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Memories of Utopia

The Revision of Histories
and Landscapes in Late Antiquity

**Edited by Bronwen Neil
and Kosta Simic**

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| <i>List of figures</i> | viii |
| <i>List of contributors</i> | ix |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | xii |
| <i>Abbreviations</i> | xiv |
| <i>Map of the Byzantine Mediterranean 500–700 CE</i> | xv |
| | |
| PART I | |
| Writing and rewriting the history of conflicts | 1 |
| | |
| 1 Curating the past: the retrieval of historical memories and utopian ideals | 3 |
| BRONWEN NEIL | |
| | |
| 2 Julian’s Cynics: remembering for future purposes | 20 |
| PHILIP BOSMAN | |
| | |
| 3 Memories of trauma and the formation of a Christian identity | 36 |
| JONATHAN P. CONANT | |
| | |
| 4 Augustine’s memory of the 411 confrontation with Emeritus of Cherchell | 57 |
| GEOFFREY D. DUNN | |
| | |
| PART II | |
| Forging a new utopia: holy bodies and holy places | 73 |
| | |
| 5 Purity and the rewriting of memory: revisiting Julian’s disgust for the Christian worship of corpses and its consequences | 75 |
| WENDY MAYER | |

| | | |
|-----------------|---|------------|
| 6 | Constructing the sacred in Late Antiquity: Jerome as a guide to Christian identity | 92 |
| | NAOKI KAMIMURA | |
| 7 | Utopia, body, and pastness in John Chrysostom | 107 |
| | CHRIS L. DE WET | |
| PART III | | |
| | Rewriting landscapes: creating new memories of the past | 123 |
| 8 | Memories of peace and violence in the late-antique West | 125 |
| | BRONWEN NEIL | |
| 9 | Two foreign saints in Palestine: responses to religious conflict in the fifth to seventh centuries | 145 |
| | PAULINE ALLEN AND KOSTA SIMIC | |
| 10 | Remembering the damned: Byzantine liturgical hymns as instruments of religious polemics | 156 |
| | KOSTA SIMIC | |
| 11 | Paradise regained? Utopias of deliverance in seventh-century apocalyptic discourse | 171 |
| | RYAN W. STRICKLER | |
| 12 | Ausonius, Fortunatus, and the ruins of the Moselle | 189 |
| | CHRIS BISHOP | |
| PART IV | | |
| | Memory and materiality | 205 |
| 13 | Spitting on statues and shaving Hercules's beard: the conflict over images (and idols) in early Christianity | 207 |
| | ROBIN M. JENSEN | |
| 14 | Athena, patroness of the marketplace: from Athens to Constantinople | 232 |
| | JANET WADE | |

| | |
|--|-----|
| 15 Transformation of Mediterranean ritual spaces up to the early Arab conquests | 251 |
| LEONELA FUNDIC | |
| Epilogue | 267 |
| RAJIV K. BHOLA | |
| <i>Scripture index</i> | 277 |
| <i>Index</i> | 278 |

10 Remembering the damned

Byzantine liturgical hymns as instruments of religious polemics

Kosta Simic

The fact that the main purpose of liturgical hymns, due to their lasting use at liturgical gatherings, is to perpetuate a certain memory, renders them highly relevant to the objectives of this volume. When hymns refer to intra-Christian doctrinal conflicts and mention certain historical figures involved in them, then they also preserve a memory of those people, regardless of their positive or negative role in such disputes. Accordingly, when protagonists of such hymns are denounced and condemned by Church councils as ‘heresiarchs,’ then those hymns perpetuate their bad memory. Hence, this practice fits well into the category of *damnatio memoriae* with the main purpose to dishonour the memory of a certain individual, but without its entire eradication (Hedrick 2000: 93). The first part of this chapter is mostly focused on this category of Byzantine hymns. In the second part, the focal point are the hymns related to inter-religious disputes, namely to the anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim polemics, in which Byzantine hymnographers, motivated by utopian ideals, lay exclusive claim to the true and pure religion.

From New Testament times, Christian worship employed distinctive songs. According to the Gospel reports, Jesus and his disciples sang at the Last Supper: ‘And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives’ (Matt 26:30). Furthermore, the apostle Paul exhorts the Ephesians to use hymns, ‘Speak to yourselves in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord’ (Eph 5:19).¹

Pliny the Younger (d. 113), who was the governor of the Roman province Bithynia (Asia Minor), offers the earliest non-biblical testimony about the use of hymns in Christian worship. In his Letter 96 to the emperor Trajan he writes that Christians ‘were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god’ (*quod essent soliti stato die ante lucem convenire carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere secum invicem seque*) (ep. 10.96).

