Iconography: Its historical, theological and philosophical background

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Introduction

In the early 1950s, Jean Gottmann introduced a new term to the geographical vocabulary: Iconography. This term had already been used before by historians of Art, but with a completely different meaning. As a geographical concept, Iconography is new and original.

The concept was not much accepted by geographers. Even Jean Gottmann himself avoided using it during the 1960s and 1970s, discouraged by its relatively limited success. However, after the end of the Cold War the term started functioning again, revealed by a small group of Geographers and Social Scientists in their effort to describe the new post-Cold War realities in a more explicit way than with terms like culture or identity (BRUNEAU, 2000, pp. 565-566).

Gottmann's "Iconography" does not make reference to simple images, but to the icons of the Byzantine tradition. Through his studies and his Ukrainian origins, Gottmann was equipped with a profound understanding of Christian Orthodoxy and of the symbolic wealth of icons in the Byzantine and post-Byzantine world. Therefore, the significance of the Iconography concept for the Social Sciences has to be studied according to the complex issues related to icons in the Christian Orthodox tradition. In fact, in the East, during the Middle Ages, every fundamental philosophical, theological and even geographical question focused on the issue of icons, Iconomachy being the most obvious expression. The long Byzantine Civil War shows the destructive force of Iconographies, a force rediscovered after 1989. Destruction, however, is not the essential attribute of Iconographies. Iconographies are usually constructive, since they form the foundations of human societies. Gottmann considers Iconographies a "cement" linking people together and with a portion of space – a territory (GOTTMANN, 1952, p. 220). They structure geographical space; they regulate movement. They represent an essential dimension of the stability of the world, moderating the eternal threat of Circulation – or Change in Space – and its consequent destabilizing effects.

By introducing the term of Iconography, Jean Gottmann conceived the encompassing and dynamic character of this extraordinary, essential influence through a network of connotations. He consequently managed to mobilize a whole world of historical, philosophical and theological references.

For the Social Sciences, Iconography constitutes an important insight. Jean Gottmann's approach could inspire other disciplines in using all the wealth of our civilization's intellectual heritage. As a contribution to this debate, the present article presents the historical, theological and philosophical background of the iconography concept, followed by a first hypothesis concerning its relationship with the theoretical problems of Geography.

The iconoclast controversy

Icons acquired a primordial significance and became a fundamental speculative category in Byzantium during "the iconoclastic crisis" period (714 to 775). Their triumph imposed them as an essential religious feature and established Hagiography, the art of icons, as a basic element of Byzantine culture.

The first Christians used various kinds of images to depict religious events or figures, although this art seemed in contradiction with the Old Testament's condemnation of any idols of God. Indeed, already in the 4th century AD, theologians such as Eusebius of Caesarea condemned all kinds of religious representations, arguing that, after the death of Christ, God ceased to be material and became a symbol, devoid of any kind of material existence.

To avoid any accusation of idolatry, early Christians abandoned the three-dimensional representations and statues of Christ and adopted the more austere art of two-dimensional

images – or icons – which were seen as distinct enough from their prototypes.

In the centuries that followed, icons became the main form of religious art in Byzantium; and the omnipresent complement of churches. Considered as sacred, they had the power to produce miracles, heal the sick, protect the weak, save cities. They could also display human emotion by shedding tears, interpreted as a material manifestation of a divine presence. This is why people worshipped icons, sometimes in an extreme idolatric way, favoring their material existence rather than their symbolic truth. Kissing or prostration has therefore always been the appropriate attitude towards an icon, a quasi-divine object.

The idolatrous risk of such behavior was brought to the fore in the 8th century AD not by the Church but by the Emperors, namely Leo II (AD 714-741) and Constantine V (AD 741-775). Constantine convoked the Council of Hieria (AD 754) which radically forbade icons and caused their massive destruction. The crisis which followed ended in AD 787, with the Seventh Ecumenical Council, held in Nicaea. On the decisive day, officially recognized as the Victory of Orthodoxy, icons were re-legitimized and restored. Iconoclasm was banished as an heresy.

Part of this crisis can be explained as an expression of cultural differences. Images did not have the same importance everywhere inside the Empire. Armenians and Syrians, for instance, did not use icons and it is certainly no coincidence that the iconoclastic Emperors were Isaurians or Armenians. Moreover, much of the non Greek-speaking East of the Empire, as monophysitic, denied the human nature of Christ and were hostile to the use of images. Another crucial element was the rise of Islam, since Muslims ridiculed the Christian notion of God's Incarnation as well as the Christian use of sacred images, and accused Christians of idolatry and polytheism. Iconoclasm followed as a consequent reaction to this challenge. Last but not least, iconoclast theologians re-animated the ancient Greek tradition, which condemned matter as ontologically weak and considered intellectual reality as the only true.

