

IMAGE AND TEXT: A THEOLOGY OF BYZANTINE ICONS  
WITH EMPHASIS ON THE SIXTH-CENTURY TAPESTRY  
PANEL *ICON OF THE VIRGIN*

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Introduction

Inasmuch as "a fundamental topic in the humanities . . . [is] the relationship between image and text" (class syllabus), there can perhaps be no better illustration of this essential theme than in a study of Christian, and in this specific instance, Byzantine, icons. "Icons are flat pictures, usually painted in egg tempera on wood, but also wrought in mosaic, ivory, and other materials, to represent the Lord, the BVM [Blessed Virgin Mary], or another saint, which are used and venerated in the Greek Church" (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* 1983: 686). An icon is an art form but it is also more than just an art form: "it is, primarily, an expression of the theological experience and faith of the Church and a statement of it" (Sahas 1986: 5). Icons are therefore "a liturgical art" (Ware 1986: 197), "dogma in color" and in specific relationship to the Scriptural text, "that which the [biblical] narrative declares in writing is the same as that which the icon does [in colours]" (*Ibid.*, ix; 69). Hence, the connection between our theme of image and text and Byzantine icons is direct.

In this paper I seek to accomplish three tasks. First, I will present a brief historical sketch of Christian icons and the celebrated controversy between the Iconoclasts (icon or image-breakers) and the Iconodules or Iconophiles (icon or image-worshippers) which agitated the Greek Church in the eighth and ninth centuries (c. 725-842). Second, I will discuss more deeply the way in which icons illustrate the theme of the relationship of visual image and literary text under the heading of "The Semiotics of the Icon." I will also point out in this section that icons not only illustrate literary texts, but even more importantly are thought to signify and even embody metaphysical and/or transcendent realities as well. And lastly as an illustration of the preceding, I will undertake an

extensive analysis of a sixth century pre-iconoclastic tapestry panel icon— "An *Icon of the Virgin* "—held in the tapestry collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

### ICONS AND ICONOCLASM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Greek word *eikon*, from which the English term "icon" is derived, means "image, likeness, form or appearance" (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich 1957: 221). As defined above, icons as a liturgical art visually depict the content and personages of the Scriptures and the Christian faith. Though it is possible to trace the use of icons by Christians back to the first century<sup>1</sup>, they became numerous in the East from the fifth-century onwards and the iconoclastic controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries only exacerbated their proliferation among the various eastern congregations.

Since that time, icons have played an important role in the public and private worship of the Greek Orthodox Church where they are given all the external marks of veneration such as kisses, genuflections, incense and so forth. Through icons the saints allegedly exercise their benevolent powers and consequently icons are present at all important events of human life such as births, birthdays, marriages, and funerals. Furthermore, icons are thought to possess effective remedies against illnesses, to be able to exorcise demons, to convey spiritual and temporal blessings and to be a general means of divine grace. Some icons are believed to possess miraculous powers especially the icon of Christ of Edessa and that of the *Theotokos* (Mary, the Mother of God) in the monastery of the Abramites at Constantinople (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* 1983: 686-87).

From 726 until about the middle of the ninth century, the Byzantine world was embroiled in the Iconoclastic Controversy. The dispute began in earnest when Emperor

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<sup>1</sup> One legend has it that the production of icons can be traced back to St. Luke the Evangelist who allegedly painted the first icon of the Virgin Mary (see Pelikan 1990: 88, note 100 and figure 22).

Leo III (717-41), who thought that the use of icons was a major obstacle to the conversion of the Jews and Moslems, published a decree in 726 declaring all images to be idols and consequently ordered their destruction. In 753, Leo's son, Constantine V, in order to further his father's iconoclastic policy, called the Synod of Hieria at which time the makers of icons were said to be guilty of Nestorianism and/or Monophysitism<sup>1</sup> and asserted that the images of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM) and the saints were idols; he, too, called for their destruction.

However, a reversal of fortunes for the future of icons came when their use in the worship of the Church was endorsed at the Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea (787) although technically the conflict did not end until icons were definitively restored to the churches in 843—an event which later became known as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy."

One polemic for icons proclaimed by Epiphanius "the Deacon" at the sixth session of the Nicaea Council aptly illustrates our present concern regarding the connection between (iconographic) image and (biblical or gospel) text.