By the fourth century, the Church prioritised Psalms, so that non-biblical hymnody was rare, but not completely absent. However, it seems that composition of non-biblical hymns was closely related to doctrinal disputes from the very beginning. Some early Christian authors refer to the use of the ‘orthodox’ verse to denounce the dogmatic teaching of their opponents. For example, Brian Dunkle mentions Irenaeus of Lyon (d. 202), who cites a hymn composed to challenge the

Gnostic leader Marcus. Although Irenaeus is not very clear, it is possible to draw a conclusion that the hymn was composed exclusively for polemical purposes (Dunkle 2016: 20). The use of hymns as suitable and powerful agents designed to convey certain messages to the congregation in both inter-religious and intra-Christian conflicts became increasingly common in both East and West in the fourth century. Some of the most prominent examples of church figures using hymns to promote teachings believed to be the sole path to salvation include Arius (d. 336), Hilary of Poitiers (d. 367), Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), Ambrose (d. 374), Basil the Great (d. 379), and Augustine (d. 430). The poetic activities of each author were caused by doctrinal disputes.

The use of liturgical hymns is explicitly attested in relation to the Arian controversy. Arius himself composed hymns widely circulated as a compilation known as the *Thalia* ('Banquet'), which allegedly contained the key concepts of his Trinitarian theology. It is believed that his hymns largely contributed to the popularity and longevity of the Arian doctrine even after its several synodical condemnations. Its popularity was one of the main reasons that Athanasius of Alexandria criticised and mocked the *Thalia* in his two main polemical treatises, namely at the beginning of his *Orations Against the Arians* and *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia*. Athanasius's critique is multilayered. First, he denounces the genre of *Thalia* by stating that Arius imitated Sotades, the third-century BCE poet:

Instead of Moses and the other saints, they have made the discovery of one Sotades, a man whom even Gentiles laugh at, and of the daughter of Herodias. For of the one Arius has imitated the dissolute and effeminate tone, in writing *Thalia* on his model; and the other when he writes that, by singing the songs of Arius, Christians are announcing a new heresy.

(*Contra Arianos* 1.2; see also *De synodis*, 15)

Athanasius then proceeds to condemn the content of *Thalia* by emphasising that Arius denies the Son, 'reckoning Him among the creatures' (*Contra Arianos* 1.4).

A direct link between doctrinal conflicts and hymnody can also be found in some reports about the genesis of antiphonal singing. For example, Theodoret of Cyrrhus (d. c. 466) argues that Diodore of Tarsus (d. c. 394) and Flavian of Antioch (d. 404), both vigorous opponents of Arianism, introduced the practice of antiphonal singing in the services of the Church:

That excellent pair Flavianus and Diodorus, though not yet admitted to the priesthood and still ranked with the laity, worked night and day to stimulate everyone's zeal for truth (νόκτωρ καὶ μεθ' ἡμέραν εἰς τὸν ὑπὲρ τῆς εὐσεβείας ζῆλον διήγειρον ἅπαντας). They were the first to divide choirs into two parts, and to teach them to sing the psalms of David antiphonally.

(*HE* 2.19: 154)

Theodoret's mention of their activity to stimulate people's zeal for truth indicates that they used hymnody to counter Arianism and advocate Nicene orthodoxy.

Nicetas Choniates (d. 1217), based on other early sources, develops this account by citing Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), who reports that Flavian and Diodore first introduced a translation of the Syriac formula ‘Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit’ into the Greek psalmody of Antioch to counter the Arians (*Thesauri orthodoxae fidei* 5.30, PG, 139: 1390). According to the historian Philostorgius, the Arians sang ‘Glory to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit’ (Δόξα Πατρὶ δι’ Υἱοῦ ἐν Ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι) while Flavian was the first to have his congregation sing ‘Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit’ (Δόξα Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ καὶ Ἀγίῳ Πνεύματι) (Philostorgius, *HE* 3.13).

Furthermore, other distinguished church fathers from the same period composed hymns to confront their opponents’ doctrinal teachings, thus perpetuating their condemnation. For example, Ephrem had to face doctrinal divisions at Nisibis and Edessa caused by Marcionites, Manicheans, and followers of Bardaisan (d. ca. 222). In addition, Ephrem’s hymns also abound with references against Judaism (Drijvers 1985: 88–102; Shepardson 2008) and pagans. Composed in the context of conflict, Ephrem’s hymns (*madrāšē*) were introduced into liturgy to protect his flock by promoting the ideals of Nicene orthodoxy. It has been proposed that even his anti-Judaism needs to be seen in the light of his anti-Arian polemic. According to Shepardson, Ephrem used ‘the familiar figure of “the Jew” more broadly as an anti-type of an orthodox Christian’ in order to establish ‘clear Nicene boundaries around his community’ (Shepardson 2008: 6, 68).

The same holds true for Ambrose. According to his biographer, the Arian controversy was behind his motives to compose hymns: ‘On this occasion, antiphons, hymns, and vigils first began to be practised in the church at Milan. And the devotion to this custom remains even to this very day, not only in the church, but through almost all the provinces of the West.’ (*Vita Ambrosii* 3.13). Ambrose himself believed that liturgical hymns were highly effective tools for endorsing the orthodox faith: ‘in a hymn you may understand the distinction of persons in the Trinity, and the oneness of the Godhead’ (*ut etiam in hymno distinctionem trinitatis et diuinatis intellegas unitatem*) (*De spiritu sancto* 3.16.110; CSEL, 79: 197).