Incarnation, the real issue

Through the iconoclast crisis, it became clear that the real issue behind the argumentation was Christology. The understanding of icons was directly related to the understanding of Incarnation and the nature of Christ.

Christological debates lead back to the first centuries of Christianity, when the first Christian communities saw themselves as the inheritors of Jewish monotheism. There was and could only be one and only God. However, as Christians, they accepted Christ as God too. This apparent contradiction worsened with the Christian Church's confession on the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Christians had therefore to face accusations of polytheism and inconsistency.

These contradictions were solved through a two-step process which determined the evolution of Christian theology from the 4th to the 6th centuries.

• At first, theologians dealt with the so-called Trinitarian issue: how can God be at the same time one and three? How can one be a monotheist and yet confess Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

• The second issue was the Christological issue *per se*. Its formulation could be the following: how can Jesus be both man and God, both a concrete human being and the Son of the Holy Trinity, without imposing the confession of two different and distinct individuals?

These problems involved the same conceptual distinction, between *hypostasis* and *ousia*, or personhood and nature.

● Nature is to be understood in the sense of an individual nature; it is the answer to the question "what?" and gives a concrete definition of the object.

● The *hypostasis*, or person, is, in its turn, almost impossible to define; it corresponds to what constitutes the ultimate individuality of the nature; it is what makes this nature a concrete individual and an incommunicable existence. In our world, each individual nature is a person, and each person is an individual nature. But in the Holy Trinity, one single individual nature exists in three distinct persons, or three persons share the same individual nature. What does this mean concretely? As they share the same nature, the three persons of the Trinity have the same will and the same energy. Whatever the Father wants, the Son wants, and the Holy Spirit wants. Whatever is accomplished by God is accomplished by the three persons. No person of the Trinity can act or want separately or differently from the others. What, in turn, distinguishes them is nothing more or less but the relations between them and their origins, namely that the Father is the ultimate source of divinity, that the Son and the Holy Spirit proceed from Him. The three persons of the Trinity are also distinguished by their manifestation in History. For instance, Jesus was not the incarnation of divinity in general but of the person of the Son.

Church theologians applied this same distinction when dealing with Christology to solve the apparent contradiction. Jesus could be one person and, at the same time, have two distinct individual natures, one divine and one human.

The issue proved, however, to be more subtle and complex than it seemed. A series of questions emerged, which divided Christians for centuries. If Christ is one person, where is this element of His concrete individual existence located? Is it the person of the Son? Is it a human consciousness? Or is it a new, distinct person? And if Jesus had two natures, what happens in specific issues where these natures have contradictory characteristics? For instance, as God, Jesus could not ignore his fate, but as human, he could not possibly know. As God, he was constantly free to choose his destiny, but as human, he could only pray to God, ask for compassion. As human, he suffered on the Cross. But as God, could he possibly have suffered?

As answers to these questions, two tendencies emerged, which solved the problem in an apparently rational way.

• The first was Nestorianism. For Nestorians, the two natures of Christ were completely distinct, and Jesus, as man, suffered all the limitations and imperfections of human nature. For Nestorians Christ was, one might say, a real, concrete man.

• On the other extreme, monophysites did not recognize that Christ had two natures. For them, Christ was God, and that ultimately meant that He had only a divine nature, his human form being mere appearance, without real consistence.

Between these two extremes, there lies, of course, a wide panorama of possible Christologies (PREVELAKIS, 2001, pp. 143-152). But none of these directions triumphed ultimately. Instead, the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), which settled the Orthodox answer to these questions, confessed, in agreement with the monophysites, that the person of Christ was the divine person of the *Logos*, but accepted the Nestorian thesis that this person had two different and distinct natures, each maintaining, after the Incarnation, the totality of its characteristics, its own mode of being. To solve the problem created by a total separation between the two natures, the Church confessed the dogma of the communication of idioms. The divine person of the *Logos* decided to acquire a human nature; this human nature was somehow transformed, adopted by divinity, transfigured. Therefore, the two natures of Christ did not

live separately, but His human nature was subjected to and oriented by the divine one.

For instance, having two natures, Christ had two wills and two energies. If left totally alone, His human nature would exercise its free will independently of – sometimes in contradiction to – His divine nature. But because of the communication of the idioms, Jesus' human nature was oriented in such a way that its wishes followed the guidance of His divine nature.

