

Liturgy and the emotions in Byzantium. Compunction and hymnody. By Andrew Mellas.

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This in-depth study of a set of early Byzantine hymns joins a new and growing interest in exploring the personal emotions of individuals in this society. The focus is on how the faithful participated emotionally in church services during Lent, and how they reacted to the space, light, scents and musical sounds of their surroundings. Such an interest moves scholarship away from the traditional view that since we lack personal accounts by the Byzantines of their experiences, we can only regard this early Orthodox society as anonymous and distant. Instead, Mellas aims to find a method to assess how we might enter and understand their emotional reactions during church services.

Mellas has narrowed down his treatment of the materials to the detection of the factor of compunction in the chosen hymns used during Lent. Compunction is his translation of the Greek word *katanuxis* in its Christian context as given in Lampe's *Patristic Greek lexicon*. His definition is that 'compunction is a feeling of remorse, often accompanied by tears, that arises from the consciousness of one's own sinfulness and engenders a desire for repentance'. For the historian, the period covered is when the Church developed ways to heighten the emotions of the faithful by encouraging their self-awareness of personal sin and the possibility of divine forgiveness. This might be regarded as developing a method through which the Church could control the lives of the faithful. Repentance became central to the season of Lent, and has remained so, though perhaps less so in the Church of England today. Mellas is one contributor to a wider study: G. Williams and C. Steenbrugge (eds), *Cultures of compunction in the medieval world* (London 2021).

Mellas reviews other studies of compunction, most critically *Penthos: the doctrine of compunction in the Christian East*, first published in French in 1944 and in English translation posthumously in 1982. He criticises the conclusions of the author, the Jesuit priest Irénée Hausherr, especially his interpretation of compunction as a 'doctrine' which Mellas suggests is a distortion resulting from over-concentration on patristic writings and a tendency to view them from a Western Catholic scholastic background. Mellas, on the contrary, claims that his sources for an understanding of compunction will be liturgical hymns which point to 'the affective mysticism that shaped its experience in Byzantium'. He suggests the Byzantine experience of compunction should not be seen as a 'history of crying or a study of spiritual weeping'. He prefers the approaches of two previous scholars – Hannah Hunt, *Joy-bearing grief: tears of contrition in the writings of the early Syrian and Byzantine Fathers* (Leiden 2004) and Derek Krueger, *Liturgical subjects: Christian ritual, biblical narrative, and the formation of the self in Byzantium* (Philadelphia, PA 2014). Mellas characterises his contribution to the subject as an examination of the liturgical experience of compunction diachronically, using the evidence of hymns and their singing. He treats hymns not as just literary texts, but as 'performative scripts for the making of emotion in liturgy'. The detailed analysis of the series of hymns in the book is certainly an advance on previous studies, but I must admit that for clarity of thought and expression I found the writing of Derek Krueger much easier to follow, and indeed found it an essential companion study.

Mellas's book is distinctive for its close and detailed examination of the Greek texts, their translation and how they might engage with the emotional state of the individual participant in church. The focus is on hymns used in the services that took place during Great Lent and Holy Week in the cathedral church of St Sophia at Constantinople between the sixth century and the ninth. His chosen hymnographers are Romanos the Melodist (c. 490–c. 556) and his compositions (*kontakia*), Andrew of Crete (c. 659–before 740) and his *Great Kanon*, and the nun Kassia (c. 810–65) and her hymn *On the sinful woman*. Each of these writers is given a separate chapter in which their texts are analysed as imparting the emotions of compunction during the services. One of many complications in this analysis is that we do not have any texts about the organisation of the services in St Sophia before the *Typikon of the Great Church* which dates from the tenth century. Attention is therefore given to the commentaries on the liturgy written in this period. Mellas also rightly points out that it is hard to decide the visual environment of viewers in the Church of St Sophia, though he may be exaggerating the dominance of the non-figurative programme of the mosaics with their multiplicity of crosses. Although the current Virgin and Child in the apse is not a restoration of an earlier figurative image, as he seems to suggest, at eye level the faithful in the sixth century and later would most likely have seen portable icons like the bust representation of Christ now at the monastery of St Catherine at Sinai which is illustrated in the book and was chosen as the cover design; they certainly would have seen the sacred figures on the silver templon screen as well as the embroidered figures on the altar cloth.

The core of the book is the detailed analysis of how the chosen texts and their singing functioned in the liturgy; it is argued that the congregation sang the refrains of the *kontakia* of Romanos. Mellas looks at how compunction was evoked by these texts. As also seen by Krueger, the intentions of Andrew of Crete can be deduced by asking how his compositions differ from the previous liturgy. It is the replacement of the nine biblical canticles of the Morning Prayer service with their emphasis on praising God with new odes which instead focus on individual repentance and penance and the promise of salvation which effectively changes the nature of the Lent services. The contribution of Mellas to this historical discussion is his careful and confident handling of these texts which enables the modern reader to come closer to understanding how words, music and art combined to arouse a special mystical experience in the Byzantine Christian during Lent. But following his argument is not always so simple, as this sample may illustrate:

Tears could trace a pathway to the divine, deconstructing the dichotomy of interiority versus exteriority and mediating the liminal space between God and the faithful. Not unlike how the earthly and heavenly realms were portrayed as converging in the mystagogy of liturgy, tears of compunction could emerge in the liminality of sacred space, amidst the liturgical world of hymnody, suspended between paradisaical nostalgia and the eschaton.

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