Augustine also used hymns to spread his dogmatic teaching. His *Psalmus contra partem Donati* (NBA, 15/1: 20–40) was composed as a response to songs of the Donatists. Augustine’s intention was to provide the orthodox party with their own chant in which he would simultaneously focus on two main topics in Donatist polemic, namely ‘the church as *corpus permixtum* and the universality of the body of Christ’ (Dunkle 2016: 36). Of equal importance is his general approval of church music, which had great impact on him after his conversion (*Confessiones* 10.33.49–50, NBA, 1: 342).

Condemnation of doctrinal opponents in liturgical hymns, which were usually used in liturgy for a long period of time, had more than one purpose. Not only did they contribute to the protection of the orthodox party against those regarded as heretics, but also perpetuated the memory of the condemned ‘heretics.’ Most importantly, future generations, by singing such hymns, were also given the opportunity to condemn the famous ‘heresiarchs’ at their liturgical gatherings.

The Byzantine tradition

Similarly to the early period, Byzantine hymnographers also invested their hymns with a polemical dimension and mobilised them to promote particular ideals, whether doctrinal or even political, and whether or not they were a matter of concern to contemporary audiences. Another goal was to preserve the memory of prominent ‘heresiarchs.’ One of the peculiarities of Byzantine Orthodoxy is the liturgical celebration of the councils of the Church and the doctrines they proclaimed. The Byzantine calendar, which is still followed in the Eastern Church, includes four feasts that are specifically devoted to the fathers who produced the conciliar doctrines and definitions. They include the Sundays of the First, Fourth, and Seventh Councils together with the Sunday of Orthodoxy, which was established after the defeat of iconoclasm. Hymns composed for these feasts abound with references to and condemnations of the individuals who were considered creators of the doctrines that were condemned by the ecumenical councils. By composing such hymns for congregational use, their authors made them an instrument through which the proponents of the doctrines condemned by councils were also condemned annually at each gathering of the faithful to celebrate victory over a specific ‘heresy.’

The main protagonist of the hymns composed for the bishops of the First Ecumenical Council is Arius. In the first *sticheron* at *Lord, I Have Cried*, which is based on Psalm 109, Arius is denounced for calling the second person of the Trinity a creature:

Ἐκ γαστρὸς ἐτέχθης πρὸ ἑωσφόρου, ἐκ Πατρὸς ἀμήτωρ πρὸ τῶν αἰώνων,
καὶ Ἄρειος κτίσμα σε, καὶ οὐ Θεὸν δοξάζει, τόλμη συνάπτων σε τὸν κτίστην,
τοῖς κτίσμασιν ἀφρόνως, ὕλην πυρὸς τοῦ αἰωνίου, ἑαυτῷ θησαυρίζων· ἀλλ’
ἡ Σύνοδος ἡ ἐν Νικαίᾳ, Υἱὸν Θεοῦ σε ἀνεκήρυξε Κύριε, Πατρὶ καὶ Πνεύματι
σύνθρονον.

From the womb, before the morning star, you were born from the Father without a mother before the ages. Arius, however, called you a creature, and does not glorify you as God, mindlessly identifying you, the Creator, with the creatures, and laying up for himself as treasure fuel for the eternal fire. But the Council in Nicaea proclaimed you, O Lord, to be Son of God, co-enthroned with the Father and the Spirit.

(*Pentecostarion*, 158)

Notably, the same quotation from Psalm 109:3, ‘I have begotten you from the womb *before the morning star*,’ was also used as an inscription above the representation of the standing Virgin Mary in the semi-dome of the apse in the Church of the Dormition at Nicaea (destroyed in 1922). The inscription, a slightly modified version of Psalm 109:3, which read ΕΓΤΑΣΤΡΟΣ (sic) ΠΙΡΟ ΕΩΣΦΟΡΟΥ ΓΕΓΕΝΗΚΑ (sic) ΣΕ (‘From the womb before the morning star I have given birth to you’) and dated to the seventh century, served to preserve the memory of the Council, which formulated one of the basic Christian dogmas, namely that the

Son was not a creature, but born from the Father's nature before the ages (Mango 1993–94: 168–70).

