

The Agency of Images: Copts and the Adoration of the Saints

Introduction

In June of 2004 my wife, Maryann, and I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. At that time the museum had an exhibit of Byzantine Christian icons. As a Coptic Orthodox Christian what struck me most about the images was that they were completely out of context. I rather quickly felt bored with the exhibit, because the icons mimicked each other so much that one feels a burden of monotony while walked through what was a rather large exhibit. As Maryann put it, “Initially I was excited and even impressed to see all of the icons and an exhibit dedicated just to icons. But after a while I got bored and dizzy from being in that space for so long, and I hated the fact that they [the icons] were in glass cases. And I got tired of hearing people talk about egg tempura. Is that what it’s called?” I suspect that for many museum-goers these were images of an interesting and perhaps somewhat mysterious or even exotic Christian past; images that spoke of archaic religion, long-forgotten saints, and perhaps even empire. I, on the other hand, had been quite accustomed to such images, since they are a part of my everyday religious life. What was odd was to see them outside of their ritual context, which is to say outside of the sacred spaces within which they were designed to hang and be venerated. In the context of the MET museum these “images before the era of art” to quote Hans Belting (Belting 1994[1990]) were effectively rendered “art.” That is to say, they were now objects of admiration and not veneration—objects valuable, to borrow from John Berger (1977[1972]:21), for what they *are* rather than what they *mean* and, important for my discussion here, for what they *do*. In effect, what the museum did was to sterilize these images by removing them from the environments (church, worship, incense, prayer, believers’ homes) that gives them and is given by them meaning.

In this brief essay I want to discuss the power of icons, when in their appropriate contexts, by introducing the notion of Orthodox icons as social agents. I also want to explore the question of

sensory engagement with icons. Rather than emphasize the narrative or theological components of iconographic art in Orthodox tradition, I draw on the late anthropologist Alfred Gell's (1998) work on the anthropology of art as a way of exploring icons as material means of accessing saints and their world. In Gell's own words: "The simplest way to imagine [an anthropology of art] ... is to suppose that there could be a species of anthropological theory in which persons or 'social agents' are, in certain contexts, substituted for by art objects" (1998:5). One could hardly find a better example of this than the iconographic images that serve as the subject of this essay. The advantages of such an approach, from an anthropological point of view anyway, is that one can include art objects as part of the fabric of people's social lives and the social processes in which they are engaged. "[A]gents," writes Gell, "initiate 'actions' which are 'caused' by themselves, by their intentions, not by physical laws of the cosmos. An agent is the source, the origin, of causal events, independently of the state of the physical universe" (Gell 1998:16). And since in practice we all attribute agency and even intention to all manner of (inanimate) objects even these things have agency. Of course, to attribute intention to inanimate things is fallacious, and Gell readily admits this, but the contradiction is resolved when we recognize that material mediation is necessary for intentions to have effect (Gell 1998:20). In simple terms, from an Orthodox practitioner's point of view, if a saint wants to intervene in someone's life, he or she can, and often does, via his or her iconographic image. While I focus mainly on Coptic Orthodox Christians, my discussion is pertinent in many respects to Orthodox Christians in general.

I draw here on fieldwork in Egypt and the U.S. citing a couple of Coptic informants, Peter Yusif and Michael Girgis, who I recently interviewed, as well as interviews that I conducted in the fall of 2003 with converts to Orthodoxy.

I suspect that many would take issue with my neglect of the narrative and theological components of iconography in the Orthodox tradition. And while I am in complete agreement with

them that narrative and theology are very important elements of any investigation of religious images among Orthodox Christians, I can only say that this is a short paper and I have chosen to focus on what I consider a neglected but quite important aspect of icons: their social agency.

What is an Image and Why?

“Images,” writes Berger, “were first made to conjure up the appearance of something that was absent” (Berger 1977:10). This is perhaps a simple or taken-for-granted observation, but its weight should not be underestimated in the context of religion. In their work on Christian (namely Catholic) images and pilgrimage, anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner pose the problem that images and apparitions solve in the following question: “The invisibility and intangibility of the spiritual and supernatural order obviously create problems regarding communication between incarnate and disincarnate members of the Church. How does one know, how can one feel sure, that one’s prayer has been heard by God or a saint?” (Turner and Turner 1978:205). It is precisely this dilemma, if not exactly in these terms, around which debates about the depiction of Christ and the saints in material form have centered. It is, in short, a question about giving the bodiless a body. Saint John of Damascus, writing in the 8th century in defense of the use of images in Christian worship, addresses this very point:

