

George E. Demacopoulos, *Sacralizing Violence in Byzantium: Hymns, Empire, and the Narrowing of Christian Identity*, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection 2025, 244 p., ISBN: 978-0-88402-523-8

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Although Demacopoulos volume focuses on the sacralization of violence in Byzantium and its impact on the violence inherent in liturgical language, it remains highly relevant to contemporary Jewish–Christian–Orthodox dialogue. We recognise that this interreligious dialogue remains hindered primarily by the seemingly insurmountable impasse presented by the anti-Judaic elements in Byzantine hymnography. The fact that Byzantine hymnography has been used without change in contemporary Orthodox liturgy for over a millennium presents a significant challenge to overcome, due to both the deep attachment to tradition and the complexity of the subject. A comprehensive treatment of this issue still requires numerous additional historical studies concerning liturgical books and texts.

Some Orthodox theologians have recently, though only fragmentarily, analysed Byzantine hymnography in various articles, highlighting with concrete examples the passages that are problematic for Jewish–Christian dialogue. However, most of their studies have approached the hymnographic corpus primarily from a *quantitative* perspective. Some, among whom I count myself, have even attempted to provide charts and maps of the problematic passages, to identify more precisely the texts that require discussion – a necessary stage, especially within the complex and difficult-to-organise horizon of Byzantine hymnography as preserved in the liturgical books of today. Yet Demacopoulos’s volume takes a welcome step forward: it moves the discussion toward a *qualitative* assessment of the various layers of theological discourse that have been overlaid throughout time and were – very importantly – politically and socially conditioned. This step is crucial in the process of establishing *criteria* that will help in classifying categories of hymns and the degree of violence they contain.

The introduction of the volume offers a beneficial perspective on both the entire work and the field of research addressed by the author. These pages, as well as the author’s entire volume, will significantly aid

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in understanding hymnography as a highly relevant source for the study of biblical reception, as well as for the exploration of other political and philosophical ideas, since “unlike formal biblical exegesis – produced by elite bishops and theologians, who routinely deployed archaizing rhetorical flourishes – hymnography was composed for public consumption and devotion.” (p. 11) This claim still requires substantial support from researchers and experts in Byzantine hymnography who are open to academic discussion, as it is a fact that we already possess a significant number of critical editions and historical studies of biblical commentaries and patristic theological treatises. However, we still lack crucial editions of the Byzantine liturgical books. Indeed, it is worth emphasising and making the most of the fact that hymnography “provided a powerful mechanism for stimulating moral and ethical formation.” (p. 11) Hymnography is not merely the instrument by which the perception of the faithful was shaped, but it was – and still is – “[...] the one thing that all Christians heard and knew, thus making it an important resource for scholars seeking to understand the religious imagination of premodern peoples.” (p. 12) In the Christian East, we have not yet fully grasped this reality. The impact of hymnography on the mindset of the faithful is, in fact, the most influential patristic and liturgical literature imaginable – yet we are only now beginning to grasp this phenomenon.

Beyond this general aspect concerning hymnography, Demacopoulos’s significant contribution in this volume lies in making us recognize a very profound, yet also painful, truth about Byzantine hymnography: “Byzantine Hymnography underwent a profound transformation in the way that it engaged violence at roughly the same time that Christian and Roman identity became fully intertwined and as Roman armies suffered unprecedented setbacks in the early seventh century.” (p. 15) We could categorise the entire volume as one of political theology. Through this study, Demacopoulos delves into the depths of the Byzantine liturgy, touching on the most sensitive chords of the marriage between religion and politics, as expressed in the most refined forms of Byzantine liturgical poetry.

From this perspective, Demacopoulos shows in the first two chapters (pp. 27–48 and 49–66) that Byzantine hymnography can be divided into at least two categories: the hymnography preceding the marriage with the Byzantine imperial political ideology, and the hymnography written after the truly momentous events connected to the conquest of Jerusalem, the reconquest of the Holy Places during the reign of Emperor