The second *sticheron* is inspired by the vision of Peter of Alexandria (d. 311) recorded in the account of his martyrdom. According to this story, the twelve-year-old Jesus appeared in front of Peter wearing a tunic divided into two parts. When Peter asked why his tunic was torn apart, he answered that Arius did it, alluding to the division in the church caused by Arius's teaching about the God Logos (Viteau 1897: 71):

Τίς σου τὸν χιτῶνα, Σῶτερ, διεῖλεν, Ἄρειος, σὺ ἔφης, ὁ τῆς Τριάδος, τεμὼν τὴν ὁμότιμον ἀρχὴν εἰς διαιρέσεις οὗτος ἠθέτησέ σε εἶναι, τὸν ἓνα τῆς Τριάδος, οὗτος Νεστόριον διδάσκει, Θεοτόκον μὴ λέγειν. Ἀλλ' ἡ Σύνοδος ἡ ἐν Νικαίᾳ, Υἱὸν Θεοῦ σε ἀνεκήρυξε, Κύριε, Πατρὶ καὶ Πνεύματι σύνθρονον.

Who divided your garment, O Saviour? You said, 'Arius', who cuts into divisions the authority of the Trinity equal in honour. He denied that you were one of the Trinity. He taught Nestorius not to say 'Mother of God'. But the Council in Nicaea proclaimed you, O Lord, to be Son of God, equal in rank with the Father and the Spirit.

(*Pentecostarion*, 178)

The third *sticheron* for the same feast takes its point of departure from the book of Acts' account of Judas's death: 'With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out' (Acts 1:18). The author of the hymn compares Arius's death with that of Judas:

Κρημνῷ περιπίπτει τῆς ἀμαρτίας, Ἄρειος, ὁ μύσας τὸ φῶς μὴ βλέπειν, καὶ θεῖῳ σπαράττεται, ἀγκίστρῳ τοῖς ἐγκάτοις, πᾶσαν ἐκδοῦναι τὴν οὐσίαν, καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν βιαίως, ἄλλος Ἰούδας χρηματίσας, τῇ γνώμῃ καὶ τῷ τρόπῳ.

Having shut his eyes so that he could not see the light, Arius fell into an abyss of sin, and his bowels were torn apart by a divine hook so that along with his entrails he forcibly emptied out all his substance and his soul, and in this way became another Judas, through his teaching and the manner of his death.

(*Pentecostarion*, 178)

Finally, the last *sticheron* worth citing is the one which refers to all the most prominent 'heretics' anathematised by the first four ecumenical councils. It reads as follows:

Ἀποστολικῶν παραδόσεων, ἀκριβεῖς φύλακες γεγόνατε, ἅγιοι Πατέρες· τῆς γὰρ ἁγίας Τριάδος τὸ ὁμοούσιον, ὀρθοδόξως δογματίσαντες, Ἀρείου τὸ βλάσφημον, συνοδικῶς κατεβάλετε, μεθ' ὃν καὶ Μακεδόنيον, πνευματομάχον ἀπελέγξαντες, κατεκρίνατε Νεστόριον, Εὐτυχέα καὶ Διόσκορον, Σαβέλλιον τε καὶ Σεβήρον τὸν ἀκέφαλον.

O holy Fathers, you became strict guardians of the apostolic traditions, for by teaching the orthodox doctrine that the Holy Trinity is consubstantial, you in synod overthrew the blasphemy of Arius; after him you refuted Macedonius, opponent of the Spirit, you condemned Nestorius, Eutyches and Dioscorus, Sabellius and the headless Severus.

(Pentecostarion, 179)

Hymns composed for the bishops of the Fourth Ecumenical Council not only refer to the proponents of the doctrine of one nature, but also to Nestorius and several other champions of one energy and one activity in Christ after his incarnation, including two patriarchs of Constantinople, Pyrrhus (638–41, 654) and Sergius (610–38); Pope Honorius (625–38); the Constantinopolitan archimandrite Eutyches, one of the main architects of the doctrine about one nature in Christ; and Dioscorus, patriarch of Alexandria (444–51). In other words, it can be argued that on this feast three ecumenical councils are commemorated, namely the third, the fourth, and the sixth. Here is an example of how an anonymous hymnographer refers to the proponents of the condemned doctrines:

Πύρρον τε καὶ Σέργιον, καὶ τὸν Ὀνόριον ἅμα, Εὐτυχή, Διόσκορον, καὶ δεινὸν Νεστόριον κατεστρέψατε, τῶν κρημνῶν ἐνδοξοί, τὸ Χριστοῦ ποίμνιον, ἐκατέρων διασώσαντες, διπλοῦν ταῖς φύσεσιν, ἕναν τὸν Χριστὸν καθ' ὑπόστασιν, λαμπρῶς ἀνακηρύξαντες, μόναις ἐνεργείαις δεικνύμενον· ὃν καὶ προσκυνοῦντες, ὡς ἄνθρωπον, καὶ τέλειον Θεόν, σὺν τῷ Πατρὶ καὶ τῷ Πνεύματι, νῦν ὑμᾶς δοξάζομεν.

O glorious [Fathers], you defeated Pyrrhus and Sergius, with Honorius, Eutyches, Dioscorus and dread Nestorius, saving Christ's flock from both sheer cliffs by clearly proclaiming Christ to be one by hypostasis, but double in nature, revealed by energies alone; as we also worship him as man and perfect God, with the Father and the Spirit, we now glorify you.

