

“THE FEET THAT EVE HEARD IN PARADISE AND WAS AFRAID”: OBSERVATIONS ON THE CHRISTOLOGY OF BYZANTINE HYMNS

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Abstract

The paper discusses the Christological bearing of certain Byzantine festal hymns, whose roots stretch back to the early Christian tradition, but which are still used in the services of the Orthodox Church. These hymns avoid the vocabulary of their contemporary dogmatic debates, and offer an alternative poetic theology deeply rooted in Biblical imagery, yet surprisingly precise and effective in conveying the very same message about Christ. This finding opens up the discussion of theological method, namely the question of how these hymns could be taken into account as direct sources for theology, on a par with the data provided by the ecumenical councils, and the subsequent patristic and medieval theology.

Introduction

In an article published in 1985, whose unambiguous title reads “Hymns are Theology,” S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. (1985, 59, 67) stated the following:

The hymns of the church *are* theology. . . . Unfortunately, hymnody as a branch of study in theological and Christian education has enjoyed little integrity, due to approaches to the subject which have not taken hymns themselves seriously as theology. . . . All Christians need to develop critical acumen about what they sing. Hymns are theology.

The truth and relevance of such a statement for the “theology in hymns” of Christian communities heir to a Graf Zinzendorf or Charles Wesley has been noted in several extensive studies (Atwood

1995; Berger 1995). In the following pages I would like to show that the same holds true for the faith of the Orthodox East.

It is a commonplace that Byzantine hymnography is often “dogmatic,” in the sense that the hymns function as a vehicle for dogmatic statements. One may think, for instance, of the hymns celebrating the achievements of Ecumenical Councils, or certain hymns to the Theotokos, aptly called “Dogmatika.” Although the title of this paper may suggest a concern for the “dogmatic,” the hymns that I will discuss in the following pages—mostly festal hymns commonly used in the Eastern Orthodox Church—are precisely *not* of this type. I shall argue, instead, that these hymns provide an alternative to the Christology of creeds and controversies.

“Byzantine hymnography” as we know it today is the result of intense interaction between the liturgical centers of the Christian East—namely, St. Sabbas Monastery in Palestine, the “Great Church” and the Stoudios monastery in Constantinople, and the monastic community of Mount Athos—over a period ranging from the end of the iconoclastic crisis (eighth–ninth century) to the wake of the Hesychastic debate (fourteenth century). The hymnographic material itself, however, is much more ancient, and its roots can be traced back to Melito of Sardis in the second century. For the brief historical overview that would be in order at this point, the reader is referred to my recent article published in *Theological Studies* of which the present essay is in many ways a continuation (Bucur 2007, 93–6). My concern, however, is theological rather than historical, as I have in mind the hymnographic material as it has been universally received in the Orthodox Church, and as it is used *today* in worship.

1. Christological Affirmations in Byzantine Hymnography

Christ, “the God of our Fathers”

Among the hymns of Holy Week, one of the most popular—and arguably one of the most beautiful—is the ninth-century hymn of Cassiane, sung on Holy Wednesday:

O Lord, the woman who has fallen into many sins, perceiving Your divinity and taking upon herself the duty of a myrrh-bearer, with lamentations brings sweet-smelling oil of myrrh to You before Your burial. Woe is me, she says, for night surrounds me: a dark and

moonless frenzy of unrestraint, the lust for sin. Accept the wells of my tears, for it is You that draws down from the clouds the waters of the sea. Incline to the groanings of my heart, for it is You that have bowed down the heavens in Your ineffable self-emptying. I shall tenderly kiss Your most pure feet and also wipe them with the locks of my hair—those feet whose sound Eve heard at dusk in Paradise and hid herself for fear. Who can search out the multitude of my sins and the abyss of Your judgments, O Savior of my soul? Despise me not, Your handmaiden, for You have mercy without measure.

The hymn is structured on the antithetic parallelism between Eve and the sinful woman. Unlike Eve, who had sinned but chose to *run away* and hide instead of repenting, “the sinful woman” *runs toward* Christ, embraces his feet and washes them in her tears. These feet, however, are the feet that walked through Eden in the cool of the day: the feet of YHWH. The Christological implication is obvious: the Lord of the Old Testament narrative is identified as Jesus Christ.

I have discussed at length elsewhere the hymnographic identification of Jesus Christ as the Lord of Paradise, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Lord who led Israel out of Egypt, the Lawgiver on Sinai, and the Lord who spoke to the prophets. I have shown that this interpretation of Biblical theophanies carries on a venerable and catholic Christian tradition that came to an end in Western Christianity with Augustine (Bucur 2007; Studer 1971; Barnes 1999).