We all, therefore, see and understand that the painting of icons is something that has been handed down to the Church before the holy councils, as well as after them, like the tradition of the gospel. Thus, as when we receive the sound of the reading with our ears, we transmit it to our mind, so by looking with our eyes at the painted icons, we are enlightened in our mind. Through two things following each other, that is, by reading and also by seeing the reproduction of the painting, we learn the same thing, that is, how to recall what has taken place. The operation of these two most basic senses is also found conjoined in the Song of Songs, where it says: *Show me thy face, and cause me to hear thy voice; for thy voice is sweet, and thy countenance is beautiful.* In agreement we say with words of the Psalms: *As we have heard, so have we also seen* " (Psalm 47: 48; Sahas 1986: 61).

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<sup>1</sup> Nestorianism, a doctrine that divided the unity of the person of Christ, was condemned as a christological heresy at the Council of Ephesus (A. D. 431); Monophysitism, a false-teaching concerning Christ propagated by Eutyches which confounded his two natures thereby affirming only his divinity, was refuted at the Council of Chalcedon (A. D. 451).

Be this as it may, the controversy concerned the *legitimacy* and the *veneration* of icons. In the Old Testament in Exodus 20: 4, the second of the Ten Commandments reads:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.

Because of this text, it was asked, "Is it permitted to make icons—pictorial representations of Christ, the Mother of God, the saints and the angels—and to place these icons in the church and the home? And, if such icons are permitted, should they also be venerated?" (Ware 1986: 196). To these inquiries, the Eastern Orthodox Church answered affirmatively and this affirmation largely came on the basis of the apology for icons articulated by St. John of Damascus (d. 749) a Greek theologian who lived outside the Byzantine Empire under Arab rule and St. Theodore the Studite (759-826), abbot of the monastery of Studios in Constantinople.

Perhaps one reason for the triumph of icons was the Greek mindset, reflected in linguistic phenomenon, that failed to distinguish between image and text or writing and painting.

It is interesting that the word for Scripture in Greek (*Graphé*) means both "writing" and "painting"; in the Greek Orthodox mind there is no separation, no division, between these two forms of communication, let alone abrogation of each other. Thus, that which writing conveys through reading, the icon conveys and enhances through the sense of sight. The icon is a narrative in shapes and forms through the medium of colours. Indeed, the icon is traditionally called *historesis* (which means both written narrative and painting), iconography is called *historia* (history or narrative), and the iconographer *historiographos* (painter of narratives) or *historistes* (narrator). The icon and the word are in no tension with each other. The icon serves as a reminder of and as a commentary upon the Scriptures and has always been an integral part of the liturgical, didactic, and missionary ministry of the Church (Sahas 1986: 14).

In this light, then, it is no wonder that St. Gregory of Nyssa believed that the icon "knows how to be a silent scripture that speaks from the wall" (quoted in Sahas 1986: 16).

## THE SEMIOTICS OF ICONS

Uspensky has asserted that a "semiotic approach [to icons] is by no means merely imposed from without . . . but rather is internally inherent to a work of icon-painting, to a considerably greater degree than might be said of painting in general" (Uspensky 1976: 9). What he means by the "semiotic approach" is the recognition of the linguistic nature of the icon, that is, understanding the relationship between "icon-painting and language, and between the icon and the verbal text" (ibid.). In this regard, writers both ancient and modern point out that "icons serve to instruct the faithful" in their literary and, as we shall see, transcendental depictions. (Cavarnos 1977: 31).

St. Nilus of Sinai as early as the fifth century reflects a semiotic understanding of the nature of icons in stating that icons were placed in the churches "so that the illiterate who are unable to read the Holy Scriptures, may, by gazing at the pictures, become mindful" of the faith (quoted by Uspensky 1976: 9). Correspondingly, Photios, Patriarch of Constantinople, said, "Just as speech is transmitted by hearing, so a form through sight is imprinted upon the tablets of the soul, giving to those whose apprehension is not soiled by wicked doctrines a representation of knowledge consonant with piety" (quoted by Cavarnos 1977: 31). According to Photios, icons not only teach as written documents do, but in some instances are more vivid than written accounts, and hence superior as a means of instruction. We can appreciate the effectiveness of icons as a means of teaching if we note that in a composition, say of the Nativity, the raising of Lazarus or the Crucifixion, the icon presents simultaneously and concisely many things—a place, persons, objects—that would take an appreciable period of time to describe in words. Hence, an icon is worth a thousand words!

