflecting on figurative art, proposed a new idea of mediation and 'returned the image and its truth into a holistic account of meaning' (pp. 64 and 75). Next, RUMPZA follows MARION's adaptation of phenomenology to the Catholic context with the help of the 'saturated object'. The following chapters 5 to 7 are devoted to the relation of icons to prayer, the issues of icon veneration, the role of icons in the liturgy, and finally, the investigation ends with a 'love letter' to 'Iconic mediation', that is, to icon veneration on a very personal note.

RUMPZA's study is difficult and complex. It is steeped in the French phenomenological tradition, which has recently turned to the analysis of religion.[2] This approach is characterised by first addressing the primordial human experience, which is accomplished in the first chapters since it is considered more basic than the theological aspects, which follow second. It has also developed a special vocabulary, the 'play' (from Kant), 'given-

1. Interestingly, RUMPZA does not mention a key liturgical term expressing the divine care for humanity, φιλανθρωπία, although the term is present in the original Greek text of her quote from John Damascene (p. 93).

2. Another phenomenological study of the icons is CHRISTINA M. GSCHWANDTNER, Welcoming Finitude. Toward a Phenomenology of Orthodox Liturgy. New York 2019.

ness', 'kenotic', 'saturation', or the elusive adjective of 'aesthetic,' which is one of the most frequently encountered terms in the book. RUMPZA's phenomenological method presents certain problems for the uninitiated reviewer, who, while deeply sympathetic to the subject matter, comes from a more historically and analytically oriented tradition.

In an earlier article that presented the main ideas of her book, RUMPZA stressed the importance of language in theology.[3] This is indeed an important methodological comment, although in a wider sense. In her book, RUMPZA wants to secure the icon's legitimacy in terms of philosophical and aesthetic conceptualisation first and arrive at the theology of icons on this basis. Philosophy, however, ought to be non-denominational. Can its secular conceptual toolbox do justice to the specific theological ideas and traditions embedded in the iconophile tradition of Eastern Christianity? Neither GADAMER nor MARION speak specifically about the patristic theory of icons. Even RUMPZA admits that 'Marion's icon is not strictly identifiable with the tradition of religious art'. MARION characterises the icon in a very general sense 'as a saturated phenomenon', which, together with his other idea, 'givenness', helps RUMPZA to provide a philosophical framework for explaining the significance of icons. What GADAMER and MARION accomplished for her was to show that the aesthetic approach to images transcends the mind-object dichotomy and creates a dynamic relationship between the phenomenon and intentionality. RUMPZA adopts this position for her program, but the specific aspects of the icon, the representation of God's visibility mediated by the 'abundance' of the icon that presents itself to the beholder, are determined by a religious context. It is difficult to keep the language of philosophy consistent with religious tradition, including scriptural formulae and theological context, since even the most sympathetic analysis ought to remain an external description – whereas it should do justice to the conceptual structure of the religious phenomena. It is here that the difficulties start.

The introductory 'Seashell Problem' begins with the legend about Augustine. RUMPZA presents the story as if Augustine realised the impossibility of comprehending *God* by the human mind. However, the original story stresses that Augustine saw this vision while he was planning his book about the Trinity, and it was the comprehension of the Trinity that was rendered impossible by the vision, not 'god' in a general sense.[4] Compre-

3. STEPHANIE RUMPZA, Icons and Analogy. Expanding our Language Game. New Blackfriars 100:1087 (2019) pp. 308–309.

4. This version of the medieval legend can be found in PETRUS DE NATALIBUS,

hending the Christian Trinity is not the same as understanding the issue of the finite representation of the infinite, which is a classic problem of the modern philosophy of religion. Aquinas (among others) is clear about the difference when he says that while the existence of God can be proven (e.g., by the Five Ways), the Trinity remains incomprehensible.[5] This might look like cavilling, but since the investigation addresses the imaging of God, it does matter whether representation is directed to an abstract 'god' or to the Trinity of three persons. RUMPZA is aware, of course, that the divine nature or the Trinity is not allowed on icons – except in the case of the visit of the three angels to Abraham (Gn 18:1–2) or the very rare case of the Ancient of the Days (Dan 7:13–14). However, even in this latter case, the Ancient of the Days carries the facial characteristics of Christ, who is the only mediator between God and humanity (1 Ti 2:5). Christ is the incarnate Word. Strangely, RUMPZA takes Rublev's famous Trinity icon as a case when 'icons do dare to figure the invisible God' (p. 137). This statement implies either that the meaning of the icon is its reference (which she otherwise denies) or that Rublev's Three Angels is not an icon.