Christ, the Creator

Byzantine hymnographers are also very emphatic in praising Christ as the Creator and Lord of creation. It is Christ who separated the waters and suspended the earth upon the void (Job 26:7):

When the creation beheld You in the flesh covered by the streams, who have established the whole earth in the void above the waters, it was seized with great amazement and cried: “There is none holy save You, O Lord!” (Canon of the Forefeast of Theophany: Ode 2, Irmos)¹

When the creation beheld You hanging in Golgotha, who have hung the whole earth freely upon the waters, it was seized with amazement and it cried: “There is none holy save You, O Lord.” (Canon of Holy Saturday: Canticle 3, Irmos)

When creation beheld You born in a cave, who have hung the whole earth in a void above the waters, it was seized with amazement and cried: “There is none holy save You, O Lord.” (Compline Canon of the Forefeast of the Nativity: Ode 3, Irmos)

It is Christ who bowed the heavens (Ps 17:10/18:9)² and holds the creation in the hollow of His hand (Isa 40:12):

He who bowed the heavens, bowed His head, and the clay cried aloud to Him that formed him: “Why do You command of me what lies beyond my power? For I have need to be baptized by You.” (Vespers of Theophany: Sticheron 3)

Open to me the gates, and entering within, I shall see as a child wrapped in swaddling clothes Him who upholds the creation in the hollow of His hand, whose praises the angels sing with unceasing voice, the Lord and Giver of Life who saves mankind. (Vespers of the Forefeast of the Nativity: *Glory* Apostichon)

It is Christ who fashioned Adam with his hands after his own image, and fashioned Eve from Adam’s side.

Bethlehem, prepare; Eden, open your gate, for He Who Is [Exod 3:14] becomes what he was not, and the Fashioner of all creation is fashioned. (Sunday before Nativity: Sticheron at Litya)

Behold, the time of our salvation is at hand. Make ready, O cave; the Virgin draws nigh to give birth. . . . For Christ comes in His love for mankind, to save the human being that He fashioned. (Eve of the Nativity: Vespers, *Glory* . . . *Now and ever* Sticheron at *Lord I have cried*).

You, O Christ, with invisible hands have fashioned the human being in Your image; and You have now displayed the original beauty in this same human body formed by You. . . . (Second Canon of Transfiguration: Ode 5, Sticheron 3)

O You who fashioned Eve from Adam’s side, Your side was pierced and from it flowed streams of cleansing. (Holy Saturday Matins: First Stasis of the Lamentations)

It is Christ who blessed the Sabbath as the day of rest.

What is this sight we behold? What is this present rest? The King of the ages . . . keeps the Sabbath in the tomb, granting us a new Sabbath! (Holy Saturday Matins: Sticheron at Praises)

For this is the blessed Sabbath, this is the day of rest on which the only-begotten Son of God rested from His works. Suffering death in accordance with the plan of salvation, He kept the Sabbath in the flesh. (Holy Saturday Matins: *Glory* Sticheron at Praises)

He is the Creator, “who covers the heavens with clouds” (Ps 146/147:8), the hidden God, “who wraps himself with light as with a garment” (Ps 103/104:2), and who condescends to be wrapped in swaddling clothes at his nativity, clothed in the waters of Jordan at his baptism, and wrapped in a funeral shroud like a mortal:

O sweetest child, how shall I feed You who give food to all? How shall I hold You, who hold all things in Your power? How shall I wrap You in swaddling clothes, who wrap the whole earth in clouds? So cried the all-pure Lady whom in faith we magnify. (Matins Canon of the Forefeast of the Nativity: Ode 9, Sticheron 5)

O Savior, who clothe Yourself with light as with a garment, You have clothed Yourself in the waters of Jordan; and You who have measured heaven with a span [Isa 40:12], have bowed down Your head before the Forerunner. (Matins of Theophany: *Glory* Sticheron at Praises)

Joseph together with Nicodemus took You down from the Tree, who clothe Yourself with light as with a garment; and looking upon You dead, stripped, and without burial, in his grief and tender compassion he lamented, saying: . . . How shall I bury You, my God? How shall I wrap You in a winding sheet? (Good Friday Vespers: *Glory, Now and Ever* Apostichon)

He is also the Wisdom pervading all creation, which “in the latter days” condescended to be incarnate:

The Wisdom of God that restrains the untamed fury of the waters that are above the firmament, that sets a bridle on the deep and keeps back the seas, now pours water into a basin; and the Master washes the feet of His servants. (Holy Thursday Matins: Canticle 5, Sticheron 2)

Exegetically, these are the results of a consistently Christological reading of key passages in Genesis, the Psalms, and the Wisdom literature. Theologically, there is nothing innovative or unusual in proclaiming Christ as creator or co-creator; patristic literature is replete with such affirmations. What is specific and different in the hymnographic

treatment of this widespread theology is the extensive and masterful cultivation of antithesis, parallelism, and paradox. A hymn will typically connect a lofty image from the Old Testament with a New Testament passage illustrating the extreme *kenosis* of the Son of God.