The argumentation

What is the relevance of this issue to the question of the sacred images, or icons? If the humanity of Christ was real, this implied that, in some way, He could legitimately be represented, depicted. If, on the other hand, one considered that the humanity of Christ was nothing but an appearance, that His only true nature was His divine nature, then any depiction of Christ is the depiction of an illusion, and should therefore be banished.

On the ground, however, things proved to be more difficult for the defenders of the icons. The argumentation of Constantine V, the most famous among the iconoclast Emperors, appeared very strong: whichever way the sacred image is understood, it should be banished. For if the image depicts the sole humanity of Christ, this means that the two natures can be totally separated, and therefore Nestorianism is implied. If, on the contrary, the image depicts both humanity and divinity, therefore the totality of the person of Christ, then two interpretations are possible: either divinity is, in some way, circumscribed by humanity, which is absurd, or humanity and divinity are confused into a new kind of nature, which leads to monophysism (MEYENDORFF, 1974, p. 44).

The argumentation of the *iconodouls*, or the defenders of the icons, consisted in recalling the fact that "each nature preserved its own mode of being," that it does not merge with divinity, that it can therefore be depicted independently. As a response to the accusation of idolatry, they would argue that a representation is not to be understood as consubstantial – or of the same essence – as the object depicted, that an icon can therefore depict in material form something that overcomes materiality.

Most of the reaction to the imperial iconoclastic policy was directed by monks. The most significant and famous treatises on the defense of the icons were written by John of Damascus, a monk in the monastery of Saint Sabbas in Palestine, later acknowledged as one of the most prominent theological figures of the Christian East and a Father of the Church. For John of Damascus, the sacred image represents "God, the invisible One, not as invisible, but insofar as He has become visible to us by participation in flesh and blood" (John of Damascus, *Or.*I; P.G. 94:1236C; MEYENDORFF, 1974, p. 45).

In other words, not the sole humanity of Christ is depicted in the icon but God Himself. The depiction of a human form therefore aims at the depiction, through a human nature, of the person of the *Logos* incarnated.

The theory that the sacred image does not represent a mere nature but a real person is also stressed by Theodore the Studite (AD 759-826), who, as head of the Constantinopolitan monastery of Studios, wrote three *Antirhetics* against iconoclasts. For Theodore:

Christ was certainly not a mere man; neither is it orthodox to say that He assumed an individual among men but the whole, the totality of the nature. It must be said, however, that this total nature was contemplated in an individual manner – for otherwise how could it have been seen? – in a way which made it visible and describable ..., which allowed it to eat and drink (Theodore the Studite, *Antirhetic*, 1; P.G. 99:332D-333A; MEYENDORFF, 1974, p. 47).

It is therefore this human nature, individual because it is individualized by the person of its carrier, which is depicted in the icon. In turn, this humanity is new, transfigured and transformed by God. Does this representation bear the risk of idolatry? No, responds John of Damascus, since "the image is not consubstantial to its model" (MEYENDORFF, 1974, p. 48).

To stress this difference, the Byzantine Church adopted another conceptual distinction, between adoration (*latreia*), due only to God Himself, and veneration (*proskunesis*), a legitimate attitude towards the icons. Through the veneration of the icon the object of adoration is in fact God.

The immediate effect of this controversy was the restoration of the icons, which were re-considered as legitimate in worship. But the iconoclastic controversy revealed and reinterpreted a whole philosophical debate, which has its origins in ancient Greece, and which concerned, precisely, the nature of representation.

Representation as mimesis

The term icon comes from the Greek *eikon* and means reflection. The nature of the icon and its significance were very largely debated in ancient Greece. The icon belongs to the general category of what was called *mimesis*, imitation. An image is a kind of imitation, by definition some kind of resemblance: the image resembles the prototype as closely as possible – the ideal being, of course, a complete, though unattainable, resemblance.

For Plato, any image, any representation, is an imperfect therefore ultimately inadequate reflection of a prototype. It has worth only insofar as this prototype is absent or invisible.

This critique of the art of mimesis in general is followed by a critique of the image as such. An image is an imitation in material form. But for Plato, spirit is the primordial, the essential and purest form of reality, all others being far less noble, or, in Plato's terms, less real. Truth exists in ideas, in forms, of which material beings are imperfect illustrations.

We can see how an image – any image – is devoid of ontological nobility. If truth exists in ideas, if actual material reality is considered as an imperfect reflection of ideas, then what is left of representations, as reflections of material objects, thus reflections of reflections, copies of copies?

