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978-1-107-07385-2 - Performing Orthodox Ritual in Byzantium

Andrew Walker White

Excerpt

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Introduction

Greeks have more to teach us than we may think. Although they have accommodated our obsession with their antiquities, because of the richness and complexity of their post-Classical heritage they do so with a growing sense of frustration. They know that the cultural and political history of the West is founded on our notions of Classical Athens, but they also know that we have obliterated centuries of Greek history – both physically and academically. For generations we have strolled through the Theatre of Dionysus, denuded of any evidence of activity since ancient times, and because of its carefully whitewashed presentation we convince ourselves that the site has always served the same function as it did in the days of Sophocles. We puzzle briefly over the statuary plinths in the audience, erected to emperors who sponsored the gladiator fights there – the *munera* being the theatre's chief attraction in Roman times. We pass over traces, clearly etched in the orchestra floor, of Christian churches erected in these “sacred precincts.” Likewise, the fact that the Parthenon which towers up above the theatre had, by the Middle Ages, been rededicated to the Virgin Mary – becoming one of Christendom's most cherished pilgrimage sites – scarcely registers.¹

Because of the West's classical myopia, we experience a cognitive dissonance when we discover that ancient Athens proved to be ephemeral, and that the Greek form of Christianity, rooted firmly in Antiquity, found new uses for this Classical heritage. Greek culture is quite different from our own; it turns out that the theatres we cherish had many, many uses down through the centuries, so that Dionysus notwithstanding, the Orthodox have never seen the relationship between church and theatre the same way we in the West do.

Consider what happened when Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* was shown in Athens; as elsewhere it opened to mixed reviews,

¹ See Kaldellis 2009.

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but Greek objections to the film had less to do with violence than with the basic premise behind the film's production. One critic writing for the mainstream newspaper *Kathimerini* characterized Gibson's *Passion* as two hours of unrelenting torture and added: "One wonders why Gibson chose sadistic realism – bordering on the grotesque – to tell a story that is clearly symbolic."² And the late Archbishop Christodoulos, spiritual leader of the Orthodox Church in Greece, explained the ultimate problem many Orthodox viewers had with the film:

It is not the goal of the *Passion* to prompt or stir the imagination and emotions, so as to ignite hostility against people who took part in Jesus' sufferings. The goal of the *Passion* is to confront ourselves, and our sins ... I think if we limit ourselves to the emotions the film incites, we won't get what we're looking for.³

The *Passion*, arguably the most dramatic episode of the Gospels, is a perennial favorite in the West and has been enacted in various forms since the Middle Ages. But many Greek Orthodox Christians find its appeal to the emotions a distraction; as much as they love the theater they don't regard Holy Week, a season of spiritual contemplation, as a time to indulge in crude theatrical display.

It is surprising to find objections to sacred drama among Christians, especially at the dawn of the twenty-first century. But *Kathimerini's* film critic and Archbishop Christodoulos spoke to the endurance of a unique, anti-theatrical ritual aesthetic that lies at the heart of Orthodoxy to this day; an aesthetic that has yet to receive the attention it deserves, especially among theatre historians.

The purpose of this study will be, in part, to describe the origins of the Greek Orthodox ritual aesthetic during its early centuries, when it became the official faith of the Eastern Roman Empire (more commonly known as Byzantium). It will also try to explain why theatre was consciously, pointedly ignored as a model for the Orthodox rite. In the process it will challenge widespread assumptions in the West about the relationship between ritual and theatre, since for the Orthodox they remain two

² See *Kathimerini Greek Edition*, February 26, 2004, www.ekathimerini.gr/.

³ *Eleftherotypia*, February 26, 2004, www.enet.gr/. For a partial English translation see Orthodox Christian News Service, February 28, 2004, www.orthodoxnews.net/firms.com/. The Orthodox Christian News Service article characterizes Christodoulos, perhaps unfairly, as an arch-conservative and a nationalist; but the reaction among Orthodox clergy in the United States was essentially the same. See Greek Orthodox Diocese of America, February 27, 2004, www.goarch.org/en/news/. Christodoulos was regarded as an innovator in other circles, and founded an annual conference devoted to liturgical matters; see Alexopoulos 2012: 383–4.

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distinct institutions.⁴ The analysis here may also challenge assumptions we have made about Hellenism, about Greek culture, and more broadly force us to re-examine the nature of cultural stability and change.