But there is also a sense in which the icon goes beyond the biblical or theological text it is designed to illustrate to the metaphysical or transcendent realities that are behind the text itself. This is their anagogic or ultimate semiotic nature. As St. John of

Damascus once remarked, "we are led by perceptible icons to the contemplation of the divine and spiritual" (quoted by Cavarnos 1977: 32). In this the essentially symbolic nature of the icon is revealed. An icon is not an end in itself nor is its illustrative value limited to a literary text. It is essentially a symbol carrying the viewer beyond itself from the physical to the metaphysical or spiritual realm.

Uspensky believes that the iconoclastic controversy revolved around this metaphysically significant aspect of the icon as a "sign" of transcendental realities. To prove this point he quotes P. A. Florenskij who writes that from the perspective of the Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea, icon art was understood to be "recollective" not in the contemporary psychological or subjective sense but platonically.

In this case it is not at all a question of the subjective recollectiveness of art, but of Platonic "recollection", *anamnesis*—as the manifestation of the idea in the sensible: art leads out of a subjective seclusion, bursts the boundaries of the conventional world, and, beginning with images and through the medium of images, brings us to the archetype (Quoted by Uspensky 1976: 21, note 17).

Or as Dionysius the Areopagite once formulated it, "phenomenal things are in truth the icons of invisible things" (*ibid.*). On this foundation the Byzantine Church built its "theory of the icon . . . as a reflection, distinguished from its archetype by certain important differences, yet allowing the *energia* [power, operation] of the archetype to be actually present in that reflection" (*ibid.*). The iconoclasts rejected this ontologically illustrative value of the icon. In another work, Florenskij writes that they did not necessarily reject the utility of religious painting but

rejected in them any ontological connection with their archetypes. With such an ontological connection, all worship of icons—the kissing of icons, prayers to them, the shaking of incense before them, the lighting of candles and lamps before them, etc.—that is, worship pertaining to the representations above and beyond the archetypes themselves, to this double of what was revered, could only be regarded as criminal idolatry (*ibid.*).

In any case, it may be argued that the controversy between the iconoclasts and the iconodules was one that revolved around the semiotic nature of the icons. And since in the minds of the iconodules who believed that the icons symbolized if not embodied

their archetypes, it was appropriate and necessary to find an artistic medium that carried the viewer from the sensible world to the world beyond. It is this feature that accounts for the dematerialized, distorted and otherworldly nature of icon painting.

This anagogic [semiotic] mode of expression is achieved in part by the use of a type of distortion. Thus, the proportions of a figure are distorted, some parts being exaggerated and others diminished. The head, for instance, may be depicted disproportionately large, in order that the face, which is the most expressive part of the body may be seen more distinctly. Usually, the eyes are depicted larger than they normally are, in order to express more effectively certain qualities which are thought of as spiritual. Also, the nose is made rather thin, the mouth small, the fingers thin and elongated, in order to present an external expression of the transfigured state of the saint, whose senses have been refined, spiritualized. The body is often elongated, as a further means of "dematerialization." Mountains, trees, buildings and so on are schematic, abstract. Thus, a mountain is represented by stair-like rock; a tree, by a trunk with a few branches; a city, by a few simple buildings surrounded by a fortification wall. Further dematerialization is attained by reducing space to a minimum, and by suppressing perspective and physical light. Thus the figures depicted give the impression of being two-dimensional, like visions. Finally, the iconographer makes no attempt to imitate faithfully the colors of nature, but uses extensively non-natural, mystical colors (Cavarnos 1977: 37).

This same author concludes his discussion by saying that, "true iconography is intended to take us beyond anatomy and the three-dimensional world of matter to a realm that is immaterial, spaceless, timeless--the realm of the spirit, of eternity. And hence the forms and colors are not those that one customarily observes around him, but have something unworldly about them" (38).

Icons, then, are epistemologically and ontologically significant. Through them not only are texts understood but transcendent realities are conveyed and even experienced. Consequently, as Ouspensky and Lossky suggest in their definitive study

### *The Meaning of Icons*

The icon is placed on a level with the Holy Scriptures and with the Cross, as one of the forms of revelation and the knowledge of God, in which the divine and human will become blended. Apart from its direct meaning, each alike is a reflection of the higher world; each alike is a symbol of the Spirit contained in them. Consequently, the meaning both of the word and of the image, their role and significance are the same (1969:32).