Man in the image of God: The image is alive!

The second revolution in the use of the word image lies in the doctrine that man is created in the image and likeness of God. This doctrine brings about a whole new understanding of what an image is. At first, theologians sought what particular element in humanity bears the image of God. Some saw it in the human intellect, viewing God, in the Aristotelian tradition, as pure intellect. Others saw it in the human "heart." But such ideas did not prevail, and the Church ultimately confessed that no particular part of humanity was divine, that somehow, each man, as a whole, was created in the image of God. But if no particular part of humanity resembled God, then how could man be seen as an image of God? In what sense does man resemble God? For the first time an idea is formed that there can exist an image of a prototype without resembling it in any concrete or definable way. Moreover, if man is, as a whole, created in the image of God, then it is as a living being that he is an image. He resembles God not in any specific feature but in his life. This idea is reinforced by the understanding of the notion of resemblance, which is often separated from that of the image. The resemblance to God, according to the Fathers of the Church, is to be understood in a dynamic way, as a project. It means that man is oriented to an imitation of the divine, and this constitutes his

goal in life, his project. Therefore, the doctrine of man created in the image and likeness of God brings up two major changes in the status of the image.

• The first is that the image is understood in a dynamic way, as a living imitation of God, as a project, as a tension.
• The second is that the notion of image is liberated from the debate on resemblance, since man is created in the image of God without having any assignable characteristic by which he would look similar to God.

The whole conception of artistic representation changes with icons. Religious art is not understood in the framework of *mimesis*. It does not aim at a close imitation to the model, nor is it perceived as a more or less perfect reflection of the prototype. An icon always aims at something beyond itself. Through the depiction of materiality, an icon points to the transcendental beyond. On the other hand, this does not transform an icon into a mere allegory. In an allegory, the material object depicted is an arbitrary sign, significant only insofar as it stands for an abstract idea. In the representation of wisdom by an owl, for example, the actual material sign has no importance whatsoever, only the abstract notion counts. In an icon, however, the actual human material reality is extremely important, because it is the actual material way in which the divine manifests itself, but also because, as a depiction of Christ, a sacred icon depicts not any human figure but a human nature which has somehow already become divine, which has been transformed and illuminated by the light of God. This humanity participates in the divine life.

Apophatism and realism: the ek-static nature of the icon

The same could be said of the icon itself. An icon is not conceived as a mere imitation or reflection of a person. It is supposed to participate in the life of the person depicted and derive its sacred character from its illumination by the figure of Christ, or the saint that it depicts. A common comparison is that of an icon to a planet. A planet does not possess its own light, but derives it from a star: it shines insofar as it participates and is illuminated by the star. If this contact were lost, or if the star disappeared, the planet would cease to shine. And, at the same time, it is the light of the planet which we contemplate; it is the planet which we see, and not the star through it. The icon, as a sacred image, is therefore contemplated and venerated in its actual form, even though one knows that the source of its light and sacredness lies beyond itself.

This characteristic of the icon is rendered by the theological term "apophatism." The apophatic nature of the icon means that an icon can never resemble its prototype, because of the substantial difference which separates any material representation from divine reality. On the other hand, the icon is supposed to transcend its nature, to point at something beyond itself, to lead the faithful to God, through it. This capacity of the icon to transcend its limits is rendered by Orthodox theologians by the term *ek-stasis* (YANNARAS, 1987, pp. 223-256).

The iconic art ceases therefore to be understood as an art of representation, of *mimesis*. The hagiographer, or, as the Byzantines would say, the iconographer, does not simply represent the saint. To create his image, he is supposed to fast, to lead an ascetic life, to enter into some kind of participation in the divine energies of God. It is a common belief that it is not really the hagiographer but the Holy Spirit that actually draws the icon, through the artist.

It is therefore not a coincidence if icons became a fundamental instrument in Orthodox worship. Their role is involved in their very theology, their initial understanding and the meaning of their triumph over the iconoclastic crisis in Byzantium.

The victory of the icons meant precisely that, if the reality of the Incarnation is accepted, then the idea that no part of human experience is to be despised or considered less noble has to be accepted as well. In the terms of one of the greatest Russian theologians of the 20th century, John Meyendorff:

The victory of Orthodoxy (i.e. the victory of the icons) meant, for example, but also the idea that religious faith could be expressed, not only in propositions ... but also ... through aesthetic experiences and through gestures and bodily attitudes before the holy images. All this implied a philosophy of religion and an anthropology; worship, the liturgy, religious consciousness involved the whole man, without despising any functions of the soul or the body ..." (MEYENDORFF, 1974, p. 52)

Iconographies: A paradigm for social sciences?