It is essential that icons are made possible only by the Incarnation. The theology of the singular act of the Incarnation says precisely this: Christ is *the* finite manifestation of the infinite God. Of course, RUMPZA is aware that Christ is the only true icon according to Col 1:15, but this divine act has very little to do with the dynamic abundance of the works of art treated by GADAMER or MARION. Jn 14:6 states unequivocally: 'No one comes to the Father except through me', 'who has seen me has seen the Father' (Jn 14:9). That is, not by any art or poetry. The finite presence of the infinite is celebrated in thousands of ways; for example, in the address to the Theotokos: 'Rejoice, container of the uncontainable God' (Χαῖρε, Θεοῦ ἀχωρήτου χώρα). This line of the Akathistos hymn spells out the unique event which made all later icons possible. RUMPZA mentions only once the so-called *Platytera* (Μήτηρ Θεοῦ ἡ Πλατυτέρα τῶν Οὐρανῶν) icon – in the section which describes church decoration (p. 228) but without explaining the deeper meaning of this image.

From a theological point of view, the key idea is that the mediation of the infinite God by finite means, that is, the 'seashell problem', risks becoming a pseudo-problem. GADAMER's aesthetic is independent of the *Platytera* icon, and the icon does not need aesthetics to express the mystery of the

Catalogus sanctorum, l.7. n.128. Venice 1543, f. 149ra.

5. Aquinas, Summa theologica, 1a, q.32, a.1. c.

Incarnation. After the Incarnation, the real question is not whether God's infinity can assume a finite human nature (this occurred when 'the Word has become flesh'), but rather what the assumption of the finite human flesh means or how to express the existing finite manifestation of the infinite. As the iconoclast debate in Byzantium shows well, the problem of the icon is a Christological and not a philosophical problem.

The theology of the icon is of deep Christological concern. Of course, the aesthetic appreciation of icons is possible, but therein lies the methodological trap: the above-mentioned problem of universal philosophical arguments. In the section 'Destruction and Resistance' of her final 'Love Letter', RUMPZA is bound to go somewhat too far. She basically claims that forbidding iconic mediation '…often rests on the assumption that the brute sensible world is closed to the spiritual dimensions of Divinity' (p. 251). It seems that the rejection of icons is a metaphysical mistake. Is it really the case that uniconic Judaism or uniconic Christian denominations would be deprived of spiritual dimensions by rejecting the images?

The phenomenological approach also renders problematic the differences between pictorial representations in the West and the iconic tradition of the East. The West's representative tradition cannot be interpreted along the lines of the theology of icons since the West has never accepted the dogmatic decisions about the icons of the Second Council of Nicaea and, therefore, the theological foundations of iconography. According to the decisions of Nicaea II (787), 'The making of icons is not the property of artists, but is an established law and tradition of the Church … for to the artist belongs only the execution of the image, whereas its content and design belong to the holy Fathers'.[6] The West never accepted the 'yoke' of tradition but cherished artistic individuality and gave it rather free reign. How deeply the division remains in effect today is debatable, but the *Libri Carolini* cannot be lightly dismissed as just an 'incident of misunderstanding due to the unfortunate confusion in translating "veneration" and "adoration" with a single Latin term' (p. 39). The reviewer is not so sure that one can deem theological controversies outdated just because they emerged in debates that are difficult to unravel in our theologically less committed and less sensitive age.

6. Οὐ ζωγράφων ἐφεύρεσις ἡ τῶν εἰκόνων ποίησις, ἀλλὰ τῆς καθολικῆς ἐκκλησίας ἔγκριτος θεσμοθεσία καὶ παράδοσις. MANSI, 13:251 = ERICH LAMBERZ (ed.), Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum. Concilium universale Nicaenum secundum. Vol. II.3.3. Berlin – Boston 2016, p. 658.

Another case is ‘kenosis’ and ‘kenotic’. The two related terms occur more than eighty times in the text. ‘Kenosis’ is indeed an accepted term in French phenomenological discussions, borrowed, of course, from Philippians 2:7. However, as an adjective, ‘kenotic’ characterises a lot of things: transparency, image, hymn, identity, love, art, refusal, surrender, receptivity, abandonment, belonging, self-effacement, attitude, refusal, emptiness, and dependence. The general meaning is taken to be self-evident, but one wonders how this richness of dimensions is really related to Phil 2:7 where the apostle Paul speaks about *Christ's* self-emptying, which is a very specific self-emptying, namely, the dispossession of the divine nature in order to take up human flesh in its totality. Therefore, the extensive use of this Christological term runs the risk of inflating and confusing its meaning, especially when it is simultaneously used to mean both abandonment and belonging. Once again, the intention of the author is laudable, but the term’s proliferation puzzles the reader.[7] In what sense is the icon ‘self-dispossessing’?