A strange wonder it is to see the Maker of heaven and earth stand naked in the river, and as a servant receive baptism from a servant, for our salvation. (Eve of Theophany: Sticheron at the Ninth Hour)

How shall I stretch forth my hand and touch the head of Him that rules all things? . . . You, whose praises the seraphim sing, walk upon the earth. And I who am but a servant know not how to baptize the Master. (Matins of Theophany: Sticheron after Gospel reading)

Beholding You, the Fashioner and Creator of all, hanging naked on the Cross, the whole creation was transfixed with fear and it lamented. . . . O strange wonder! (Great Vespers on the Third Sunday of Great Lent: Glory Sticheron at Lord I have cried)

Today a tomb holds Him who holds the creation in the hollow of His hand; a stone covers Him who covers the heavens with glory! (Holy Saturday Matins: Sticheron at Praises)

He who holds the earth in the hollow of His hand is held fast by the earth. (Holy Saturday Matins: First Stasis of the Lamentations)

The hymns exploit the occurrence of similar words, images, or actions (for instance, “he hung,” “he was wrapped,” “he holds,” “hands,” “rest”): “*With his hands* the betrayer . . . secretly receives the silver, the price of Him who fashioned man *with His hands* . . . (Holy Thursday Kontakion). The following hymns, one sung on Good Friday, the other (obviously patterned after the first) on the Eve of Nativity, are perfectly illustrative:

Today He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the Cross. He who is King of the angels is arrayed in a crown of thorns. He who wraps the heaven in clouds is wrapped in the purple of mockery. He who in the Jordan set Adam free receives blows upon His face. The Bridegroom of the Church is transfixed with nails. The Son of the Virgin is pierced with a spear. We venerate Your Passion, O Christ. Show us also Your glorious Resurrection. (Good Friday: Antiphon 15)

Today, He who holds the whole creation in the hollow of His hand is born of the Virgin. He whom in essence none can touch is wrapped in swaddling clothes as a mortal. God who in the beginning founded the heavens lies in a manger. He who rained manna down on the people in the wilderness is fed on milk from His Mother's breast. He who is the Bridegroom of the Church calls unto Himself the Magi. The Son of the Virgin accepts their gifts. We worship Your birth, O Christ. Show us also Your divine Theophany! (Eve of Nativity: *Glory . . . Now and ever . . . Sticheron at the Ninth Royal Hour*)

The cosmic drama is actualized liturgically in a mystical "today": "*Today* the Creator of heaven and earth said to His disciples: "The hour is at hand, and Judas who betrays Me has drawn near'" (Good Friday: Antiphon 5); "*Today* the Master of creation stands before Pilate; *today* the Maker of all things is given up to the Cross!" (Good Friday Vespers: Sticheron at *Lord I Have Cried*). Yet, we should not overlook the Christological core of such statements: *the Creator of heaven and earth* speaks to the disciples, *the Master of creation* stands before Pilate, *the Maker of all things* is given up to the Cross! More than anything else, explaining who the Crucified One is precisely the liturgical program of Holy Week.

Christ, the Lord on the Divine Throne

The hymns often depict Christ as occupying—or sharing—the throne of God. "Throne" functions in the hymns as a code for bearer of divinity: the Virgin, the manger of Bethlehem, the elder Simeon, the foal on which Christ enters Jerusalem, are all described as "thrones" inasmuch as they are bearing Christ:

The captain of heaven was sent to the living Pavilion of the Glory, to make ready an everlasting Dwelling for the Maker. And coming before her he cried: "Hail, fiery throne, more glorious by far than the living creatures with four faces! [Ezek 1:5–6] Hail, seat of the King of heaven!" (Great Vespers of the Annunciation: Sticheron at Litya)

A strange and most wonderful mystery do I see: the cave is heaven; the Virgin—the throne of the cherubim; the manger—a room in which is laid Christ, the God whom nothing can contain. Him do we praise and magnify! (Canon of the Nativity: Ode 9, Irmos)

Simeon was amazed when he beheld incarnate the Word that is without beginning, carried by the Virgin as on the throne of the cherubim, the Cause of all being Himself become a Babe. (Canon of the Meeting of the Lord: Ode 4, Sticheron 4)

O happy manger! Receiving the Creator as the babe, it is made the throne of cherubim, for our salvation who sing O God our Deliverer, blessed are You! (Compline Canon of the Forefeast of the Nativity: Ode 7, Sticheron 3)

He who is borne on high by the cherubim and praised in hymns by the seraphim, is brought today according to the Law into the holy temple and rests in the arms of the Elder as on a throne. . . . He is the originator of the two covenants, both old and new. (Great Vespers of Meeting of the Lord: *Glory* Apostichon)

With Your disciples You have entered the Holy City, seated upon the foal of an ass, as though upon the cherubim. (Palm Sunday Canon: Sticheron at Praises)

When You were about to enter the Holy City, O Lord, the multitude . . . saw You riding on a foal, as though upon the cherubim. (Palm Sunday Canon: Sticheron at Praises)

[L]ook today upon the King of heaven, who enters Jerusalem, seated upon a humble colt as though upon a lofty throne. (Palm Sunday Canon: Sticheron at Praises)

Throne imagery is ancient. Following a general Near-Eastern pattern, the Bible depicts the God of Israel as the ruler of a heavenly world: seated on a fiery throne of cherubim, in the innermost sanctum of a heavenly temple attended by thousands upon thousands of angels, who perform their celestial liturgies according to precisely appointed times and rules.³ The same throne imagery is operative in the theophanies of Exod 33:18–20, Ezek 1:26, and Isa 6:1–5, which offered the basis for rich developments in the apocalyptic literature of Second Temple Judaism (see de Jonge 1999). The latter was part of the common matrix of both Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. As expected, throne imagery looms large in both Jewish Merkabah mysticism (“mysticism of the chariot-throne”)⁴ and in its Christian counterpart: the New Testament and patristic literature.⁵ The same applies to hymns such as the following:

O You who ride on the cherubim and are praised by the seraphim. You have sat, O gracious Lord, like David on a foal, and the children honored You with praise fitting for God. (Palm Sunday Vespers: Apostichon)

Be glad, O Bethlehem, . . . for from You comes forth, before the sight of all, the Shepherd who tends Israel, He that is seated upon the cherubim, even Christ. (Canon of the Nativity: Ode 3, Sticheron 4)

The Theotokos Mary carried in her arms Him who is borne aloft upon the chariot of the cherubim . . . the Giver of the Law who fulfills the commandment of the Law. (Great Vespers of Meeting of the Lord: Apostichon)

[H]ow, tell me, shall I become the spacious habitation and the holy place of Him who rides upon the cherubim? (Great Vespers of the Annunciation: Sticheron at *Lord I have cried*)

[H]ow shall He whose throne is heaven and whose footstool is the earth, be held in the womb of a woman? He upon whom the six-winged seraphim and the many-eyed cherubim cannot gaze has been pleased at a single word to be made flesh of this His creature! (Great Vespers of the Annunciation: *Glory* Sticheron at *Lord I have cried*)

The point of these hymns is, first and foremost, Christological. They proclaim Jesus Christ as the very rider of the *merkabab*:

He who in glory makes the clouds His chariot, comes borne upon a cloud that is the Virgin. (Matins Canon of the Forefeast of the Nativity: Ode 7, Sticheron 2)

You who have heaven as Your throne are laid in a manger. You whom the host of angels attend on every side have come down among shepherds. (Vespers of the Synaxis of the Theotokos (26 December): Apostichon)

[A]ll have taken palms into their hands and spread their garments before Him, knowing that He is our God to whom the cherubim sing without ceasing: Hosanna in the highest! (Palm Sunday Vespers: Apostichon)

But the link between this high and asymmetric Christology, on the one hand, and the Byzantine “high anthropology” of deification

should also be noted. If Christ is the Lord of hosts, enthroned upon the cherubim, the elder Simeon is by implication likened to the cherubim; if Jesus is the Lord of glory, it is natural for the disciples on Tabor to be overwhelmed and tremble before him together with all the angels.⁶ Such “angelomorphism”—because, quite clearly, Simeon is not *identified* with a cherub—is simply the imagistic expression of the doctrine of deification.⁷

Moreover, the hymns provide the context for a correct understanding of “deification.” Reading the hymns, it becomes clear that the content of *theosis* is not doctrine, but worship: those who “recognize” in Jesus the God of Israel become co-worshippers with the angels.

Seated in heaven upon Your throne and on earth upon a foal, O Christ our God, You have accepted the praise of angels and the songs of children who sing: Blessed are You who come to call back Adam! (Palm Sunday Kontakion)

They even enjoy a certain preeminence over the angels, since by his Incarnation, “God who is on high upon the cherubim and yet cares for the lowly, is Himself come in power and glory” (Palm Sunday Canon: Canticle 5, Sticheron 2), unveiling the innermost mystery formerly inaccessible to angels.

From fear the cherubim dare not gaze upon Him; yet the children honor Him with palms and branches. (Palm Sunday Vespers: Sticheron at Litya)

Before Your birth, O Lord, the angelic hosts looked with trembling on this mystery and were struck with wonder: for You who have adorned the vault of heaven with stars have been well-pleased to be born as a babe; and You who hold all the ends of the earth in the hollow of Your hand are laid in a manger of dumb beasts. (Eve of Nativity: Sticheron at the Third Hour)

The seraphim, O Savior, beheld You on high, united inseparably with the Father, yet they saw You below lying dead in the tomb; and they trembled with fear. (Holy Saturday Matins: Second Stasis of the Lamentations)

All things above and all beneath the earth quaked with fear at Your death, as they beheld You, O Savior, upon Your throne on high, and in the tomb below. For beyond our understanding You lie before our

eyes, a corpse yet the very Source of Life. (Holy Saturday Canon: Canticle 1, Sticheron 3)

These and similar hymns can be read both as a Christological “definition” of the Biblical deity, and as an interpretation of the Cross and the Crucified One in light of the Old Testament theophanies. The hymns ask, for instance, whom Joseph and Nicodemus wrapped in linen cloths; their answer points to “Him who wraps himself in light as in a garment” (Ps 103/104:3). Similarly, whom does Judas deliver to death? Him who delivered Israel out of bondage. Who is given gall and vinegar? He who sent manna to his people in the wilderness. Who is judged? The Judge of Israel. Who is it that has his arms stretched out and is hanging on the Cross? He who stretched out the heavens, he who hung the earth upon the waters (Ps 136:6; Isa 42:5, 44:24; Job 26:7). In other words, we are reading the Scriptures in light of Christ just as much as we are reading Christ in light of the Scriptures.

*“Exalt Christ, the God Most Good,
and Venerate His Divine Footstool!”⁸*

The reference to the footstool of the divine throne is oft-recurring in Byzantine hymnography of the Cross.