And furthermore, these same authors suggest that

The meaning of Church art, and in particular of the icon, lies precisely in that it transmits, or rather testifies visually to these two realities, the reality of God and of the world, of grace and of nature. It is realistic in two senses. Just like the Holy Scriptures, the icon transmits historical fact, an event from Sacred History or an historical personage, depicted in his real physical form and, again like the Holy Scriptures, it indicates the revelation that is outside time, contained in a given historical reality. Thus, through the icon, as through the Holy Scriptures, we not only learn about God, but we also know God (Ouspensky and Lossky 1969:37).

Thus, in the icon, the relationship of image and text, and of image and the transcendent is more than adequately illustrated. One prominent extant icon that images biblical texts and transcendent realities is the sixth-century tapestry panel *Icon of the Virgin* held in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art. An examination of selected aspects of this icon will illustrate the dynamics of iconographic image/text relationship.

THE ICON OF THE VIRGIN:  
A SIXTH-CENTURY TAPESTRY PANEL FROM EGYPT

The *Icon of the Virgin*<sup>1</sup> is a wool tapestry which measures seventy and three-eighths by forty-three and one-fourth inches (or about six feet by four feet) and was most likely crafted by an unknown artisan in Egypt during the sixth century Byzantine period. The panel is composed of two zones (see Figure 1): in the lower zone the Virgin in Majesty is flanked by archangels and enclosed within an architectural setting. On the lintel above her are three inscriptions in Greek:

THE HOLY MICHAEL

THE HOLY MARY

THE HOLY GABRIEL

In the upper zone is Christ in Majesty, surrounded by an aureole of light and supported in a starry heaven by two flying angels. These two zones are united by a

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<sup>1</sup> This description is taken from Shepherd 1969: 90. For an additional general description of the tapestry, see Weitzmann 1978: 46.

wide foliate border decorated with fruits and flowers and, in the lower part, with medallions containing busts of apostles and evangelists whose names are inscribed in Greek nearby. In a clockwise direction they are:

ANDREW

MATTHEW

PAUL THE APOSTLE

LUKE

JAMES

PHILLIP

MARK

THOMAS

JOHN

MATTHIAS

PETER

BARTHOLOMEW<sup>1</sup>

In the *Icon of the Virgin* obviously two figures are enthroned: Christ in the upper and then Mary in the lower zone. It would seem, however, that the subject of the tapestry is Mary in Majesty and it could have been entitled *The Theotokos Enthroned*.<sup>2</sup> As Shepherd points out, "the emphasis on the lower zone, through its larger scale and

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the apostles as they are found on the tapestry are in some cases misspelled, some letters are written in the wrong direction and the name of Andrew is written in mirror reverse (Shepherd 1969: 115, note 3).

<sup>2</sup> The theological term *theotokos* literally means bearer or mother of God; it was a title given to the Virgin Mary by the Alexandrian and Cappadocian theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries predicated upon a *communicatio idiomatum in abstracto*, the communication of divine attributes to the human nature of Christ through the womb of the Virgin. Pelikan suggests, however, that the term *theotokos* "does not mean simply 'Mother of God' as it is usually rendered, but more precisely and fully: 'the one who gave birth to the One who is God'" (Pelikan 1990: 134).

by the obviously intended sense of communication between the Virgin and the viewer on whom she gazes, strongly suggests that the panel was designed as an *Icon of the Virgin* (Shepherd 1969: 91). Even though the term "icon" is primarily applied to painting on panel or on canvas, it is nevertheless "equally applicable to any portable picture intended as an object of personal devotion regardless of the medium" (Ibid.). Since this is the case, to call this tapestry panel an icon is not inappropriate.

The *Icon of the Virgin* aptly illustrates the relationship of image and text as will be seen below. As Pelikan has suggested in his 1987 A. W. Mellon Lecture in the Fine Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C., there is an

intricate relation between image and idea in philosophy and theology, above all in Byzantine (or, for that matter, Russian) philosophy and theology, for which, as another modern interpreter has put it, "the interior space of the church," was to be seen as the "carrier of an idea." The interrelation between image and idea, as each of these served to define the Byzantine and Russian icon, was expressed by John of Damascus when, in his taxonomy of "images," he defined as an "image [eikon]," . . . "the [pre-existent] idea in God of the things that are to come to be through God." Inseparability of the image and the idea in the icon is the subject matter of this [lecture] . . . for which this *Icon of the Virgin* also provides the iconographic text" (Pelikan 1990: 3, 5).