How can the invisible be depicted? How does one picture the inconceivable? How can one draw what is limitless, immeasurable, infinite? How can a form be given to the formless? How does one paint the bodiless? ... When He who is bodiless and without form, immeasurable in the boundlessness of His own nature, existing in the form of God, empties Himself and takes the form of a servant [Phil. 2:6-7] in substance and in stature and is found in body and flesh, then you may draw His image and show it to anyone willing to gaze upon it. (John of Damascus 1980:18)

And thus we have what for centuries was and continues to be today among the strongest arguments for the depiction of Christ and the saints. But what is the purpose of having such images? St. John goes on to say,

visible things are corporeal models which provide a vague understanding of intangible things. ... Anyone would say that our inability immediately to direct our thoughts to

contemplation of higher things makes it necessary that familiar everyday media be utilized to give suitable form to what is formless, and make visible what cannot be depicted, so that we are able to construct understandable analogies. (John of Damascus 1980:20)

Impacting Believers' Ways of Being in the World

The saints, via iconic representations of them as well as other means like their bones and apparitions, are social actors and therefore impact the way believers perceive, position themselves, and act in the world. One of the more striking aspects of conversations with my Coptic informants, was the emphasis some of them placed on icons as “moral compasses,” to paraphrase Peter. When I asked Peter why he has icons in his home, among the answers was that, although “the picture [or icon] is fairly static,” when one is feeling off-balance in life or is troubled by something even a glance at the image can be grounding. The glance reminds one to “do the right thing.” When I pressed Peter to tell me *how* the image does this, he reiterated that the image reminds one of being Christian and therefore “a glance [at an icon] readjusts your moral compass.” The morally sound life of the saint, which a believer is familiar with through oral and written accounts, is re-presented in the person of the saint depicted on the icon. The believer, then, is reminded of where a morally correct life can lead when she gazes at the saint and is many times led to making changes or avoiding immoral acts as a result of that gaze. Peter’s account exemplifies the power that saints have through their iconic representations on Orthodox Christians struggling in this world.

The agency attributed to an icon is directly linked to the saint depicted, but the line between saint and image is often quite blurred, if not altogether missing. Consider the following passage from a homily about the Virgin Mary in a tenth century manuscript attributed to the 23rd Patriarch of the Coptic Church, Theophilus (AD 385-412). Referring to an icon of St. Mary in a storehouse that was desecrated by a “Hebrew,” the author states:

The workmen looked and saw the tablet of wood, set up on top of the wall, the Icon of the Virgin being drawn therein. And they took it, and saluted it, and embraced it, and kissed its hands and feet and continued to salute it a long time, pressing it to their bosom in great faith ... The Hebrew seized the tablet of wood which was in their hands and shattered it, and

broke it into small pieces and cast it into a basket ... When the workman [sic] picked up the basket, blood flowed continually from the basket which contained the icon of the Virgin, which the Hebrew had destroyed ... Thereupon when they had come to me I brought up, out of the basket[,] the tablet of wood upon which the picture of the Virgin was drawn. Believe me, my brothers, I gazed at the face of the picture – I and the bishops which were with me – we saw its countenance to be sad, as if weeping tears of blood ... The icon remains even unto now, and it shall remain world without end. And ... anyone that has any disease – if they salute this icon of the Virgin, will obtain good health and restoration. (cited in Gabra 2003:32-33)

As Linda Langen comments in reference to this homily: “The image can do everything expected of the saint depicted on the icon. Thus the distinction between the image and the saint has disappeared; they are one and the same” (Langen 1990:60). Such is reflected in the everyday lives of pious Orthodox Christians who consider the images of saints not to be images of the dead, but images of the living.