With the psalmist, O Master, do we now behold the footstool on which Your undefiled feet rested, Your precious Cross, exalted this day with love. (Great Vespers of the Exaltation of the Cross [14 September]: Sticheron at *Lord I have cried*)

Today, the holy words of David have truly received their fulfillment: for lo! in the sight of all the world, we venerate the footstool of Your undefiled feet! (Great Vespers of the Exaltation of the Cross [14 September]: Sticheron at the Litya)

Today, O Christ our God, we sinners venerate with unworthy lips Your precious Cross, . . . which David the psalmist commanded to be venerated as Your footstool. (Great Vespers of the Exaltation of the Cross [14 September]: *Glory . . . Now and ever* Apostichon)

Today, the words of the Prophet are fulfilled: for see, we worship at the place on which Your feet have stood [Ps 98/99:5], O Lord. (Third Sunday of Lent: Canon, Sessional Hymn of the Cross)

Today the words of the Psalmist are fulfilled: for see, we worship at the footstool of Your most pure feet . . . at Your precious Cross, the thrice-blessed Wood. (Third Sunday of Lent: Canon, Canticle 6, Sticheron 4)

The biblical reference of the hymns just quoted is Ps 98/99:5 (*Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at His footstool, for He is holy!*), and Ps 131/132:7 (*Let us worship at His footstool*). But how and why could the Cross be understood as the footstool of God's throne? The key lies in the archaic origin of the hymns. In early Christianity, following a conception that was current in Second Temple Judaism, and ultimately rooted in ancient Mesopotamia, the exalted status of heavenly entities was often expressed by descriptions of physical greatness. The greatness of the God of Israel finds expression in the depictions of an enormous body filling the heavens, whose feet rested on the earth as on a footstool. Early Christians described the *kenosis* in terms of a "shrinking" of this enormous body to human dimensions.⁹

The ark in the holy of holies was understood precisely as the footstool of God's throne (Haran 1985, 254–5). There is some debate over the cherubim throne. The traditional view is that "the official cult was early aniconic: over the cherubim throne and ark, the god of Israel was enthroned in unseen majesty. The place usually occupied by the deity is empty" (Mettinger 1979, 22, 27; see also Mettinger 1995; Mettinger 1997). However, other scholars argue the existence of a cultic statue of the YHWH seated on the throne (Niehr 1997; McCormick 2002, 171; 184 n. 74).¹⁰ In the words of one such scholar, "whether the enthronement was invisible or in the form of a statue is at this point impossible to say" (McCormick 2002, 188).

In this light, identifying the Cross with the footstool is an affirmation of Christ's divine identity and kingly majesty, in line with the Johannine understanding of the Cross as glorification: In the words of a Latin hymn, *Regnavit a ligno Dominus*, the God of Israel rules from the Cross.¹¹ This understanding of the Cross seems to be rooted in the New Testament, since Rom 3:25 and the Gospel of Mark, for instance, seem to interpret the Cross as the mercy seat, the locus of sacrifice and supreme theophany (Fryer 1987; Bailey 1999; Chronis 1982, esp. 110–1). For the hymns, in any case, the Cross is, like the ark, the place where God's presence and voice are made manifest. This

can be understood, as I suggested before, as a “definition” of Jesus Christ in light of Old Testament imagery (“*It is the God of Israel* who rules from the Cross”), as well as a specifically Christian qualification of the traditional faith in YHWH (“the true face of the God of Israel can only be grasped in his Cross”).

It is in this light, I think, that the heavy anti-Jewish polemic the Byzantine and Roman *Improperia* must be considered.¹²

My people, what have I done to you, and how have you repaid Me?
Instead of manna, you have given me gall, instead of water, vinegar.
(Good Friday: Antiphon 12)¹³

Today the Jews nailed to the Cross the Lord who divided the sea
with a rod and led them through the wilderness. Today they pierced
with a lance the side of Him who for their sake smote Egypt with
plagues. They gave Him gall to drink, who rained down manna on
them for food. (Good Friday: Antiphon 6)

Be not be deceived, O Jews: for this is He who saved you in the sea
and fed you in the wilderness. (Good Friday: Antiphon 12)

Read in isolation this type of material is deeply disturbing. It seems more than legitimate to eliminate or rewrite such hymns, as has been done in all Western Christian denominations where the *Reproaches* are part of Holy Week services. In fact, Serghei Hackel (1998) has called for similar reforms in the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, such an approach, although well-intentioned and serving a worthy cause, is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the hymns. These are, first and foremost, Christological affirmations, not polemical injunctions. Their point is that it is Christ who rained manna in the desert, it is Christ who divided the Red Sea—in short, Christ is the “Lord” of the Exodus account. This observation can be verified by recourse to other festal hymns, where the anti-Jewish polemic is absent, yet one encounters the very same reading of biblical theophanies, and, by way of consequence, the same type of “YHWH Christology.” It must be noted, however, that the Christian *Improperia* tradition continues and reinterprets a venerable Jewish tradition, with roots in the prophetic literature (see Murray 1977, 129; Harvey 1962; Harvey 1967; Brocke 1977). From a pastoral point of view, therefore, rather than “adjusting” the hymnological tradition on an ideological bed of

Procust, it would be more necessary to educate Christians about the fact that the hymns do not warrant any sort of anti-Semitism, since their intention is primarily Christological.