(MV 1889/11: 59)

Sergius and Pyrrhus were monothelite patriarchs of Constantinople; Honorius was a bishop of Rome who seemed on occasion to support the formula of 'one will' in Christ (see further Strickler's Chapter 11). The two 'sheer cliffs' referred to here are Nestorianism and monophysitism (Lash 2006: 157). Hence, the author's intention was to emphasise that the fathers had to protect the church community from both by formulating the dogmatic teaching that Christ was one by hypostasis, but in two natures.

The cited hymns from the Byzantine tradition reveal in a more obvious way their authors' intention both to condemn 'heretics' and to keep their bad memory alive. Moreover, their primary function was to provide a setting within which those figures could be condemned continually. In this regard, we can discern a sort of contradiction since, along with the widespread practice of destroying the writings of 'heresiarchs,' there also was a tendency to save them from oblivion. However, the purpose of the latter practice was to perpetuate their condemnation.

Anti-Jewish polemic

One of the important features of Byzantine hymns still sung in the liturgy of the Christian East during Holy Week is their anti-Jewish character. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, their liturgical use is frequently criticised as blatant anti-Semitism. This has initiated discussions over whether such hymns should be excluded from the liturgy (Theokritoff 2003; Groen 2008; Azar 2015; Bucur 2017). Some Orthodox theologians openly propose such a solution, as the following example shows:

The Orthodox Church as a whole, and especially and more effectively the hierarchy, should revise and discard anti-Judaic statements and allusions from hymnography and from liturgy itself, as a matter of fact. The poetry of Eastern Orthodox hymns is too sublime to be marred by such low sentiments echoing from a past dominated by religious quarrels and controversies.

(Pentiuc 2014: 40)

The ‘anti-Judaic statements’ that the author has in mind include the phrases which designate the Jews as ‘God-Slayers, the lawless nation of the Jews,’ ‘the destructive band of evil men,’ ‘a swarm of God-Slayers,’ ‘the lawless assembly,’ ‘most malicious race of Jews,’ ‘pack of dogs,’ and so on.

However, for the purpose of this study, I will leave aside the hymns with such insulting phrases without any theological meaning. Rather, I will pay close attention to a hymn from the same ‘anti-Jewish’ category, but which could be interpreted in the light of the Christian replacement or supersession theology. As is well-known, Christianity from its onset saw itself not only as a continuation of Judaism but also as its fulfilment and replacement (Woudstra 1988; Thettayil 2007). The latter view actually prevailed in the end. According to this perception, after denouncing Jesus Christ as the Messiah, all promises given to the Old Israel were fulfilled spiritually in the Christian church that was mostly comprised of gentiles.

Among the hymns that need to be seen in the light of fulfilment theology is the following, which is sung on Holy Friday:

Τάδε λέγει Κύριος τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις· Λαός μου τί ἐποίησά σοι, ἢ τί σοι παρηνώχλησα; τοὺς τυφλοὺς σου ἐφώτισα, τοὺς λεπρούς σου ἐκαθάρισα, ἄνδρα ὄντα ἐπὶ κλίνης ἠγωνρωσάμην. Λαός μου, τί ἐποίησά σοι, καὶ τί μοι ἀνταπέδωκας; ἀντὶ τοῦ μάννα χολήν, ἀντὶ τοῦ ὕδατος ὄξος, ἀντὶ τοῦ ἀγαπᾶν με, σταυρῷ με προσηλώσατε· οὐκέτι στέγω λοιπόν, καλέσω μου τὰ ἔθνη, κἀκεῖνα με δοξάσουσι, σὺν τῷ Πατρὶ καὶ τῷ Πνεύματι, κἀγὼ αὐτοῖς δωρήσομαι, ζῶην τὴν αἰώνιον.

Thus says the Lord to the Jews: O my people, what have I done unto thee? Or wherein have I wearied thee? I gave light to thy blind and cleansed thy lepers, I raised up the man who lay upon his bed, O my people, what have I done unto thee, and how hast thou repaid me? Instead of manna thou hast given me gall, instead of water vinegar; instead of loving me, thou hast nailed me to the

Cross. I can endure no more. I shall call my Gentiles, and they shall glorify me with the Father and the Spirit; and I shall bestow on them eternal life.

(*Lenten Triodion* 1978: 583)

After reproaching the Jews for their ingratitude for all the good that God had done for them in the Old Testament, this hymn, similarly to a large number of other hymnographic texts composed for Holy Week, concludes that, because of their ingratitude, God chose to give 'eternal life' to the gentiles. It should be pointed out that Holy Week, a period when the Church commemorates Christ's suffering and death that culminated in the Resurrection, was very suitable for developing this idea. From the very beginning, the Christian communities closely associated these events from Christ's life with the Jewish Passover (Greek *Pascha*). Since the Christian *Pascha* was based on the Jewish one, initially its liturgical celebration included the commemoration of both the Old Testament's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and the New Testament's salvation from death accomplished through Jesus Christ. Gradually, the feast was entirely Christianised, so that only typological meaning was given to the events of the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt. As a result, Byzantine hymnographers started to emphasise that God chose 'us' rather than 'them,' especially through the hymns for this originally Judaic feast (Azar 2015). Hence, according to these authors, the promises of the future kingdom of God and eternal life no longer referred to the physical Israel, but to the Christians as the new Israel.