Befriending the Saints

Indeed, images have been, throughout the history of Christianity (not to mention humanity in general), important means of communing with and accessing the invisible. The interaction with saints via their images is for Copts and other Orthodox Christians a critically important way in which one has a direct experience with them. As Nelly van Doorn aptly puts it, Copts

believe and are taught from earliest childhood that the icons in the church represent the presence of the saints. Their souls are alive and are present during the celebration of the eucharist at which they form the ‘ecclesia triumphans’, the community of triumphant believers whose love for the members of the ‘ecclesia militans’, the believers who are still struggling, did not cease when they departed from this world. (van Doorn 1990:107-108)

Saints are like powerful friends and therefore it behooves a believer to befriend them (see van Doorn 1990:108). The relationships that people develop with saints often seem hardly different than “earthly” friendships, sometimes even resulting in quarrels (van Doorn 1990:108). I heard a story once of a Coptic man who reprimanded St. Dimyana (a 3rd century Egyptian martyr) for not responding to a request that he made of her in the way that he thought she ought to respond. Thus the saints, while highly respected and revered, are recognized as humans with whom one can have a disagreement and engage in conversation. The most interesting aspect of such an anecdote is that it

illuminates the level of intimacy that believers reach with certain saints. But if a believer's goal is to achieve intimate friendship with a saint, it is through the senses that such intimacy is accomplished.

Ways of "Seeing"

In Orthodox worship the body is engaged in a sensory dance wherein the senses of smell, taste, touch, sound, and sight are activated while the practitioner crosses himself, makes prostrations, or stands for long periods at a time.

In his work on Hindu engagement with the gods, anthropologist Christopher Pinney (2001; 2002) has employed the term "corporetics." By this term he means "the sensory embrace of images, the bodily engagement that most people ... have with artworks" (Pinney 2001:158). This is quite an apposite notion for this project. Many Copts (and other Orthodox Christians) when they see an image of a saint or biblical event will cross themselves, bow, kiss and touch the image, and perhaps offer a short prayer; a practice that a museum space precludes.

Pinney also found that many Hindu faithful place auspicious banknotes around images that are important to them. "The dressing of images," writes Pinney, "takes the place of words. Instead of exegesis, instead of an outpouring of language—there is a poetics of materiality and corporeality around the images" (Pinney 2001:169). Interestingly, Copts, particularly in Egypt, commonly "dress images," except they do it with language. It is quite common to find saints' images, especially popular ones, littered with slips of paper on which are written people's names and prayer requests. These bits of paper are often jammed between the icon and its protective glass. The glass is intended to keep people from etching their names or prayers onto the image itself or, as is more common, to write the message directly on the image with candle wax. This is a long-time practice as revealed in recent renovations of the church of St. Antony at St. Antony's monastery in Egypt (see Griffith 2002 for a fantastic essay on graffiti in that church). It is, of course, the sight of the images

of saints in the context of a cultural environment that promotes conversation with them that invites such practice.

I once interviewed a number of (non-Coptic) Orthodox Christians, among them Moses and Juan, about their conversions to Orthodoxy. Moses, told me the following:

all of a sudden I saw out of the corner of my eye this little boy who's looking up at this larger than life icon of St. Anthony the Great and he's going like this [Moses imitates the boy, with eyes wide staring up at the icon, mouth agape] [laughter]. And I've been in Churches all my life and I've been in churches mostly that have nothing on the walls, including the Roman Catholic high school that I went to. We said Mass in gym for God's sake! ... So I'm looking at this boy, he's just staring at this icon [imitates the boy again], and I took my notebook and I put it away and I said, 'There's something here that I'm missing that this little boy is getting,' you know.

Juan was first inspired to attend an Orthodox church service when he had his first encounter with icons. "I found Orthodoxy while doing a favor for a friend," Juan told me.

My friend Walter gave me a book, *The Way Of A Pilgrim*, and asked me to take it to an Orthodox bookstore ... and give it to the wife of a priest. At the bookstore I had my first experience with icons. The icons intrigued me so much that I attended a Great Vespers service to find out more [about] this mysterious form of Christianity.

He went on to speak about how important icons are for him: "I think icons keep the mystery of God within them. When I look at an icon I see a treasure." It is this treasure that my Coptic informants also see. Michael said:

The icons provide a sense of heaven on earth; in heaven usually we imagine it as a place full of saints and all of the hosts of angels and principalities. That's why when we see all these icons around our house it makes us feel ... as if we are among them in heaven.

Diana Eck (1998) has written about the act of seeing in the Hindu context. The term used to describe how Hindus engage with the images of their gods is *darshan*. *Darshan* means seeing, but is also sometimes translated as "the 'auspicious sight' of the divine" (Eck 1998:3). This is an indication of how important gazing at images of the gods is for Hindus. Pinney (2001 and 2002), drawing on Eck, has also discussed the practice of *darshan* among Hindus, finding that the images of the gods are not activated, as it were, until a believer returns the gaze of the god with his or her own gaze. For Orthodox the act of seeing the saints and Christ in images is quite important in the

context of ritual worship. As Margaret Kenna writes regarding her work with Greek Orthodox Christians: “From the icon the saint ‘can view the world of the living.’ This gaze out from the icon, into the space where the onlooker stands, demands a response from the onlooker. The gaze must be returned or rejected. It is not possible to let one’s eyes wander over the painting: they are caught by the gaze of the saint whose eye cannot blink” (Kenna 1985:356).

