How can something finite mediate an infinite God? Weaving patristics, theology, art history, aesthetics, and religious practice with the hermeneutic phenomenology of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jean-Luc Marion, Stephanie Rumpza proposes a new answer to this paradox by offering a fresh and original approach to the Byzantine icon. She demonstrates the power and relevance of the phenomenological method to integrate hermeneutic aesthetics and divine transcendence, illustrating how the material and visual dimensions of the icon are illuminated by traditional practices of prayer. Rumpza’s study targets a problem that marks a major fault line in continental philosophy of religion – how to understand the integrity of finite beings in relation to a God that transcends them. For philosophers, her book demonstrates the relevance of a cherished religious practice of Eastern Christianity. For art historians, she proposes a novel philosophical paradigm for understanding the icon as it is approached in practice.

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Foreword

To any reader seriously interested in the crucial issue of the icon, Stephanie Rumpza’s work will appear as an invaluable achievement. This is evident for technical reasons, as it holds together a number of different fields and sources of information that have rarely been united before: the history of patristic theology as well as modern and post-modern philosophy, from hermeneutics and phenomenology to semiotics and pragmatism, etc. This provides sufficient means to bring together two different questions, otherwise kept apart: the concept of the icon from a speculative and contemporary point of view and the positive description of the icon according to the components, laws, and, so to speak, rules of engagement (to use the military formulation of the criteria to open fire) – a very difficult issue, as it implies opening up the narrow sense of the “icon,” as merely a form of Byzantine painting, onto the dimensions of a possible practice for today and for the future. Only this attempt to connect them both can give us a genuine insight into the style of visibility of the icon in general. I must admit that the result is quite convincing.

If a challenging path to clear, the track is easy to follow. First, an account of the history of the theological approach to the icon: iconoclasm, idolatry, iconophilia, final dogmatic standards, and this disturbing conclusion, “the more we study these debates, the less we understand what an icon means.” Second, a turn to hermeneutics, that is, to Gadamer’s insights, which are applied neither for textual nor existential interpretations (as previously done by Heidegger), but in a more original way, for the development of an account of visual art, and spiritual or liturgical practice. This move leads the inquiry to join my own work, focusing on the phenomenological structure of the icon as such, which means to consider its relation to the visible as such, by studying its opposition to the idol. In the idol, I trigger the visible by seeing it from my point of view and my intentionality; in the icon, on the other hand, I experience the visible as coming down upon me, as seeing me according to a reverse intentionality. Third,
these steps alone would remain still too abstract to provide access to a real understanding of the icon qua icon. In Rumpza’s words, “[U]ntil we see more positively what the icon does as an icon, it sounds like what the icon does remains inconsequential.” Then begins a new moment: exploring the actual procedures of framing, designing, and painting the icon according to the Byzantine tradition, not to reconstitute them (they are still well known and still in use) but to understand their conceptual aims. They first aim at “representation” (Vorstellung), that is, the production of a visible, which should not be too quickly explained as an image, because this visibility, while brilliant and glorious, remains the visibility of something that no one has ever seen in our visible world and will never appear in this visibility. This representation does not intend to serve as a stand-in for an impossible or absent presence but to lead the viewer to strive with all his forces and with her whole heart for this presence through prayer. This leads to “re-presentation” again, but now understood as substitution (Vertretung): some visible stands for another visible, or better, some visible stands for an invisible that, although it remains hidden, projects out into our visible realm. In the icon, we don’t see the invisible becoming visible. This is not because of a lack of revelation of a stingy or shy divinity, but because we don’t see, we no longer even need to see anything. On the contrary, we consent to being seen, we see (and experience) being seen, and as this gaze (invisible, like each gaze is) crosses our (invisible) gaze, we feel the weight of the Other. The experience of the icon, if we are courageous enough to dare to face it in prayer, provides us with the same experience as any other human self when we cross gazes. With a major difference, in this encounter, we meet the everlasting Other, not an other who is fading, provisional, mortal, and deceiving, but the Other who lives forever. This structure implies that the icon has to be performed, achieved by acts: prayer, which consists in silence and speaking, touching and listening, solitude, and liturgical community. We perform the icon, we are embedded in it, and we are reformed by it into what, at last, we shall be – those looked at by the charity of God.

The final and most convincing moment of this inquiry leads to the analysis of the love letter. This provides a perfect analogy to the icon. Reading a love letter, we have the words of the author, but we don’t have his or her immediate presence. We don’t even learn anything factually, and nothing means anything (at best, it reports a past state of mind of the writer, perhaps already fading away when we read it, or lying, even). Unless, of course, every word means something. This is only possible if we take each of them as the written gaze of the other, watching us, exactly as we are
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meant to take the icon. In both cases, reversing the intentionality makes the crucial difference. A love letter may work as an idol (for instance, in the *Liaisons dangereuses*) or as an icon (for instance in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians 2:12: “… not only when I am present but all the more now when I am absent, continue to work out your salvation!”). At stake here is a reverse intentionality, not only in significations, but in the visible. Far from the superficial accusation of neglecting the hermeneutics of the gift in the icon, this alone achieves its genuine hermeneutics: the interpretation of *my self* by the gaze of the icon on me.

No doubt, this work will stand as a landmark in the understanding of the icon.

JEAN-LUC MARION

de l’Académie française

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Abbreviations

Jean-Luc Marion

AR

BG/ED

CP

CV/CdV

GR

GWB/DSE

ID/IeD

IE/DS

RD

SP/LS
### List of Abbreviations

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