The purpose of this brief treatment of the anti-Jewish polemic in the hymns composed for the paschal period is not to determine if they should be removed from the liturgical books or not. Rather, my intention was to show how the hymns were used by Byzantine theologians to advance Christian supersessionist theology initiated by utopian ideals.

Anti-Muslim polemic

As for the anti-Muslim polemic reflected in Byzantine hymnography, hymns for the feast of the veneration of the Holy Cross are especially imbued with such references. The development of the cult of the Cross from the fourth century onwards had a direct impact on liturgical poetry. Liturgical hymns for the Exaltation of the True Cross repeatedly stress not only the spiritual dimension of the Cross in Christian life, but also its military and triumphant functions. Hymnographers frequently eulogise the Cross as a powerful weapon, which brings victories to the emperors and secures peace in the empire. In the *kontakion* sung annually on the feast of the Exaltation of the True Cross, as well as at weekly offices, namely, on Wednesday and Friday Matins, it is sung:

Εὐφρανὸν ἐν τῇ δυνάμει σου τοὺς πιστοὺς βασιλεῖς ἡμῶν, νίκας χορηγῶν αὐτοῖς, κατὰ τῶν πολέμιων, τὴν συμμαχίαν ἔχοιεν τὴν σὴν, ὅπλον εἰρήνης, ἀήττητον τρόπαιον.

Make our faithful emperors glad in your strength, giving them victory over their enemies: may your Cross assist them in battle, weapon of peace and unconquerable sign of victory.

(*Festal Menaion* 1969: 148)

Kosmas the Melode's *kanon* for this feast is preoccupied with the idea of imperial victory to such a degree that Alexander Kazhdan has called it 'a political document' (Kazhdan 1999: 114). Kazhdan explains this feature by the fact that Kosmas was writing in Palestine, which was occupied by Muslim Arabs. The *kanon*, accordingly, expresses the author's hope for liberation by the Byzantine emperor. Characteristic of Kosmas's insistence on the link between the emperors and the True Cross is the third of the eighth ode of his *Kanon* for the Exaltation of the Holy Cross:

Οἱ τῇ θεῇ ψήφῳ, προκριθέντες ἀγάλλεσθε, Χριστιανῶν πιστοὶ Βασιλεῖς,
καυχᾶσθε τῷ τροπαιοφόρῳ ὅπλῳ, λαχόντες θεόθεν, Σταυρὸν τὸν τίμιον,
ἐν τούτῳ γὰρ φῦλα πολέμων, θράσος ἐπιζητοῦντα, σκεδάννυνται εἰς τοὺς
αἰῶνας.

You, faithful Christian emperors, forechosen by divine decree, rejoice. Receiving from God the venerable Cross, make this victorious trophy your glory, for by it the tribes of the enemy that rashly seek battle are scattered unto all ages.

(*Festal Menaion* 1969: 150)

In addition to such invocations of the Cross's might phrased in rather generic terms, there are hymns which contain specific references to the power of the Cross against the Muslims. The rise and expansion of Islam represented the most acute threat to the Byzantine empire in both military and ideological terms from the seventh century onwards, since the Muslim Arabs laid claim to the same territory and cultural heritage as Byzantium (Speck 2003: 144). Furthermore, according to the Islamic replacement theology, Islam was the original, primordial expression of the Abrahamic monotheism that God revealed to his chosen people. To counter the new religion, many Byzantine authors engaged in polemics with its proponents by producing separate polemical writings, often in the form of a dialogue between a Christian and a 'Saracen.' The earliest one is *Controversy between a Saracen and a Christian*, attributed to John of Damascus, but apparently composed in the second half of the eighth century (Sahas 1972: 142–55). This kind of polemic was also frequently incorporated into more popular literary genres, including saints' lives. For instance, the *Life of Constantine*, the apostle of the Slavs, relates the protagonist's dispute with a Muslim during his mission to the Caliphal court in Baghdad (Dvornik 1933: 354–8). Echoes of this existential threat to the empire found their way into liturgical texts, especially hymns, through which the faithful prayed for imperial victory.

One of the best examples is the *kanon* for the Exaltation of the True Cross ascribed to Germanos I, Patriarch of Constantinople (d. c. 740). Its author glorifies

the emperor and expresses his hope that the offspring of Hagar will be defeated by the power of the True Cross. This idea is articulated in the fourth *troparion* of the third ode:

Ὡςπερ σταυροτύποις ἔτρεψας ἐν Σινᾷ παλάμαις Ἀμαλῆκ τὸν ἀλλόφυλον,
τοὺς τῆς Ἄγαρ τῷ πιστωτάτῳ βασιλεῖ ἡμῶν ὑπόταζον.