In order to illustrate the inseparability of image and idea in the *Icon of the Virgin*, I would like to focus on two images on the tapestry which reflect both biblical texts as well as the work's own theological and socio-political contexts. First I will examine from the lower zone of the tapestry the image of Mary in Majesty as a depiction of Luke 1: 46-49 in the context of the theological understanding of her as the *Theotokos*. Furthermore, the fact that the image of the enthroned Virgin comes into prominence about the same time the Court Religion does helps to explain a shift in emphasis from the Virgin depicted in humility to the Virgin depicted in majesty; this too will be discussed. Secondly, from the upper zone of the tapestry I will discuss the image of Christ in Majesty as reflective of texts in the book of Revelation which describe Him as cosmic ruler—King of kings and Lord of lords—and this in the context of socio-political

understanding of the relationship of the Byzantine Emperor to the rule of the sovereign Christ.

### Mary in Majesty

The passage of Scripture which forms the basis of many Byzantine icons of Mary is taken from Luke 1: 46-49, a text traditionally called the "Magnificat" uttered by her when she went to visit Elizabeth her cousin who was pregnant with John the Baptist. The text reads as follows:

And Mary said, "My soul doth magnify the Lord,  
and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my saviour.  
For he hath regarded the **humble**  
estate of his handmaiden;  
for, behold, from henceforth all generations  
shall call me **blessed**.  
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;  
and holy is his name.

The key terms here are "humble" and "blessed" and as Pelikan points out, it was these two terms or characteristics about Mary that supplied the "texts" of Byzantine icons about her.

The theological presentation of Mary in Byzantine thought related these several themes of the Magnificat to one another. And, as the entire history of representations of Mary in Byzantine art suggests, it was the particular vocation of the icons of the *Theotokos* to find graphic ways of simultaneously depicting the two key adjectives in the narratives of the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary and of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth: 'humble' and 'blessed.' Neither of these attributes was to be slighted, and on the other hand neither of them was to be emphasized at the expense of the other (Pelikan 1990: 143).

In describing the way the Virgin is depicted on our tapestry (see Figures 2, 3, 4), it is obvious that the accent falls on Mary as the Blessed One. She sits on an elaborately jeweled throne of Byzantine type with an enormous red cushion behind her. She is clothed in a simple purple *palla*<sup>1</sup> and tunic and black shoes. One end of the *palla*

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<sup>1</sup> In the ancient world, a *palla* was a large mantle or wrap worn by women.

(maphorion in Greek) is draped over her head as a veil; beneath it her hair is hidden by a little white cap on which is embroidered a tiny gold cross. Her head is encased in a large yellow nimbus. The Christ Child, who is without a nimbus, is seated yet in a suspended fashion in her lap toward the left (see Figure 5). He is dressed in a golden-yellow tunic and *pallium*;<sup>1</sup> purple *clavi* decorate the shoulders of the tunic. His right hand rests on the top of a scroll; the left hand, supporting it from below, is concealed in the folds of the *pallium* (Shepherd 1969: 93). The scene is overall quite majestic and yet it manages to convey both the humility as well as the blessedness of the Virgin.

That combination makes itself evident on our tapestry *Icon of the Virgin*. Therefore, "the Virgin's costume is that of a woman of the ordinary classes in late antiquity," and yet her simple garments are nevertheless consistently purple, the color reserved for Byzantine royalty" (Pelikan 1990: 143).

Ernst Troeltsch has posited that "the whole Christian world of thought and dogma [is dependent] on the fundamental sociological conditions, on the idea of fellowship at any given time" (Troeltsch 1960, 2: 994). The truth of his remark can be seen in aspects of the tapestry which reflect its own theological and socio-political contexts.