2. The Hymns and Orthodox Theology

“Alternative Christology”

The most ancient hymns appear to develop a sort of “alternative” Christology: instead of “defining” Christ in terms of *hypostasis*, *prosopon*, *ousia*, *thelema*, *energeia*, and so forth—“that extraordinary panoply of polysyllabic Greek abstractions which we meet in the Greek Fathers, and which modern Orthodox theologians—God bless them!—are so anxious to invoke” (Golitzin 2003, 360)—the hymns offer a Christological exegesis of theophanies. The ensuing “YHWH” Christology is coupled with a clear affirmation of His humanity: the glorious Old Testament “Lord” is wrapped in swaddling cloths, suckled like a babe, humiliated, slandered, sentenced unjustly, scourged, and beaten bloody; and he learns to die the death of fallen Adam.

This Christology is just as ancient, universal, and well “received” in the Church as the “technical” Christology of the councils. In fact, some of the hymns *precede* such towering theological authorities as Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, or Gregory Palamas. Moreover, it is quite certain that none of the Fathers has been read so extensively and with such unconditional acceptance throughout the ages, as these hymns, which have been and continue to be chanted, listened to, and called to mind by believers from almost all times and places. The classic criterion of Orthodoxy, articulated by St. Vincent of Lerini (“*that* is to be regarded as true, which has been believed by all, in all places and at all times”) is more than satisfied. So much for the “reception” and, implicitly, for the authority that these hymns should command.

As for the “technicality” of their theological language, it must be noted that the distinction between hymnographic and conciliar Christology corresponds to a distinction of their *Sitz im Leben*. The Councils articulated the faith of the Church in the face of heretical distortion. The formulae of faith are meant as *horoi* (“definitions”), precisely because they *delimitate* what, with a formula repeated by all councils, “seemed to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28) as

authentic belief in (and experience of) God, from false experience and belief. In doing so, the language of the Councils (and, similarly, Christian apologetic literature in general) seeks for the most apt instruments to formulate the definitions, borrowing from disciplines such as Philosophy, Logic, Medicine, etc. With the hymns, however, the situation is quite different. Unlike the “dogmatic hymns,” the hymns discussed in this essay are not engaged in demonstration, clarification, or polemics, but in worship. They do not address the adversaries of faith, but give expression the spiritual intimacy between the Bride and the Bridegroom, constantly recalling their covenant recorded in the Scriptures. To use Berger’s term, this is “doxological language.”¹⁴ In the absence of heresies, it may very well have been the only Christology.

The difference between hymnological and conciliar Christology may perhaps be understood by analogy with today’s concerns about Christian use of the language. According to Geoffrey Wainwright, “it would be too simplistic to say that we must choose between ‘the language of Canaan’ and ‘the language of CNN.’ Christians may rightly use one ‘language’ for their internal discourse within the Church, and another for their external work in apologetics, evangelism, or dialogue” (Wainwright 1992, 161). In early Christianity, the philosophical jargon of the councils—the era’s “language of CNN”—was adopted precisely for the purpose of apologetics, evangelism, or dialogue; at the same time, “the language of Canaan” continued to be used *ad intra*. These two types of language have always coexisted. One finds a perfect illustration of this state of affairs in the persons of Sophronius—patriarch of Jerusalem (560–638), deeply involved in the monothelite controversy, but also responsible for part of the Good Friday hymnography—or John of Damascus, who was hailed both as the author of the *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* and as an inspired hymnographer.

Speaking about the “alternative” Christology of the hymns, I do not mean, of course, that it should or could replace the technical glossary of theology. The issue becomes clearer when one considers its practical application. How to “teach” Christ in catechesis? One way is to introduce and define the consecrated theological terms to which I just referred, and to offer the essentials about the dogmatic controversies that made it necessary for the Church to respond as

she did. One can then only be on guard for people not to reinvent the heresies that have plagued the church in the past (e.g., “If Christ has two wills, why is he not ‘two persons’? Is not ‘will’ the mark of personhood?”).

A different way of speaking about Christ is to read the New Testament, together with the hymns, and discern in the icon of Christ painted in the Gospels and the Apostle readings the traits of YHWH, the “God of our Fathers,” the Creator of Adam, the “King of Israel.” Catechumens are, thus, learning the Christian faith from becoming familiar with their concrete worship of their God. This is essential and spiritually formative, and the only sound basis for the optional engagement with the fine distinctions between *homo-ousios* and *homoio-ousios*, *an-hypostatic* and *en-hypostatic*, *natural* will and *gnomic* will.

Hymnography exemplifies the proper orientation of the theological enterprise, inasmuch as it helps to anchor Christian Dogmatics in the living experience of Israel’s walk with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Lawgiver and “God of our fathers.” The recognition and proclamation of Jesus Christ as “Lord” is, according to the earliest Christian tradition (1 Cor 12:3; Luke 24:30–31; John 14:26), a matter of inspired exegesis, prompted by the prophetic-charismatic community’s self-actualization in the course of liturgy. In “performing” the hymns, theology comes alive. Its vantage point is no longer outside the event to which it refers, but rather the event itself, made present liturgically and encompassing worshippers past, present, and future: “Today, He who holds the whole creation in the hollow of His hand is born of the Virgin”; “Today a tomb holds Him who holds the creation in the hollow of His hand”; “Today the Master of creation stands before Pilate; today the Maker of all things is given up to the Cross”; “This is the Day of Resurrection . . . Pascha, the Lord’s Pascha!”