In the same way as you defeated the Amalekites, the foreigners in Sinai, by the hands put in the form of the Cross, subject the [race] of Hagar to the most pious emperor.

(Sinait. gr. 552, f. 128)

In this hymn, the Muslims are denoted as descendants of Hagar: ‘those of Hagar’ or ‘the offspring of Hagar.’ Originally, in its biblical usage, the word *Hagarenes* designated the offspring of Abraham’s slave Hagar (Gen 16; 1 Chr 5:19; and Ps 82:7). However, after the appearance of Islam, Byzantine authors employed the terms *Hagarenes* or *Hagarites* to denote the Arabs, who were believed to be the offshoot of Hagar’s son Ishmael (*De haeresibus* 100: 60). Another common term for Arab Muslims was *Saracens*, especially in the earliest Byzantine sources dealing with the Arab conquests. For example, both Sophronius, patriarch of Jerusalem (d. 638), and the author of the *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati*, use this term in 634 (Usener 1886: 501–16; Déroche 1991: 47–229; Kaegi 1969: 139–49). By applying these names to the followers of the new religion, Byzantine authors apparently wished to disconnect them from the promises given to Abraham and the chosen people of the ancient Israel.

One of the central concerns articulated in this hymn is the hope that the Hagarenes will be subjected to the emperor. The same concern is encountered already in the earliest Byzantine writings that make reference to the Arab Muslims. In his *Synodical Letter*, Sophronius of Jerusalem expressed his wish that the ‘strong and mighty sceptre’ of the Christian emperors would destroy the pride of all barbarians, ‘but especially of the Saracens’ and ‘cast down their insolent acts’ (Allen 2009: 154–5). Gradually, this idea found its way into liturgical poetry—one should recall that Sophronius himself was a distinguished hymnographer—but instead of the ‘sceptre’ Byzantine hymnographers invoked the strength of the Cross.

In the present *troparion*, the author, appealing to God to subject the Muslims to the emperor, refers to the Old Testament battle of the chosen people against the Amalekites (Ex 17:8–16). He provides a typological interpretation of the biblical event according to which the Israelites won the battle because Moses had his hands raised during the battle: ‘As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning’ (Ex 17:11). The author sees the figure of the Cross in the position of Moses’s hands. In this, the author follows a well-established tradition, for ever since Justin Martyr (d. 165) Christian exegetes claimed that Moses kept his hands lifted in a cruciform fashion. By pointing to this interpretation, the author sent a message to the congregation that the power of the Cross, which in its Old Testament type had brought victory to the Old Israel, could now help the emperor, as

the leader of the New Israel, to defeat ‘those of Hagar,’ that is, the Muslims. It is worth mentioning that, aside from hymnographic texts, other Byzantine sources of liturgical character also refer to the Arab Muslims as Amalekites. For example, in the late seventh century, Anastasios of Sinai (d. after 700) in his sermon on the creation of man uses the phrase ‘the Amalekites of the desert’ (ὁ ἐρημικὸς Ἀμαλήκ) referring to the Arabs: ‘and swiftly arose the Amalekites of the desert, who struck us, the people of Christ’ (τὸν λαὸν τοῦ Χριστοῦ) (Uthemann 1985: 56). A similar expression is also used in the chronicle of Theophanes: ‘Amalek rose up in the desert, smiting us, the people of Christ’ (ἀνέστη ὁ ἐρημικώτατος Ἀμαλήκ τύπτων ἡμᾶς τὸν λαὸν τοῦ Χριστοῦ, *Chronographia*) (De Boor 1963: 332; Mango and Scott 1997: 462: see under Theophanes Confessor). Furthermore, Maximus the Confessor denoted the Arabs as ‘nation of the desert’ (ἔθνος ἐρημικόν) in his dogmatic epistle a century earlier (PG, 91: 540A).

The correlation between the Muslims and the Amalekites contains hints of theological polemics against Islam. More specifically, since Islam also claimed its right to the title of the Chosen People and the ultimate fulfilment of God’s promises to the Old Israel, Byzantine authors, including the composer of the hymn under discussion, were eager to associate their Muslim foes with the Amalekites. Their intention seems to have been to declare that, if the followers of the new religion have any place within the larger framework of the divinely conceived unfolding of human history, it is to be sought among the enemies of the Chosen People.

Another allusion to the Muslims in this *kanon*, which also includes an appeal to God to subject them to the emperor, is found in the fourth *troparion* of the fourth ode:

Τὸ χορηγοῦν ἰσχὺν κατ’ ἐναντίων ἐχθρῶν τῷ πιστοτάτῳ βασιλεῖ, καὶ ὑπότασσον αὐτῷ τοὺς ἐκ τῆς Ἄγαρ ἄφρονας, ξύλον τοῦ σταυροῦ προσκυνήσωμεν.