Kenna is writing in the context of iconographic style and the messages that icons are intended to disseminate when created within the Byzantine iconographic tradition. Thus when images are not recognizably Orthodox some believer’s find worship to be impossible. Belting writes of a 15th century Greek Orthodox Patriarch, Gregory Melissenos, who is reported to have said the following: “When I enter a Latin church, I can pray to none of the saints depicted there because I recognize none of them. Although I do recognize Christ, I cannot even pray to him, because I do not recognize the manner in which he is depicted” (cited in Belting 1994:1). Belting reads Patriarch Gregory’s response to images in the Western church as a “fear of contamination” by associating with the images of another religious sect, albeit in this case Christian (Belting 1994:1-2). I want to suggest that it is not a fear of contamination but an offended sensibility that prompted the patriarch to react in the way that he did. When one has become so accustomed to religious imagery of a particular style it is quite difficult to change one’s sensibility without prolonged exposure to the new style. Thus the eye is trained, within a given cultural context, to see certain images and to respond to them in particular ways. Images that are recognized as expressing one’s own beliefs and yet strike the eye as aesthetically jarring are especially disconcerting. Such images do not prompt the seemingly natural next step to seeing which is touching.

Gell notes of the Hindu practice of *darshan* that it is “very much a two-way affair. The gaze directed by the god towards the worshipper confers his blessing; conversely, the worshipper reaches out and touches the god” (Gell 1998:117). Gell is here drawing on the work of Stella Kramrisch,

who writes that “Seeing according to Indian notions is a going forth of the sight towards the object. Sight touches it and acquires its form. *Touch is the ultimate connection by which the visible yields to being grasped.* While the eye touches the object the vitality that pulsates in it is communicated ...” (cited in Eck 1998:9 and Gell 1998:117, my emphasis). In the Coptic context this touching should not be understood as a metaphor for what seeing does, for upon seeing, the Coptic believer is inclined to literally touch the image, whether this is an image at home, at church or any religious site of importance. Just as we saw with the workmen and the Virgin Mary image, Coptic Christians are often inclined to touch the saints and to kiss them when they make eye contact. It is not uncommon to find Copts placing a hand on a saint’s image for a long period or leaning their heads near the saint while silently praying. Also common is the Copt who glides her hand in a wiping motion across an image as if to wipe up every ounce of blessing the image has to offer and then rubbing that blessing onto her child and herself. Mothers often train their children to touch the images by physically taking the child’s hand and placing it on the saint.

Conclusions

I have focused here on one of a number of possible approaches to the use of religious imagery in Orthodox Christian worship: namely the agency of saints as enacted through images and sensory engagement by believers. Other important avenues of research of course include the theological and narrative components of iconographic art and the reproduction and spread of images.

Among the things people “get” out of interacting with icons, is a sense that they have powerful friends who can help them in times of need and who generally look out for them. The catch-phrase that a Copt would use is *baraka* or “blessing.”

Clearly the act of seeing a saint is a part of a whole repertoire of sensory engagement in Orthodox religious life. By touching, kissing, seeing, and speaking to a saint via his or her icon

Copts are as much engaged with them as they are with their own family members. They are also on the receiving end by virtue of being healed, blessed, and comforted by the saints depicted on icons. If this is not a clear sign of art objects as agents in the world, I'm not sure what is. Indeed, as stated earlier, this agency is such that people's very lives are directed by the stories of the saints which often materialize in the form of an image that the believer links, in his or her mind, to hagiographic text. The discussion of image gazing as a moral compass exemplifies this point.

More ethnographic research is needed among Copts and other Orthodox Christians in order to better illuminate the social milieu that incorporates the saints via their images into everyday social life as well as the intimate engagements that Orthodox Christians have with the saints. But it is clear that for pious Copts the saints are as much a part of their everyday lives as the fruit vendor, a spouse, or a colleague. I hope that here I have at least opened a door onto this needed research.

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