Since the *Sitz im Leben* of hymnography is the liturgical recognition of Christ “in the Spirit,” it follows that learning about Christ from the hymns also shapes one’s understanding of individual and communal identity. If Christ is the Lord, it becomes easier to understand in what sense the Church is “the Jerusalem above” (Gal 4:25) and “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16). If the Christian is called to become the cherubic throne of God, holiness is not optional, but mandated as the standard Christian existence.

Finally, learning from the hymns may reeducate Christian sensitivity. No “doloristic” piety, no exaltation of one’s pious emotions before the tortured body of an innocent; the hymns rather invite one to approach the Cross with the awe that the people of Israel approached Mount Zion when Christ spoke to them in flashing light and rolling thunder. *This* is the “fear of God, faith and love” with which the Byzantine Eucharistic liturgies bid us approach the risen Christ in the Eucharist.

Can the Hymns Serve as Source for Christology?

The idea that the hymns of the Orthodox Church are loaded with dogmatic content has become a cliché. However, the reversal is problematic: in looking to expound Orthodox theology, one rarely thinks of the hymns. Berger’s conclusion, that “the Orthodox tradition accepts as a foregone conclusion the theological character of liturgical language and the doxological roots and orientation of theology” (Berger 1995, 57), is correct only inasmuch as it mirrors the statements of several Orthodox theologians about the relationship between *theologia* and *leitourgia*. With notable exceptions (such as that of the late Fr. Schmemmann), Orthodox theologians continue to use liturgical materials not as a source of theology, but only as means of illustrating and confirming dogmatic views articulated on the basis of non-liturgical sources. While Orthodox Systematics often consists of a more or less creative exegesis of patristic writers—e.g., the Cappadocians are foundational for Zizioulas, Ps.-Dionysius for Lossky and Yannaras, Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas for Staniloae—hardly anyone uses hymnography in the same way.¹⁵

Can hymnography be treated as a source for theology, to the same extent that patristic writings are? On this point, I am parting ways with Berger. On the basis of a very narrow definition of “doxology”—“My definition is not so broadly drawn as it sometimes is in Systematic Theology . . . doxology is neither from nor about God; rather it is directed to God . . . an event, an encounter between the adored One and the one who adores” (Berger 1995, 17, 158, 164)—Berger arrives at the conclusion that “doxology cannot become a source for theology by being stripped of its essential and defining characteristics and operative principles” (Berger 1995, 174). The latter happens “when the encounter of praise with God is transformed into a theological

question-and-answer session” (Berger 1995, 173). At most, there can be talk of an “implicit theology,” as long as this does not mean that doxological material is turned into theology, or theological study into doxology (Berger 1995, 173). Since, however, the Byzantine hymns *do* make explicit theological statements—a “prayed dogma,” perhaps, but couched in a language different from that of dogmatic definitions—and if, on the other hand, doxology is “the ontological condition of theology” (Schmemmann 1990, 18; cf. Kalis 1986), it seems that Berger’s “genus doxology” and “genus theology” are not essentially distinct, but rather two different modalities of giving an account of the Church’s experience of God. In short, Berger’s too narrow definition of “doxology,” and her understanding of doxology as a completely separate “genus” from theology, are not helpful for a discussion of the possible theological value of Orthodox hymnography.

I find it preferable to consider the idea, on which there seems to be a large consensus, of liturgy as a legitimate “locus theologicus” (Stenzel 1965; Vorgrimmler 1986),¹⁶ and apply it to the hymns discussed above. It can be said, then, that returning to the hymns as sources for theology is a legitimate and desirable project, both for the Orthodox Church, who has preserved the material, but also for Christianity in general.

Ecumenical Horizon

Christian hymnography traveled from Jerusalem to Constantinople and was disseminated throughout the Christian East; but it also traveled West. The Byzantine Antiphons of Good Friday find their counterpart in the Roman *Improperia*, and they have survived in Lutheran, Anglican, and Methodist hymnals.

It is therefore obvious that the hymns presented in this paper also provide a wide horizon for ecumenism—namely the horizon of a theological ecumenicity *already* given in the hymns. As Berger notes, “while churches of diverse confessions have waged the grimmest of battles with one another, the hymns of the churches have always transcended confessional lines, and thus accomplished a ‘concealed ecumenism’” (Berger 1995, 25, 175; see also Berger 1986; Rose 2000, 256). Aside from the common Scriptures and the confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the common hymnographic tradition provides a specific theological method (doxological theology), a specific Scripture exegesis (Christological exegesis of theophanies), and a specific Christology

(YWHW Christology). As long as these hymns are still accepted as Christian tradition (albeit a sterile element of tradition, because it no longer informs Christological doctrine), and as long as they do not fall victim to some inept liturgical or ideological “correction,” the main Christian bodies still have the possibility to overcome their mutual estrangement by theological rapprochement with their own tradition.

