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**Review article**

**Matthew J. Milliner**, *Mother of the Lamb: The Story of a Global Icon*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2022. ISBN: 9781506478753 (pkb); 9781506478760 (e-bk). Pp 1- 298.

Theology and history, including art history, are natural academic bedfellows, but it is rare to find a scholar who does justice to both. Historians often neglect the extent to which theological ideas and devotional practices have shaped western history and culture, and theologians can be cavalier in their disregard for the influence of history and politics on doctrinal developments and debates. Matthew J. Milliner's book, *Mother of the Lamb: The Story of a Global Icon*, is a rare exception, in its scholarly exploration of how the icon of the Virgin of the Passion (also known as Our Lady of Perpetual Help) provides a lens through which to read the vagaries of Christian history, with its militaristic triumphs but also, and more importantly, its defeats, struggles and failures.

The main focus of the book is the earliest known image of the Virgin of the Passion in the Virgin of the Vetches church in the mountains of Cyprus, as part of a series painted by an artist believed to be Theodore Apevdis. It dates from the late twelfth century, soon after the defeat of the island by Richard the Lionheart in 1192, at a time of political and ecclesial turmoil during the Crusader conquests and theological controversies of late Byzantium. Spanning the history of the icon from this early image, Milliner offers a persuasive account of its centrality and universality as a bearer of Christian hopes and fears, sorrows and struggles. Often used as a mascot of military power and triumph, Mary's maternal association with the suffering of the cross invites a different interpretation: 'She is the mother ... not just of the lion but of the lamb' (p. 7).

Milliner writes from a background that includes Anglican, Catholic and evangelical influences, with a tendency towards Catholic interpretations. He is a fluent and sometimes eloquent communicator, which makes this book readable and engaging for those with a general interest in the subject, as well as being an excellent resource for academic studies. Having said that, there are nearly a hundred pages of footnotes with additional material which sometimes would have been better incorporated into the main text. The interdisciplinary nature of the study with its interweaving of different times, places and historical events also means some rereading and cross-checking to follow the various threads, so I was thankful for a comprehensive index.

The book is divided into three parts: The Artist, the Fresco, and the Icon. In Part I, Milliner situates Theodore in the historical context of the Byzantine Empire and the crusades. Part II offers a richly detailed and sometimes densely argued analysis of how Theodore's Virgin of the Passion embodies the mourning and sorrow of the post-Byzantine Church, while incorporating subtle symbolic allusions that refute heretical challenges to Trinitarian, Incarnational theology, and affirm Mary as priest and personification of Wisdom. Part III describes the emergence and development of the icon of the Virgin of the Passion as it moved 'like a deep ocean current beneath the surface disturbances of the Crusades' (p. 115), to become a ubiquitous representation of divine love and mercy mediated through the tender, sorrowful motherhood of Mary. To quote from the introduction: 'When the [Byzantine]

empire's winning streak was broken, the Virgin of the Passion often appeared, testifying not to mere power but to the suffering love that power's theatrics left in its wake' (p. 5).

Milliner's story begins with an exhibition titled *Faith and Power* at Manhattan's Metropolitan Museum of Art, in a city still reeling from the attacks of September 11, 2001. In this exhibition of Eastern Roman/Byzantine icons, 'veterans of [the] civilizational collapse' of Byzantium (p. 1), Milliner was drawn to reflect on how the defeat of imperial power was the stimulus for a form of prayer known as hesychasm (from the Greek *hesychia* meaning silence), rooted in silence and techniques of posture and breathing, which in turn shaped the development of icons. In the darkened galleries of the museum, he encountered 'bricks of golden light dense with the wisdom of another age, antidotes to American triumphalism, tutorials in grief' (p. 2). As a seminary student, he experienced the icons as the materialization of the theological ideas he was studying, and he decided to switch from studying theology to studying Byzantine art. Thus began a quest to follow one of the most ubiquitous images of Christian art, seeking to understand how the icon of the Virgin of the Passion became saturated with *hesychia* – a presence of silence and stillness as a response to suffering.

Milliner's polyphonic approach, informed by his studies of theology and art history, allows him to discern subtle doctrinal and scriptural themes encoded within Theodore's iconography, bringing nuanced meanings into play as responses to different debates and controversies. For example, he dedicates a chapter to a 'verbal theological skirmish' (p. 78) associated with a deacon named Pantevgenos, in which the doctrinal claim that Christ's sacrifice was offered to the whole Trinity was challenged by arguments that in the Eucharist, Christ offered and the Father received the sacrifice. The controversy appears to have been sparked by two deacons who challenged the Trinitarian orthodoxy of another deacon, Basil, in one of his sermons. This was, writes Milliner, rather like 'two Harvard professors making a trip to the Boston suburbs to shout down a pastor during a routine Sunday sermon' (p. 75). The book is enlivened by such asides, which lighten its tone and make its historical characters seem vividly real. He argues that the reassertion of Trinitarian doctrine at the synods of 1156/57 had a significant influence on art, including Theodore's Virgin of the Passion: 'Like a best-selling book in the present that soon becomes a film, the decision of the synods of 1156/57 would soon be reinforced in paint' (p. 79).