Academically speaking when ritual and theatre meet it is usually on less-than-equal terms. One tradition portrays ritual as primal and instinctual, “ludic,” on the assumption that theatre is *ipso facto* sophisticated; this approach positions drama as if it were the ultimate, subconscious goal of ritual. Even when analyzed as a genre of performance, the overriding assumption seems to be that rituals emerge spontaneously from the performing body;⁵ the concept of ritual as an activity lacking in intellectual rigor remains.⁶ Ritual has likewise been subjected to theories of “blindness,” in which ritualization is a process fundamentally unaware of its mode of operation. Even when it is not seen as primal, blind, and unconscious, ritual is portrayed as deriving its power from a policy of “mystification,”⁷ with practitioners suppressing the truth of a rite’s mundane – or worse, theatrical – origins. Especially when confronted by Christian ritual, academics still tend to use formulations like, “Ils font du théâtre, mais ils ignorant qu’ils en font. Ils n’y voient que l’idée, le sentiment; le fait matériel leur échappe.”⁸

Elsewhere, use of theatre as a metaphor or an analytical tool for the study of ritual reinforces the perception that the two are equivalent – either in terms of cultural symbiosis or narrative structure. As Catherine Schnusenberg’s survey demonstrated, drama can be used to make

⁴ The foot-washing rite associated with Holy (Maundy) Thursday is in a category of its own; although it is situated explicitly in the Gospel episode from the Last Supper, it requires the priest to wash the feet of the entire congregation, not just a handful of celebrants representing the Apostles (as would be expected in a theatrical version of the story). Because it is intended as an act of humility and service, its performance strategy is best treated elsewhere.

⁵ This applies particularly to the process of ritualization; although Ronald L. Grimes acknowledges that rituals demand a certain amount of conscious effort, he argues for a latent spontaneous, creative element in every performance (see Grimes 1995: 58–73). The dichotomy he finds between fixed ritual and live performance would be familiar to any actor who has tackled a classic play – but the fact that a rite is scripted does not negate the need for spontaneity in performance. Spontaneity is present in all ritual to some degree, and perceptions of rigidity notwithstanding I don’t think Grimes would maintain that traditional rituals (the Synagogue rite, the Orthodox Liturgy, Catholic Mass, etc.) achieved their desired effects, time and again, by chance.

⁶ Kevin Schilbrack notes that “rituals are typically seen as mechanical or instinctual, and not as activities that involve thinking or learning” (Schilbrack 2004: 1). Through a focus on ritual action, some of the essays collected in his volume propose “new” definitions that incorporate performance, but which still reinforce the idea of ritual as pre-intellectual: “Ritual is less appropriately conceived as thoughtless action than as a thinking through and with the body” (Raposa 2004: 115).

⁷ On blindness or “misrecognition” theory see Bell 1992: 108–10. On the invisibility of ritual origins see Bell 1997: 224.

⁸ “They’re doing theatre, but they don’t know they’re doing it. They see only the idea, the feeling; the material fact escapes them” (Cottas 1931a: 91).

otherwise ancient and alien ritual practices easier for modern readers to respect and appreciate.⁹ But this approach, as fruitful as it may be for modern readers, has its limits; for all our talk of the world – even all of Creation¹⁰ – as a theatre, there is the danger that the analytical tool will be confused with the phenomenon it is designed to measure. The result is a tendency to lump together what is in reality a widely diverse group of practices; in its article on medieval drama, *Grove Music Online* chooses to define drama broadly as “any action in which the speeches, or songs, of two or more personages (realistic or symbolic) are opposed or juxtaposed”. This formulation comes dangerously close to rendering theatre and ritual exactly alike.¹¹

The early Church Fathers themselves were among the first to promote the metaphor of *kosmotheatron*, the world-as-stage; but they did so with a completely different understanding of theatre from our own. For us, theatre and dramatic literature are distinguished institutions worthy of academic study; equating theatre with ritual, in our time, seems natural. But for the Fathers theatre was a debased pagan relic to be shunned, and they were clearly anxious about the mis-perception of their rites as entertainment. Our respect for modern theatre blinds us to the fact that theatre is a historically contingent phenomenon, whose fortunes have risen and fallen numerous times since the first Dionysia.

The more general problem here is that our assumptions fail to account for the ways that ritual and theatre were constructed and interpreted within specific historical and cultural contexts.¹² The earliest Christian rituals were created in the context of the highly theatricalized culture of the later Roman Empire; by that time theatre had been a cultural institution for centuries and had long since lost its aura of sophistication; pantomime may have appealed to the intellectual classes, but for the most part working actors (mimes especially) were indistinguishable from slaves; they even lacked the routine legal protections that came with citizenship.¹³ Because

⁹ Schnusenberg 2010. ¹⁰ Schnusenberg 2010: 11.

¹¹ See the Introduction, in Stevens and Rastall n.d.