Let us bow before the wood of the Cross, which provides the power to the most pious emperor against enemies, and subjects to him the foolish offspring of Hagar.

(Sinait. gr. 552, f. 128v)

Apart from associating the Cross with imperial power, this poetic statement contains elements of a dogmatic polemic against Islam. The explicit reference to the veneration of the ‘wood of the Cross,’ which is posited as a source of strength against the Hagarenes, should be understood in the light of Muslim anti-Christian polemical literature. This literature focused, among other things, on the Christian veneration of the Cross, which the Muslims considered mere wood and thus unworthy of reverence (Corrigan 1992: 91–4; Brubaker 2006). For example, the anonymous middle Byzantine sermon published by Marc de Groote features a phraseology very similar to the one used in our *troparion*: ‘The Hagarenes allege that you worship mere wood’ (ξύλον ἀπλῶς λέγοντας προσκυνεῖν σε) (de Groote 2004: 336–7). By using a similar vocabulary, the hymnographer seeks to convey the message

to the congregation that this 'wood' is a strong weapon in imperial hands that could be deployed against the Muslims. It is well documented that members of the Umayyad dynasty worked systematically to remove or destroy crosses and sacred images. The most extreme step in this direction was undertaken by Caliph Yazid II (720–4), who issued a decree prohibiting crosses (and icons) from public display in 721 (Vasiliev 1955/1956: 23–47; Schick 1995: 215–17; Guidetti 2016: 87–8). Byzantine theologians felt it necessary to respond to these attacks against the main Christian symbol. John of Damascus refers to this issue in his treatise *On Heresies*, in which he treats Islam in a separate chapter: 'They also defame us as being idolatrous because we venerate the Cross, which they despise' (*De haeresibus* 100: 64; Sahas 1972: 137; Griffith 1985: 65; Griffith 2007). The Byzantine response to the Muslim attacks against the veneration of the Cross can also be discerned in the marginal psalters produced in the ninth century (Corrigan 1992: 86, 91–2). I would argue that the entire context of the anti-Muslim polemic during that period points to a sort of Byzantine reaction to the Islamic view that Islam is the final and most authentic expression of Abrahamic monotheism, replacing both Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, Byzantine hymnographers attempted to separate the Muslims from the God's chosen people as they believed that Christianity inherited the eschatological promises given to the Old Israel.

Conclusion

The hymns under consideration here show that liturgical poetry could serve as an instrument of intra-Christian and inter-religious polemics. Addressed to a wide audience, these texts could be effectively mobilised to communicate messages that delineate dogmatic differences and strengthen the congregation's sense of identity vis-à-vis a common foe, either internal or external. The ultimate goal was to demonstrate that certain dogmatic teachings, especially those formulated at ecumenical councils, embodied the authentic religious ideals, which secured the salvation of the Church community. Furthermore, hymns composed to celebrate the ecumenical councils were regarded not only as potent tools to maintain the bad memory of the condemned 'heresiarchs' but also to give an opportunity to orthodox communities to condemn them perpetually.

In addition, the hymns were used as tools to condemn other religious practices, specifically those of Judaism and Islam, which are particularly connected to the principles of replacement theology. Namely, the authors tried to present Christians as the new chosen people who replaced Israelites as favourites in the eyes of God. Byzantine hymns composed to be sung for Holy Week are frequently imbued with anti-Semitic sentiments. While most of anti-Jewish expressions are usually empty of any theological meaning, many of these hymns reflect the well-established theological concept that the events related to Jesus's sufferings and resurrection are a new Pascha, which was based on a new memory. Hence, building upon the early Christian tradition, Byzantine hymnographers continued to manipulate Jewish religious texts (i.e. the Old Testament) as well as the content of the most important Jewish feast to justify a 'new' memory of the past.

A revision of memory was also characteristic of Islam, another late-antique religion derived from Judaism, which laid claim to the pure Abrahamic monotheism in order to supersede both Judaism and Christianity. The Muslim Arabs also posed a serious political threat to the structures of the Byzantine Empire as a Christian state, since their goal was to conquer Constantinople and replace Byzantium. The purpose of the Byzantine anti-Muslim hymns was to counter this threat by unveiling Muslims as innate enemies of the new chosen race of Christians, and associating them with the Amalekites, the enemies of the Old Israel.

Note

- 1 Biblical scholars have found evidence for the texts of these early songs in the New Testament, as for example in Luke (1:46–55, 67–79; 2:14, 29–32); Revelation (1:5–6; 4:8, 11; 5:9–14; 7:10–12, 15–17; 11:15–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 16:5–7; 19:1–8; 22:13); in some of Paul's letters, including Romans (11:33–6) 1 Corinthians (13), Ephesians (1:3–14), Philippians (2:6–11), Colossians (1:15–20), and 1 Timothy (3:16); and in 1 Peter (2:21–5) (Sanders 1971).

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