

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

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These two parts do leave the reader wondering if other figures could have made an appearance. Berdiaev, Bulgakov, Frank, and Florensky are treated in numerous chapters. One wishes to have seen at least some space afforded to female figures from this period, such as Maria Iudina, Maria Skobstova, or Zinaida Gippius. It is also these two parts that reveal the limits of the volume. Whereas the parts on the nineteenth century explore the connections between official Orthodox thought and what we have traditionally called Russian religious thought, many of the authors in these two parts maintain the traditional assumption that the worlds of “official Orthodox thought” and “Russian religious thought” rarely, if ever, overlapped.

Part 4, “Art in Russian Religious Thought,” is a delight to encounter, with four chapters that present exciting and thoughtful reflections on the relationship among religion, poetry, music, and art in the early twentieth century. One is intrigued by how much Russian religious thought was dedicated to a reflection upon aesthetics, and how these reflections, in turn, shaped the culture of modern Russia, including the work of composers, authors, and painters who were determinedly anti-religious.

Finally, part 6, “Religious Thought in Soviet Russia,” serves as an important reminder that not only did religious thought not die out under the Bolsheviks, but that the experience of oppression sometimes gave birth to profound religious creativity. Caryl Emerson’s wonderful chapter on Mikhail Bakhtin challenges the notion that the famed critic can be easily claimed by either Orthodox or Marxists.

The final assessments by Rowan Williams, Paul Valliere, and Igor I. Evlampiev provide a satisfying conclusion to the volume. Valliere’s discussion of the influence of Orthodox thought on Western theology in the twentieth century makes for a nice book-end to a volume that began with a reflection on the fraught relationship between “Russia” and “the West.” As the most up-to-date

treatment of the subject that made its debut in the West in Madison in 1993, this handbook is essential reading for graduate students of Russian literature, philosophy, history, and linguistics. The chapters on historical contexts will no doubt prove to be very helpful for teaching undergraduate students about the role of Orthodoxy specifically, and religion more broadly, in Russian history. The editors and authors have made an enormous contribution to the field, for which all scholars of Russia ought to be grateful.

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Andrew Mellas. *Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium: Compunction and Hymnody.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 206 pp.

In recent years, scholarship on Byzantine liturgy has seen the rise of various performative and sensory approaches that consider how liturgy in its many expressions was experienced in Byzantium. In *Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium: Compunction and Hymnody*, Andrew Mellas makes a valuable contribution to the field by focusing on liturgical emotions, particularly compunction, as embodied by liturgical hymns in their heyday, between the sixth and ninth centuries in Constantinople.

Through textual analysis, Mellas examines compunctious themes and personae in a selection of *kontakia* (namely, “On Repentance,” “A Prayer,” “On the Prodigal,” “On the Harlot,” and “On the Second Coming,” as well as “On the Victory of the Cross” and “On the Man Possessed with Devils”) by Romanos the Melodist, the Great Kanon by Andrew of Crete, and the *sticheron idiomelon* “On the Sinful Woman” by Kassia, which were performed during the time of repentance: Great Lent and Holy Week. To delve into the emotional meaning of the hymns for their contemporaries, Mellas

reconstructs, or reimagines, their liturgical performance as they would have been experienced at the time.

For context, Mellas explores the multi-sensory environment in which the hymnody was performed, focusing on Hagia Sophia as the sacred space of cosmic beauty that became a “mediator between materiality and divine reality” (43). He draws on the liturgical commentaries by Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, and Germanos of Constantinople to explore the iconic, affective, and essentially participatory dimensions of liturgical singing, and he evaluates the compunctious character of the Byzantine Eucharist as reflected in Emperor Justinian’s Novella 137.

In the three main chapters dedicated to Romanos, Andrew, and Kassia, respectively, Mellas presents a thorough investigation of each hymn genre, the manuscript sources, the liturgical context, and the musical tradition of the hymn. Additionally, he reflects on the liturgical performance as reimagined and presents his analysis on the compunctious contents in the hymns. In these chapters he provides fascinating insight into Byzantine hymnody and the scholarly state of the art, pointing out that much is still to be done: for example, an English translation of all *kontakia* attributed to Romanos is yet to be released, as is a critical edition of the Great Kanon of Andrew of Crete.

The overarching idea in the analysis is the recognition of the mystical and performative significance of hymnody (170). It was through hymnody that the faithful could “experience the mystery of salvation and transform their passions” (62). Mellas thus focuses on the transformative quality of the hymns, looking beyond the literary text to see how they “served as performative scripts for the making of emotion in liturgy” (21). Hymnographers evoked compunction by presenting the faithful with biblical figures as exemplars, “as paradigms of repentance” (98). As “masters of pathopoeia,” the hymnographers were skilled in dramatizing and

enriching the scriptural narratives to accentuate their emotive dimension (76), combining different topical and temporal levels into images that the faithful would recognize and relate to, based on their (liturgical) acquaintance with the scriptures and their own spiritual experience. Thus, the hymns invited the congregation to internalize the emotion they witnessed in the chanted text.