Conclusions

I started this essay by referencing an article entitled “Hymns are Theology.” The pages above have undertaken to prove this insight in the case of the Byzantine hymnography. These hymns provide a wealth of Christological material, and they have much to teach us in terms of both theological method and substance. It is often the case, unfortunately, that Christian hymnography is considered in isolation from reflection on doctrinal issues and largely perceived as belonging to a different type of concern in the Church. I have not argued for the importance of the hymns in Christian devotion—not only because this matter is self-evident, but also because such an approach would have only confirmed the common assumption that hymns offer something else than doctrinal inquiry. I have argued instead that the Byzantine festal hymns are bearers of an elaborate Christology, which essentially proclaims the same theandric mystery in Jesus Christ that is defended by the Councils, yet in a language very different from that of conciliar definitions; that the hymns constitute the historical companion of dogmatic writings in the patristic era and should be considered as their interpretative framework; that the hymns meet the criteria for being considered authoritative sources for theological reflection, and that they would prove crucial in retrieving the lost hymnic dimension of theology; that a Christology rooted in the hymns opens up precious avenues for ecumenical dialogue among the Christian bodies that preserve hymnographic elements derived from the same sources as the Byzantine festal hymns; finally, that the hymns are an invaluable resource for catechesis.

Retrieving the properly doctrinal elements present in hymnography remains, I think, a project worthy of serious consideration. If this essay has provided the slightest stimulus in this direction, it has fulfilled its purpose.

Notes

1. “Theophany” is the common Eastern designation of Epiphany. A thorough clarification of the liturgical terms that will be used in this article would be impractical for reasons of space. Suffice it to say that *sticheron*, *kontakion* (as found in today’s liturgical books), and *troparion* simply designate various hymns consisting of one stanza, differentiated by their position and function in various services. By contrast, the *canon* is a lengthy composition, comprising nine odes or canticles, each of which is in turn made up of several stanzas. The theme song and first hymn of each canticle of a canon is called *heirmos* (transcribed *irmos*, in accordance with the Byzantine Greek pronunciation common in the Orthodox Church).
2. All biblical references in Byzantine hymnography are to the LXX. Throughout this paper, in cases of divergence between the numbering of chapters or verses in the LXX and the MT, the first number refers to the LXX, the second to the MT.
3. For the Old Testament background, see Weinfeld 1972, 191–209; and Mettinger 1982.
4. For the texts, see Schäfer 1981 and 1987. Among the studies dedicated to these texts, are Scholem 1967, Schäfer 1991, and Elior 2004.
5. For the abundance and theological relevance of throne imagery in the NT, see Bauckham 1999. Throne imagery will remain crucially important for Christology (cf. *synthronos* as a description of Christ in relation to the Father), and by extension, for Mariology and ascetic theory (Mary and the saints as living thrones). It shows up repeatedly in visionary literature, in iconography, in liturgical hymns. It is even used in polemics against Rabbinic throne speculation (see Golitzin 2003).
6. “The angels ministered in fear and trembling, the heavens shook and the earth quaked, as they beheld upon earth the Lord of glory” (Vespers of Transfiguration: *Glory Sticheron*).
7. I am using “angelomorphism” in the sense defined by Fletcher-Louis (1997, 14–5): “we propose its use wherever there are signs that an individual or community possesses specifically angelic characteristics or status, though for whom identity cannot be reduced to that of an angel.”
8. Great Vespers of the Exaltation of the Cross (14 September): *Sticheron at Lord I have cried*.
9. Golitzin (2003, 350) notes that the representation of the Incarnation as “downsizing” of sorts “is both ancient and frequent, particularly among Syriac-speaking Christians” and “might well comprise the original force of the *kenosis* passage of Phil 2:6–7 itself.”
10. For a survey of the successive descriptions of the ark and the cherubim in Biblical texts, see McCormick 2002, 168–90.
11. Cf. the following stanza from the Latin hymn “*Vexilla Regis*,” written by Venantius Fortunatus (530–609): “The things are fulfilled which David foretold in faithful song, saying to the nations, “God ruled from the Tree!” “*Vexilla Regis*” and two other hymns were composed for the festive reception of fragments from the Holy Cross, sent from Constantinople to the Frankish ruler Clothaire. See Szövérfy 1966 and 1976.

12. For a study of the *Improperia* tradition, see Schütz 1968 and Auf der Maur 1967.
13. The similarity with the Roman *Reproaches* is evident. See Baumstark 1922.
14. Berger defines it as follows: “the explicit and implicit speech of praise, confession of faith, prayer, and thanksgiving, as directed to God for God’s glorification. Such doxological speech is found most often in prayers, hymnic confessions, and songs” (Berger 1995, 17).
15. Among the very few exceptions are two beautiful pages in Lossky’s *Mystical Theology* (150–1), where reflection on the Passion is explicitly based on the hymns of Great and Good Friday. I do not count here works of popularization (e.g., Tyciak 1976, 1979), which do not supply a serious theological analysis of the hymns.
16. As an example of how this insight may influence the concrete practice of theology, see Wainwright 1980, 15–146.

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