



**JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY
FOR ORTHODOX CHURCH MUSIC**

Vol. 4 (2), Section IV: Reviews, pp. 399–401

ISSN 2342-1258

<https://journal.fi/jisocm>

LITURGY AND THE EMOTIONS IN BYZANTIUM
COMPUNCTION AND HYMNODY

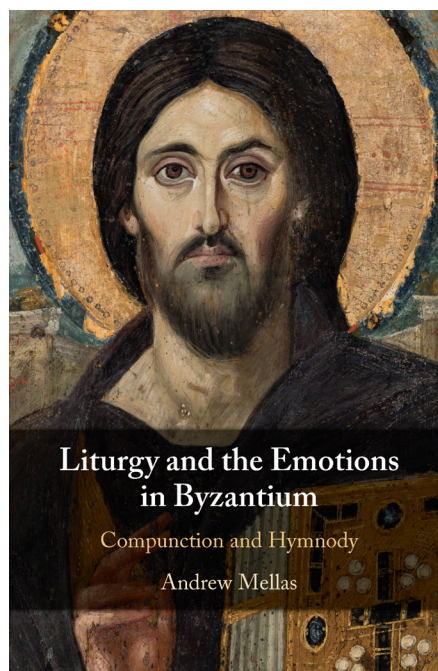
Andrew Mellas
Cambridge University Press
2020

ISBN 978-1-108-48759-7 xii+206 pp. 1 figure.

There is a popular perception amongst the Orthodox that emotion has no place in liturgy, though this is something that is, in turn, almost completely undermined by instinctively emotional reactions to liturgical music of various kinds, to hymnography, to homiletic discourse and, indeed, to aspects of liturgical ritual itself (I am thinking, for example, of the burial procession of Christ on Holy Friday).

This remarkable book seeks to understand compunction as a “liturgical emotion”, enacted through embodiment precisely through chanted hymnology as mystagogy. In order to do this, Andrew Mellas, who is Senior Lecturer in Byzantine Studies at St Andrew’s Theological College, Sydney, concentrates on hymns for Great Lent and Holy Week by Romanos the Melodist, Andrew of Crete and Kassia the nun. It is divided into five chapters and a conclusion, three of the chapters dealing with each of these hymnographers systematically and prefaced by a substantial introduction and a discussion of “The Liturgical World of Compunction”.

The Introduction is neatly sparked by a quotation from St Basil the Great concerning the way in which compunction is given or withheld, and there follows a clearly-written and often revelatory appraisal of the way in which the theme has been dealt with by other scholars. Particularly important, it seems to me, is Mellas’s acknowledgement that “(...) I eschew Hinterberger’s methodology, which approaches emotions in Byzantium as ‘ideational’ constructs rather than embodied phenomena” (p. 15), since this is a foundational aspect of the book’s aims and scope. There is a very pungent section on the limitations of much scholarship on hymnography which ought to be read by anyone venturing



into this area, and which begins by reminding us that “[...] an authoritative and comprehensive monograph on Byzantine hymnography is yet to be published” (p. 16).

Chapter 2 is entitled “The Liturgical World of Compunction”, and focuses in particular on Hagia Sophia. There is a detailed discussion of the interrelationships between liturgy and the emotions in Byzantium and the way in which this is manifested through sacred song and understood in the liturgical commentaries of Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor and Germanos of Constantinople. As Mellas notes after his analysis of Maximus’s insistence that “the performance of the eucharistic mystery [...] can transform the human person into theology itself”, “[t]he relationship between cognition and emotion portrayed here can be a bewildering one for the modern world” (p. 55), and accordingly explains the Byzantine understanding of this against the background of earlier Greek thought, and deepens it with a discussion of affective mysticism and a final section on “Great Lent and the Triodion as the Liturgical Framework for Compunction”, concluding neatly that, “[u]nlike the discursive thought of patristic texts and exegetical treatises, the performativity of hymns dramatised the adventure of salvation as a personalising narrative in the sacred space of liturgy, which was the habitus of compunction” (p. 70).

The third chapter is devoted to Romanos the Melodist, and more specifically his kontakia and the way they would have been performed during the period of Great Lent. Regarding this topic, I should note that, though the frequent use of the word “performance” and related terms may be disturbing to some, it reflects an increasing area of scholarship on these matters and also accurately describes without undue circumlocution what is in fact taking place when liturgy is enacted by means of chanting. This clears the path for an illuminating discussion of the way Romanos deals with the themes of compunction and repentance in his work, and then relates it to Biblical exemplars of compunction. Again, Mellas notes the intensity of the collective and individual experience that the hymnographical treatment of the in the kontakia might produce: “[Romanos’s] hymns sought to harness the iconic nature of the liturgy to incite a profound experience that could shape Christian personhood” (p. 94).

This is followed by a discussion of compunction and the eschaton, and a thought-provoking section on the musical dimension of the kontakia. One might wish this to be longer, especially perhaps in the section dealing with the patristic attitude towards music, but it is true that Mellas acknowledges right at the beginning the difficulty of the task, and too much speculation would be unhelpful.

Chapter 4 deals with Andrew of Crete, and more specifically the Great Canon. Mellas reminds us that there is, astoundingly, no modern critical edition of this monument of liturgical poetry available, and accordingly he has recourse to three of the earliest manuscripts of the Triodion. The aim of the chapter is to reimagine the way in which the Canon would have been performed in Byzantium, and to that end there is a prefatory discussion of the place of the genre in the hymnography of the time, of manuscripts, editions and translations and the liturgical context, but the intangible object of the study is always returned to: “Feeling liturgical emotions was an extension of the Eucharist, a perpetuation of the mystery where creation communicated with the uncreated and was deified” (p. 138). It would be easy to imagine this particular chapter expanded to become a monograph in itself.

Kassia is the subject of the fifth chapter, and inevitably in this context, her famous *sicheron* idiomelon for Holy Wednesday (most commonly known as the “Troparion of Kassiani”). Mellas again discusses the liturgical contexts and the manuscripts before moving on to a masterly examination of the text itself and the way in which its performance could provoke compunction. In many ways his comments here resume the entire aim of the book:

The performance of Kassia’s hymn opened a liminal space, where personal contemplation and the collective song of the faithful converged. Singing the hymn became a liturgical act that could mirror and transform the emotions of the singer’s soul. Words and melody invited the faithful to contemplate the striking paradox of how, in the depths of darkness, amidst the eros of sinfulness, Kassia’s protagonist senses the divinity of the Logos and feels compunction. (pp. 165-6)

This is a striking description indeed, and could only come from someone who is not merely a liturgical historian or theologian, but a practicing musician with a deep knowledge of the liturgical life of the Church. Mellas’s book will be of fundamental importance, then, not only to those working in these fields, but to any Christian seeking to understand the way in which what we experience in the liturgical moment embodies the eternal and transforms the worshipper.

Ivan Moody