For example, Mellas observes how Romanos depicts the prodigal son as befouling “the first robe of grace” with “stains of passion,” likening him with the fallen Adam, yet at the same time with all Christians, whose “first robe, which the baptismal font weaves for all” can only be cleansed by repentance (95–97). Transcending time, the hymn binds together Adam’s compunction and nostalgia for paradise with the prodigal son’s journey back to his father’s house and with the Lenten journey of the congregation.

In the Great Kanon by Andrew of Crete, Mellas notes how the hymnographer “immerses the faithful in biblical narratives” by presenting numerous exemplars of repentance and wickedness: “I bring you, O my soul, examples . . . to lead you to compunction” (128). The hymn invites the congregation to experience this “journey through scriptural landscapes” as their own spiritual process—as a “liturgical act that could mirror, shape and transform the passions of the singer’s soul” (139). In other words, “The Great Kanon . . . asks the faithful to go beyond a superficial emulation of its scriptural exemplars of repentance. The first-person narrative of the hymnographer could become the words of the Byzantine faithful who took up the song of the righteous that had gone before them” (132).

The universality of the transformation is highlighted in the analysis of the *sticheron idiomelon*, also known as the Troparion of Kassia, who was one of the few female hymnographers known from the Byzantine period. Elaborating on the biblical narrative of a fallen woman who anointed Jesus in the house of a Pharisee called Simon (Luke

7:36–50), Kassia likens the woman to the Myrrhbearers at Christ's tomb and to Eve hiding in paradise at the sound of God's feet—the same feet that the fallen woman kisses, washes with her tears, and wipes with her hair. Mellas emphasizes the physical intimacy of the woman's repentance as “a vivid and somatic image of compunction” (162). Instead of portraying her transformation as *metanoia*, a change of mind, it is the body that acts: “Crying, anointing and wiping convey the emotion of compunction and a transformation of what was once erotic passion into a desire for Christ, . . . allowing the woman to sense Christ's divinity” (157).

Although much has been written about Kassia and her masterpiece because of her gender and memorable accounts of her life—such as her questionable participation in the emperor's bride show—Mellas rightly notes that “the protagonist of her hymn rises above her gender and social standing. Compunction suspends the determinism associated with gender and shows the uniqueness of the person who is aware of her limitations. Her story is a universal song of repentance that can be sung by those who wish to feel compunction and paradisaical nostalgia” (167).

Andrew Mellas convincingly argues that the performance of compunctious hymns had a deep emotional meaning for the Byzantine faithful. Through hymnody, “compunction became more than a personal feeling of remorse arising from the consciousness of one's own sinfulness and a desire for forgiveness through repentance; it became a liturgical emotion and a collective feeling” (30). Mellas has written a very welcome addition to the study of emotions and of Byzantine hymnody alike. Richly annotated and paying generous homage to earlier research, *Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium* also provides a highly useful guide to the contemporary research on Byzantine liturgy as performed and experienced.

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Maria E. Doerfler. *Jephthah's Daughter, Sarah's Son: The Death of Children in Late Antiquity.* Christianity in Late Antiquity 8. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. 396 pp.

Borrowing a metaphor from Michel de Certeau, Maria Doerfler presents *Jephthah's Daughter, Sarah's Son* as arising from a kind of scholarly prowling “among the artifacts of mourning” and at “the edges of biblical interpretation” (209). Embedded in Doerfler's characterization rest some arguments central to this book—that the highly stylized, elite hymns, homilies, poems, and letters that sit at the book's heart arise from the real stuff of mundane suffering, and that encounters with scripture formed a site where these real-life concerns could operate. This rich and engaging book emerges, on one level, as a study of the (primarily literary) representation of the death of children. Yet it offers, on another level, arguments—often implicit—about the way late-antique literary works were constituted, about the relationship between elite and lay lives, about the way life could be rerouted through the stories of the Bible, and about the crucial role of affect and emotion in late-antique Christian liturgy. Putting all of this more simply, Doerfler's book argues that when late-antique orators turned to biblical scenes of children's deaths, they carried with them real experiences (their own, as well as their congregants') of the death of children. In turn, the liturgical spaces in which these hymns, homilies, and poems were performed became a kind of ritual, therapeutic space. Liturgy (or the more private ritual spaces of epistolary exchange) came to operate as ritual healing and catharsis.

The book builds this portrait cumulatively, each chapter treating the literary interactions with particular biblical narratives in which grieving parents, rather than dead children, take center stage. After an initial, social-historical chapter around child mortality, chapter 2 focuses on the parents of Cain and Abel, chapter 3 on the parents of