The language of theology, especially if it relies on the Scriptures, ought to be very careful when expanding terms for metaphorical use. Another example of this proliferation is the overuse of ‘transfiguration’. In Scripture, this occurred on Mount Thabor (Mt 17:2, Mk 9:2, cf. Lk 9:29). Once again, in its proper sense, ‘transfiguration’ can only apply to Christ since his metamorphosis is a singular event, the interpretation of which carries great significance. In the mainstream Byzantine theological context, ‘transfiguration’ is the manifestation of Christ’s divine nature. Expanding the use of the term for the ‘transfiguration of the gaze’ (p. 52), or ‘of the vision’ (pp. 244, 238), while beholding the icon, or ‘of the [human (GYG)] body’ (p. 47) as it is waiting ‘for God to come’ (p. 252) is stretching the meaning of ‘transfiguration’ beyond its limits. Neither of these cases allows for the manifestation of the divine nature. RUMPZA seems to rely on two patristic references to justify her interpretation that the event described not so much the transfiguration of Christ but of that of his followers: ‘…in Eastern theology, the change is interpreted rather as the transfiguration of the disciples’ (p. 240). There are two references in fn. 51, one from John Damascene (PG 96, 564b) and another from Gregory Palamas (PG 151, 433b). The problem is that neither text supports this claim. According to Damascene, the shining forth of the divine nature opens the eyes of the disciples,

7. For example, Father MAXIMOS CONSTAS also uses ‘kenosis’ and ‘kenotic’ in his recent book, but always in Christological context: The Art of Seeing. Alhambra CA 2024.

but there is no mention of *their* transfiguration. [8] A better expression would have been 'transformation'. In the other text, Gregory Palamas goes indeed further and claims that the vision of the elect disciples underwent a change *in their senses*, but this 'short and rare' instance was not a transfiguration but a change gifted by the Spirit.[9]

In the section about 'Icon and Liturgy' RUMPZA speaks about church decoration (pp. 219–223). Here, she does not seem to separate the function of the images on the church walls from the icons, albeit devotion to them is different. While the icon is touched and kissed, mosaics or murals do not receive similar attention. Their function is different. It could have been pointed out that in the cosmic symbolism of the Byzantine church building, worshippers are put in the context of the history of salvation and in the company of the saints and other heroes of faith (Heb 11:32–37), and that all these events and saints, the god-bearing Fathers (οἱ θεοφόροι πατέρες), are presided over by Christ Pantokrator. The main aim is to show the manifest presence of God in His providential acts and self-manifestations. It could have supported RUMPZA's argument that the veneration of icons is a communal event, as worshippers see that they are part of the *communio sanctorum*.

The book contains some minor infelicities. There is a confusion of the Trisagion with the Sanctus (which is part of the anaphora) on p. 173. It is not clear why the noun ἁρπαγμός is used in the accusative (pp. 119, 127). The editing has left some inconsistencies in the Byzantine names: in about half of the cases, John Damascene is 'John of Damascus', but twice only, 'John Damascus' (pp. 166, 240). 'Nicephorus Gregorian' (p. 227), who is spelt as Nichephorus Gregoras in the index, should be Nikephoros Gregoras. There are a few misprints, e.g. 'Zacarias Rhetor' instead of Zacharias Rhetor. Formulae such as 'image$_a$ and image$_b$' should have been corrected (p. 134).[10]

At the end of this review, there remains a burning question. Why does phenomenology need to explicate a non-Catholic religious practice? Is this important as an interesting new topic? Or is it important because it helps

8. Μεταμορφοῦται τοίνυν, οὐχ, ὃ οὐκ ἦν, προσλαβόμενος οὐδὲ εἰς, ὅπερ οὐκ ἦν, μεταβαλλόμενος, ἀλλ', ὅπερ ἦν, τοῖς οἰκείοις μαθηταῖς ἐκφαινόμενος, διανοίγων τούτων τὰ ὄμματα καὶ ἐκ τυφλῶν ἐργαζόμενος βλέποντας (ed. BONIFATIUS KOTTER).

9. …μετέβησαν οἱ τοῦ Κυρίου μύσται τῇ ἐναλλαγῇ τῶν αἰσθήσεων, ἣν αὐτοῖς τὸ Πνεῦμα ἐνήργησε… Hom. 34, 8. (ed. PANAGIOTES K. CHRESTOU).

10. The bibliography of RUMPZA's book presents a thorough and up-to-date collection of the relevant literature.

to survive a significant religious tradition against various philosophical or theological arguments rejecting the veneration of icons? RUMPZA's intricate analysis does offer a novel approach to Orthodox icon veneration. However, it does so with the help of a particular philosophical language that is sympathetic to religion in general terms, but its conceptualisation is fundamentally secular and non-theological. RUMPZA's book thus renders the theology of the icons credible from an *exoteric* point of view. From this angle, it makes good sense. Fusing the theologically unfamiliar terms of phenomenology with the theological tradition of the veneration of icons is acceptable from the phenomenological point of view. RUMPZA's defence of the icons might be welcome for more philosophically minded Orthodox circles, but it has to be acknowledged that such an approach fits uneasily with the standard Orthodox theological language. The problem arises not because of an inveterate traditionalism but because phenomenological language has not been integrated into theology. Since RUMPZA's book does not countenance this admittedly far-reaching problem, it remains only partially successful.

**Keywords**

aesthetics of religious art; iconology