Theologically, in 431 at the Council of Ephesus, a doctrine was set forth which asserted that the divine and the human natures in Christ were inseparable (contra Nestorius) and that Christ was divine from the point of His birth. This meant that Mary was the Mother of God—the blessed *Theotokos*. From this time onward, there was a proliferation of the cult of the Virgin which reached its apogee in the sixth century and as mentioned above, it was "in the service of the cult of the Virgin that our panel was created" (Shepherd 1969: 105; cf. Weitzmann 1978: 48). It would have quite appropriate to entitle this tapestry icon "*The Theotokos Enthroned*" since this blessed vocation of the Virgin as the Mother of God (or perhaps more accurately "the one who gave birth to

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<sup>1</sup> In the ancient world, a *pallium* was a large, oblong mantle worn by men, also called a *himation*.

the One who is God") is the focal point of the tapestry. If we accept Troeltsch's principle enunciated above, then not only would a biblical text like the Magnificat become the basis for this icon but the theological notion of the *Theotokos* would also be illustrated here as well. In this sense she is blessed and in this sense she is presented in the tapestry. As Pelikan concludes in this respect,

Mary the Mother of God . . . did not have a preexistent divine nature, as Christ did, but was completely human in her origin, just as all other human beings are. Yet because she had been chosen by God to be the *Theotokos*, "the one who gave birth to the One who is God," that completely human nature of hers had been transfigured; and already in this earthly existence she had in a special way "come to share in the very being of God," as the Second Epistle of Peter had promised that who believed in her divine Son would (Pelikan 1990: 145).

Because Mary's nature had been transfigured and had already come to share in the very being of God, "the church . . . devoted to the Mother of God a cult of 'hyperdulia', [supersaint] exalting her above all the saints and all the celestial hierarchies" and "whilst the Church still awaits the advent of the world to come, the Mother of God has crossed the threshold of the eternal kingdom; and, as the sole human person deified—token of the final deification of creatures—She presides at Her Son's side, *over the destinies of the world which yet unfold in time* " (Ouspensky and Lossky 1969: 77; italics added).

On this basis, icons of the Virgin enthroned and exalted possessed political signification: she along with her divine Son rule over the cosmos while earthly kings ultimately exercise their rule only under their authority and judgment. With the recognition of Christianity as the state religion, and since the Christian religion so exalted the *Theotokos*, then it is no wonder that such themes gave rise to a multitude of icons which depicted Mary in majesty as one with authority. As Mary in the gospel of Luke had accurately predicted of herself, "all generations shall call me blessed" (1: 48).

#### The Icon of Christ in Majesty as King

Despite the damage to the textile in the upper zone, it is clear that the theme of this region of the icon is that of Christ in majesty (see Figures 6 and 7), seated on a throne and flanked by the two archangels Gabriel and Michael. Though this depiction of Christ is "less massive in size than the lower zone, it is also still more exalted in theme" (Pelikan 1990: 69). The triangular form of the sky also serves as the canopy carried by the columns below. The red background beyond gives the same effect of infinite space and timelessness as the red around the ciborium<sup>1</sup> of the *Theotokos* and is perhaps to be understood as symbolic of heavenly light. Christ's head is here surrounded by a golden nimbus with a cross subtly defined. His costume is the same as that of the infant below except that here the *pallium* is purple (royalty). The jeweled throne is very similar to that of the Virgin's though his red cushion is in a more normal position and has a pattern of four petalled rosettes. The angels (see Figures 6, 8) which support the *mandorla*<sup>2</sup> wear the same costumes as those worn by the two archangels below; their light blue tunics have the same golden yellow decorative bands at the neck and sleeves and the same *gammadion*<sup>3</sup> borders at the hems. They wear their *pallia* draped over the right shoulder in the more usual manner (Shepherd 1969: 98-99).

In the lower zone of the icon, the most important figure is really not the Virgin Mary as *Theotokos* or Mother of God but her infant son, even though it is clear that the entire icon was made in the service of her cult.

Mary is holding him [Jesus] forward and presenting him to the world as its infant Sovereign. The angels Michael and Gabriel on either side [see Figures 9, 10] likewise bear witness to him, with the globe as a sign of Christ's power and authority. . . . the infant Christ himself is serenely looking out . . . with his

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<sup>1</sup> A *ciborium* is a canopy of wood, stone, etc. that rests on four columns, especially one covering an altar.

<sup>2</sup> *Mandorla* is an Italian word used in the fine arts to refer to anything in the shape of an almond.