Jean Gottmann's Iconography is a concept which cannot be understood outside his conceptual framework. It is part of a triadic system in which the *Partitioning* of Geographical Space is interpreted through the antagonistic and at the same time complementary interplay of *Circulation* and *Iconography*. Iconography is presented as a "self-defense mechanism" of societies in front of the threat of destabilization by Circulation.

Why Iconography, rather than Culture, Identity or Civilization? The recent renewal of Cultural Studies as well as the growing notoriety of Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* has brought forth the debate about material and intellectual factors in social life. In what way can Gottmann's approach be considered different from recent intellectual fashions which challenge the more materialistic cold-war paradigms?

The term Iconography implies in fact the mobilization of various intellectual aspects. Language, Religion and History are among them. However, Gottmann offers us a clue as to other elements which must also be included in Iconographies. He indicates how to interpret even those aspects which we are accustomed to consider as purely "spiritual." Thus, Gottmann mentions "taboos" among other examples of iconographic elements (GOTTMANN, 1952, p. 221). The material dimension is introduced in this way; religion, language and history become related to regional and territorial characteristics. The landscapes or the taste of foods related to specific local or religious practices come to the surface of social consciousness. In the concept of Iconography, the relationship between the material and the immaterial is complex and synthetic. The distinction between the two is no more a dichotomy; it is transformed into a network of reciprocal influences. Iconographies express themselves through material objects, like flags, which convey highly symbolic meanings, meanings of such intensity that people sacrifice their lives for them.

Icons in the Byzantine and the post-Byzantine world were and are objects of this kind. The story of the Serbian villagers, migrating from the Ottoman to the Austrian Empire, always carrying their icons in front of the group while marching through mountains and woods, is highly significant. By the symbolic gesture of transferring the icon, they saved their most important political capital: territoriality. This symbolic relationship would guarantee their cohesion as a group and therefore as a polity.

The complex combination of material and intellectual factors in the concept of Iconography permitted a series of fundamental problems related to Modern Geography – and more generally to Social Sciences – to be overcome. The most important is the dichotomy between intellect and matter, between idealism and materialism. In Geography this problem finds an expression through the oppositional dialectics between Man and

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Nature.

In 1967, Lynn White brought to the fore the "theological roots of the ecological crisis" (WHITE, 1967): contrary to paganism, which sees God scattered throughout nature, monotheism concentrates the whole of the divine in a spiritual essence outside the material world, and therefore separates nature from spirit. The significance of the iconoclastic controversy has been, precisely, to amend this dichotomy by bringing the divinity "back to earth": by stressing the incarnation of God into a concrete human being; by stressing the sacred nature of concrete material artifacts, icons. In one of his writings Jean Gottmann suggested that this essential flaw of Geography, which led to the dead-end discussion related to Geographical Determinism, had a "metaphysical" origin, a theological dimension (GOTTMANN, 1952, p. 48). Was he conscious that by introducing the term Iconography he was combatting this dualism with the weapons of the Eastern Christian tradition?

In fact, the relationship between Gottmann's Iconography and the Byzantine conflicts and debates is neither coincidental nor superficial. The force of Iconographies lies in their capacity to combine the visible with the invisible, the concrete with the abstract.

Abstraction can federate and lead to the creation of large territorial and political entities; it can animate complex networks like the bureaucracies which constitute the infrastructure of whole empires. The visible and concrete has access even to the illiterate, the simplest members of a community. The combination of abstract and concrete creates a extraordinary "cement" which can preserve a community from the worst threats.

Social Sciences need to contemplate the iconographic paradigm. They are going through a period of serious crisis. The tradition developed during the 20th century and based on imitation of the Natural Sciences touches its limits. Understanding, interpreting and trying to guide the tremendous social changes of our times create new challenges for Social Sciences. It is necessary to open the scope of the Social Sciences by criticizing and overcoming stereotypes and artificial barriers. One of those barriers separates Social Theory from the heritage of the Humanities – to which theological debates belong as well. Such a project seems at first sight paradoxical. This is why Jean Gottmann's conceptual framework has a special significance, advancing much further than geographical theory. Through the concept of Iconography, Jean Gottmann not only managed to free Geography from its 19th century handicaps; he also offered to the Social Sciences an example of the way the intellectual capital of our civilization can be mobilized in order to address the tremendous challenges of our New World.

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