The Virgin of the Passion is, in Milliner's reading, 'a lamentation for an island' intended to 'grieve an unimaginable loss, one that the entire Byzantine world would eventually experience as well' (p. 46). By including the cross and the lance used to pierce Christ's side, Theodore incorporates symbols of suffering that Milliner argues are more true to the real meaning of the cross than the 'True Cross' sought by the Crusaders. Again, the text is spiced with anecdotal asides that add colour and life to the telling. Theodore's early years in the magnificence of Constantinople are likened to 'a young modernist architect in the freewheeling Weimar Republic enjoying the last days of the Bauhaus before the troubles of Germany forced it to close' (p. 14). Like an employee at the World Trade Centre in early

September of 2001, Theodore could have had no idea of the scale of the disasters about to engulf his world. This kind of colloquial aside would detract from a less scholarly and reflective work, but as it is it invites us into what feels like intimate conversation with a Christian believer's quest to understand sorrow as a source of wisdom.

The Virgin of the Passion is the culmination of a transformation that Milliner tracks back to the aftermath of the iconoclastic controversy when Mary emerged less as the Byzantine empress and more as the affectionate mother bearing the presence of the divine, a transition from 'residual warrior goddess to suffering mother' (p. 61). Part of this symbolic shift was a focus on Mary's suffering at the Crucifixion. If, as tradition teaches, Christ's birth was painless, the mother at the foot of the Cross experiences anguish analogous to childbirth. The most startling image in this book is a twelfth century painting at Nezeri in the Balkans, in which Mary straddles the body of the crucified Christ between her legs, in a pose suggestive of childbirth.



Church of Saint Panteleimon, 1164, Nerezi, North Macedonia (photo by [Byzantologist](#))

These intimations of the suffering mother reach their apotheosis in the Virgin of the Passion, which with its representation of maternal sorrow, infant vulnerability and symbols of torture and death, would become the prototype for a global icon that retains its affective power and theological integrity today. From Arius to Pantevgenos, Milliner argues that Theodore's Virgin of the Passion, not enthroned but standing in front of the throne of Wisdom

which evokes both the Trinity and Wisdom, responds to every heresy and affirms the ageless truth of divine wisdom personified in Mary and the Church, symbolizing ‘the salvific destiny of all humans, collectively understood as the church’ (p. 91).

Among the many intriguing insights offered by Milliner is his persuasive argument that images such as these associate Mary with the symbols of priesthood. As ‘mother of the eucharistic lamb’ she is also a priest – a role that was attributed to her before such devotional images were banned in the early twentieth century. Pope Pius IX reiterated a long tradition when he hailed Mary as a ‘Virgin Priest’ (p. 1). Milliner points out that, in a painting in the Virgin of the Vetches church that predates Theodore’s work, Mary holds a eucharistic cloth in the hand with which she cradles the infant Christ. Although he doesn’t mention it, I wonder if that image from the church in Nerezi shows Mary’s body as an altar, with Christ’s crucified body laid out on an altar cloth spread across her lap.

Milliner traces a narrative of Mary’s priesthood through Theodore’s organisation of the series of frescoes surrounding the Virgin of the Passion, including themes from the second century *Protevangelium*, which had a significant impact on the development of eastern art and devotion. There is the representation of the presentation of Mary in the temple; the inclusion of words from the Cherubic Hymn, ‘For you are the one who offers and is offered’ (p. 101); Simeon’s offering of Christ in the temple; and the Dormition or Falling Asleep of Mary. He sees in these connected images a visual communication of the idea that Christ’s offering of himself ‘operates through the Marian ecclesial matrix’ (p. 103).

In all this, Milliner deftly steers a path through opposing trajectories of modern Marian scholarship – those who would promote her as a ferocious warrior goddess, and those who would misrepresent her humility as obsequious docility. Instead, he offers an interpretation that draws widely on historical and contemporary sources, including feminism, to argue that the icon of the Virgin of the Passion is as relevant to our own troubled politics as it has been to the crises of the past, announcing as it does ‘a community of divine persons in unified resolve to rescue marooned humanity’ (p. 9). In her emergence from the ruins of Byzantium, ‘Mary did not save the empire from destruction; instead, she taught the empire how to be gracefully destroyed and how to transcend that destruction as well’ (p. 135). This is not, argues Milliner, a celebration or affirmation of the value of suffering for its own sake, but a source of consolation and endurance when, despite our efforts to avoid it for ourselves and others, ‘suffering finds us still’ (p. 135).

Milliner concludes with a Cook’s tour of the icon’s appearance in modern cultures and countries from North America to India, and even in cyberspace. He ends with an image of the Ethiopian athlete Meseret Defar, who held up an image of the icon and plastered it to the sweat on her face when she won a gold medal in the 2012 London Olympics, causing some consternation in the world’s media.

This book is an inspiring example of what theology becomes when it truly is faith seeking understanding. A trustworthy scholar and a faithful tour guide, Milliner invites his readers to join him on Mary's unfinished journey, as the wise and compassionate mother who accompanies suffering humanity along the path of redemption unfolding through history.