<sup>3</sup> The term *gammadion* is taken from the third letter of the Greek alphabet, "G," (gamma) and refers to a cross composed of four capital gammas, especially in the form of a swastika.

"tranquilla sovranita" at the world, of which as a child he is the "All-sovereign [*Pantokrator*] and the King" (Pelikan 1990: 69-70).

Christ enthroned in majesty, as seen by St. John the Divine in his visions on the island of Patmos, gave the icon painters texts for making statements about the absolute lordship of Christ. The following texts from the book of Revelation in particular form the literary backdrop for depictions of Christ such as this.

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever (Rev. 11: 15).

And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS (Rev. 19: 16).

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end (Rev. 22: 13).

These texts and their iconographic representation raise the question of the relation of Byzantine politics and religion and of the socio-political context of these images of Christ and Mary enthroned. The question can be framed as follows:

According to Byzantine theology and Byzantine political theory, what was the relation of these two eternal and heavenly thrones of the *Theotokos* and of her divine Son to the temporal and earthly thrones on which, in Byzantium, both the emperor and the patriarch were seated?

It is probably correct to see the recognition of Christianity as the state religion under Constantine (Edict of Milan, 313) as the turning point in the artistic depiction of Christ as the supreme ruler. Furthermore, this political event may also be the key to understanding the shift in emphasis in the portrayal of Mary in humility to Mary in Majesty. Pelikan points out that Mary was "often portrayed that way [i.e., enthroned] in Byzantine icons from all periods. For example, she is seated on a throne in an icon of Byzantine origin from the thirteenth century (see Figure 11), which Kurt Weitzmann has entitled *Virgin Enthroned* [Constantinople, 1200-50 located in Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai]. Nor is this an exclusively Byzantine motif. The enthronement of the Virgin Mary as herself the 'Throne of Wisdom' [*Sedes Sapientiae*; see Figure 12] and

her coronation by her Son (or sometimes by the entire Holy Trinity) are familiar themes also in the mariological art of the Latin West during the Middle Ages" (Pelikan 1990: 19).

This view of Christ as King and Mary enthroned carries with it "a polemical message against the cult of the pagan Roman emperor, whose sacred kingship was believed in Roman civic religion to embody both divine and political authority" (Pelikan 1990: 16). The images of Christ and Mary in Majesty on our tapestry convey this essential political implication: In Byzantium, what the church stood for was believed to be supreme. The throne of any earthly king, including the Byzantine king, was subordinate to the throne of Christ the king. In the *Icon of the Virgin*, the heavenly throne of Christ was surrounded by angels and positioned far above terrestrial powers and even above the heavenly throne of His mother. The orb or globe in the hand of the archangel Gabriel, moreover, symbolized the universal, indeed cosmic authority of God and of the Son of God. Still, this did not mean that the power of the Byzantine emperor or Roman emperor was subordinate to the throne of the patriarch. The church was free to be the church and the state was free to be the state which protected the church and was still under the direct rule of Christ (Pelikan 1990: 28-29).

### CONCLUSION

Perhaps there is no better illustration of the relationship between literary text and visual image than in a study of Christian icons. Icons, as noted in the introduction, is an art form but it is also more than just an art form: "it is, primarily, an expression of the theological experience and faith of the Church and a statement of it" (Sahas 1986: 5). The *Icon of the Virgin* is exactly this. It visually conveys the meaning of biblical texts; it depicts the theological notions of Mary as the *Theotokos* and Christ as King; it reflects the political structures and realities of the Byzantine empire; and in the final analysis and perhaps behind it all, the *Icon of the Virgin* could lay claim to be reflective of

metaphysical truth and transcendental realities. As G. K. Chesterton said in his own apology for icons in the Roman Church,

They speak more truly than they know who say that the sign and scandal of the Catholic Church is the Graven Image. The Church forbids us to worship it save as a symbol; but as a symbol it is most solidly symbolic. For it stands for this strange mania of Certitude, without which Rome will remain a riddle; it stands for the intolerant and intolerable notion that something is really true; true in every aspect and from every angle; true from the four quarters of the sky; true by the three dimensions of the Trinity. We turn from it and it does not vanish; we analyze it and it does not dissolve; at last, after long and laborious experiments in skepticism, we are forced to believe our eyes (Chesterton 1930: 74-75).

## FIGURES (taken from Pelikan 1990)

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