

Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium: Compunction and Hymnody by Andrew Mellas (review)

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Andrew Mellas

Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium: Compunction and Hymnody

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Pp. xii + 206. \$99.99.

This book investigates the liturgical experience of emotions in Byzantium through the hymns of Romanos the Melodist, Andrew of Crete, and Kassia performed during Great Lent and Holy Week and found in the *Triodion*, one of many liturgical books used in the admittedly lengthy Orthodox divine services. Mellas's book impresses the reader with a deep Christian understanding of the hymns. He studies the hymns as an essential part of the liturgy and understands them as manifestations of the incarnation in the same way that icons are seen in the Orthodox tradition.

Throughout the book, Mellas often uses the metaphor of a journey to refer to his own scholarship in hymnology, to the believers' journey through Lent to Easter, as well as to the reader's way through the book. The author begins with alluding to the Modern Greek poet Constantine Cavafy and writes about his project as his "Cavafian journey to Byzantium." One might add William Butler Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" to the metaphor.

Mellas's close reading of texts in the book presents hymns that often have interested earlier scholars only cursorily and discloses both a deep spiritual meaning and aesthetic qualities. His analysis of the theme of exile in Kassia's hymn "On the Sinful Woman," sung on Holy Wednesday, echoed in other texts from the *Triodion* is worthy of particular mention. Likewise, the reflections on the opposition between Judas and the harlot in the texts, the analysis of the use of refrain in Romanos's *kontakia*, and the discussion of the role of tears as a meeting place between body and soul in hymnody are also noteworthy. The examples of fantastic analytical work could be multiplied. It is both academically rewarding and enjoyable to read the book.

Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium might be read as a sermon on incarnation, and a good one. The quotations not only from hymns but from the Bible, the church fathers, and from the very prolific genre of liturgical commentaries in Byzantium are revealing for explaining the meaning and the function of hymnody.

In the book the hymnody seems, however, to be a part of a forever bygone Byzantium, but the fact is that most or perhaps almost all the hymns quoted are still in use in the various Orthodox traditions. Using the living tradition to further the understanding of the liturgical practices of early days would have enhanced the already high value of the book. For example, a discussion of the *Triodion* and the *Pentekostarion* (the book for the Easter cycle) drawing on contemporary liturgy would not link the first pericope of the Gospel according to John, read on Easter vespers, as a context for Kassia's hymn from Great Wednesday (154). The distance between them in liturgical practice is and certainly was too far for this connection; this distance is especially clear if we think in terms of the metaphor of the great liturgist Robert Taft, who called the divine services of Passion week a liturgical marathon. The formidable difficulties of understanding the actual

liturgical practices of the time as well as the development of the *Triodion* might have been alleviated in some cases by more attention to contemporary practice.

Being a Slavist, I notice the absence of the rich scholarly heritage of Russian liturgists (mostly written in Russian but also in English). The comprehensive study by Ivan Karabinov on the development of the *Triodion* (*Postnaia Triod': Istoricheskii obzor eia plana, sostava, redaktsii i slavianskikh perevodov* [St. Petersburg: Tip. V. D. Smirnova, 1910]), is only mentioned indirectly in a footnote and there are no references to studies of the *Typikon*, the Byzantine book containing the rubrics of liturgical services. The well-known book by Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (London: Faith Press, 1966), focusing specifically on the development of the Byzantine *Typikon* might have contributed to this study. Including the Russian scholars and contemporary Orthodox liturgical practice would have provided the reader with yet more perspectives on Byzantine hymnology.

A further observation regarding Mellas's book concerns the key concept of compunction, *katanyksis*, used in a very broad sense by the author, although given a more precise definition in the glossary attached to the study. In most cases here, it is synonymous with "feelings," sometimes with "contrition," "penitence," "being touched," or even "passion." This concept, which is found in many Byzantine theological and hymnographic texts, is difficult to grasp, especially when it is, as in this volume, mingled with many other terms used for emotions. Still, the importance of emotions in understanding Byzantine hymnody is proven without a doubt by Mellas.

The choice of Romanos, Andrew of Crete, and Kassia is well justified; they represent three genres—*kontakion*, *kanon*, and *sticheron*—and three different stages of Orthodox hymnography (from the sixth to the ninth centuries). Surprisingly, the most well-known Byzantine hymn of all, the "Akathistos," is not mentioned in Mellas's book. Perhaps this highly theologized hymn, sometimes ascribed to Romanos, does not fit in, but it could have been interesting to see it used in comparison to all other hymns and texts mentioned.

In conclusion, the book makes a firm statement of the importance of Byzantine hymnody and it is an excellent example of such a study. Furthermore, it convinces the reader of the beauty and spirituality of the ocean of Byzantine texts contained in the *Triodion*.

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