Heraclius, and their subsequent and definitive loss from Byzantine control. Although we do not have many tools at our disposal to make this distinction within hymnography, Demacopoulos makes use of what is available to us – namely, access to pre-seventh-century Jerusalemite Greek hymnography through its translations into Georgian. These hymns were, until recently, accessible only to specialists and were mainly studied by liturgists. However, through their recent translation from Georgian into English by Prof. Shoemaker, they can now be appreciated by a broader audience – an opportunity that Demacopoulos does not hesitate to seize. Moreover, the author offers his readers direct access to these hymns, translated into English, in a substantial appendix to the volume (pp. 165–197). Thus, following his analysis of these differences within Byzantine hymnography – differences influenced above all by the politics of the time, which would remain dominant for many centuries throughout the Byzantine and even the post-Byzantine periods – Demacopoulos argues that “Hymnographers begin to sacralize violence in the sense that they incorporated prayers for the destruction of others, but they also intimately tied this sacralization to the notion that the basileus – the Eastern Roman emperor – was God’s chosen political and military instrument on earth.” (p. 16)

It is no coincidence that alterity par excellence was embodied by the “Jews,” which is why the second chapter is entitled “Crucifixion and the *Jews*.” The Jews and their depiction in Byzantine hymnography serve as the “litmus test” for the degree of violence that Demacopoulos investigates. The author notes how Romanos the Melodist is both the first and the last hymnographer to dare mention the Romans as having a role in the crucifixion of Jesus. (p. 85). However, after the 6th century, the blame for the killing of Jesus is attributed solely to the “Jews”:

...nearly half of the Idiomela hymns develop their exegetical or theological points about the Crucifixion by blaming the Jews for Jesus’s violent death. By way of comparison, of the approximate one thousand hymn in the Octoechos, only fourteen identify and disparage the Jews. Theologically implicit in this identification and condemnation of the Jews in the Idiomela is a rhetorical positioning in which ‘they’ (the Jews), rather than ‘we’ (all mortals), are responsible for the violence that Christ suffered during the Passion and Crucifixion. This is a noteworthy shift from the rhetorical and theological structure of most of the hymns of the Octoechos that speak about the Crucifixion. (p. 55)

The merit of Demacopoulos volume lies in its success in placing the discussion of liturgical anti-Judaism within the broader context of Byzantine theology. He draws attention to the fact that...

One of the more intriguing, if not surprising, metaphors they deployed is the transformation of the cross into a weapon against the forces of death; it is not only a weapon employed by Christ, but a weapon offered by Christ to the faithful for spiritual contests against the enemy. This transformation of the cross from a weapon against spiritual forces into a weapon that Christians could deploy against human enemies will become one of the most important steps in the gradual sacralization of violence in the Byzantine tradition. (p. 47)

Demacopoulos's explanation for this profound transformation in Byzantine hymnography is found in the often-invoked concept of *Byzantine symphony*, and the example he finds most illustrative is the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, which "was the only major Christian celebration that originated through imperial auspices." (p. 105) He devotes two chapters to this feast and to the political, historical, and social context surrounding the events and reign of Heraclius (pp. 89–106 and 107–32). Even these chapters alone would be beneficial if read by priests and theologians in Eastern Europe. They illuminate much of the mindset established in the Eastern Church and help in understanding contemporary situations, such as local disputes over church and state or even the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Following a final chapter on liturgical rituals before war (pp. 133–52) – highly relevant today – Demacopoulos offers a set of crucial conclusions that are not directly about anti-Judaism but concern Christian theology more broadly. He concludes that the sacralization of violence is "theologically problematic" in at least three ways:

- a. The Byzantine hymnography "equated the imperial cause with the Christian cause and vice versa. [...] There is simply no way to affirm Christian universalism when the prevailing assumption is that the Christian cause belongs exclusively to a single ethnic, cultural, or political community." (p. 162)
- b. "The sacralization of violence against others in hymns confuses – and, indeed, seems to completely contradict – Christianity's core message that the birth, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ provide eternal life. [...] hymns that sacralize violence against others detract from that message and appear to celebrate the very opposite – that is, death." (p. 162)

- c. These hymns “usurp the original theological and eschatological vision of the liturgical feast for worldly, political ends. Rather than celebrate the role of the cross in the cosmic history of salvation, or the construction of the church at Golgotha as an event in the history of salvation, such hymns replace Christian teaching with an imperial ideology that co-opts the Christian message of salvation by situating it within the discourse of imperial power and authority.” (p. 162)

These conclusions are both disturbing and beneficial at the same time. They are alarming because any Orthodox theologian can immediately recognise how right the author is and how harmful the influence of this type of hymnography has been throughout the history and present reality of the Orthodox Church. Yet they are also beneficial, because only by discussing them can we take steps toward understanding the negative realities within our tradition and eventually overcome them through effort, research, publications, and debates, which must serve as the foundation for decisions at the ecclesiastical level.