¹² For a critique of theories of ritual up to and including Catherine Bell see Grimes 2004. Victor Turner's *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (V. Turner 1982) may have been partially responsible for this confusion, but he stressed that he used theatre and drama as analogies – see V. Turner 1990. Turner's approach still creates issues, however; as Bell points out, “The comparison of ritual to all sorts of dramatic spectacles or structured improvisation effectively demonstrates shared features and similar processes. At the same time, such comparisons often result in simply describing one unknown in terms of another, and fail to account for the way in which most cultures see important distinctions between ritual and other types of activities” (Bell 1997: 76).

¹³ On the debased legal standing of theatre performers, see *CTh* 15.7.1–13 (translation in Theodosius 1952: 433–4). No intellectuals chose to defend the dignity of mimes until the early sixth century

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Christianity's rise occurred at a cultural moment when theatre had long been in a state of profound decline, the stage would have served as little more than a ritual anti-type.

The system of Christian rites that developed throughout late Antiquity and beyond were created by some of the Roman world's most gifted public intellectuals, trained in the art of rhetoric – the ancient equivalent of performance studies. The authors of the Divine Liturgy were nothing if not self-aware, and they were fully aware of their historical and cultural moment. Trained in a variety of modes of performance, steeped in Plato's ancient denunciation of the histrionic arts, and buttressed further by the Jewish tradition's theological rejection of theatre, these Roman intellectuals were in a position to create a new mode of performance based on post-theatrical, rhetorical models. And in spite of their elite status, they were more than willing to explain their mode of ritual performance and the humble origins of their practices to initiates.

Blindness does, in some ways, characterize the popular understanding of traditional Christian rites because it is here that the lines between ritual and theatre have been deliberately blurred for years. The Eucharistic rite that commemorates the Last Supper is treated as essentially theatrical; what we fail to notice is that its character is non-mimetic. Even the elevation of the Host turns out to be an accidental by-product of a complex set of negotiations during the Middle Ages over Eucharistic theology, architectural changes to the nave and sanctuary, and was complicated further by debates over the eligibility of the laity for communion. Moreover, the sight of a priest on an open platform performing the Eucharistic rite while facing the congregation is hardly "traditional," since it is the product of liturgical reforms only adopted in the mid twentieth century.

Historically contingent ritual innovations, like other historically contingent phenomena, can mislead us into drawing overbroad conclusions about the nature of Christian ritual, and hence the nature of ritual itself. Then again, this tendency to see drama in everything has its roots in a very basic human urge: we are, as Richard Schechner once pointed out, hard-wired to use narrative as a means of grasping the world around and within us, it's a dominant feature of human cognition.¹⁴ And narrative,

CE, and even Choricus of Gaza frankly describes his *Defense of the Mimes* as an entry in an oratorical contest; apparently his choice of subject matter was in part an attempt to score extra points because of its degree of difficulty (Choricus of Gaza 1972: 345:7–10).

¹⁴ "Narrativity – the need to construct a plausible story – is not only hard-wired into the brain but dominant" (Schechner 1993: 239).

or “plot” as Aristotle would put it, is the heart and soul of the drama.¹⁵ So the perception of Christian ritual as a narrative and hence dramatic form – popular since the apologist Tertullian first seemed to suggest it in the second century CE¹⁶ – can be persuasive.

What should also give us pause is the complete absence of theatrical terminology in the Church’s service books. Even with the increasingly elaborate, visually and aurally stimulating performances of the High Middle Ages, the vocabulary used to describe them – whether the Latin *representatio* and *ordo* or the Byzantine Greek *akolouthia* – indicates that the celebrants had very distinct ideas about what they were doing. Michal Kobińska has raised the question of whether familiarizing terms like “theatre” or “drama” are applicable in a medieval liturgical context. His investigations of texts like Ethelwold’s *Regularis Concordia* and Hildegard von Bingen’s *Symphonia* reveal them to be part of an ongoing negotiation over how best to manifest piety, how best to realize the visibility of the sacred. Implicitly, Kobińska asks us to choose: do we wish to understand these texts on their own terms, in their own contexts? Or would we prefer to make the material more familiar, visible, or “knowable” even if it means that we distort their nature?

With the formation of Christian ritual in particular, we may well ask whether drama was in some sense the more primal of the two forms, historically and developmentally speaking. Any ritual can incorporate narrative or theatrical mimesis as a part of its overall strategy, but if its goal is to activate states of heightened spiritual and cognitive intensity, dramatic impulses are only useful at a certain stage, and for a certain kind of audience. Even if we grant that Western clergy *appear* to enact Jesus’ role at the Last Supper, they do so in preparation for communion; and communion by design is a solemn act with a universe of potential meanings for each communicant – meanings that go beyond pretending to be seated at a dinner table in biblical Jerusalem. And if the goal of ritual lies beyond the aesthetic or intellectual appreciation we associate with theatre, it is safe to say the celebrants – especially at the moment of consecration – are trained to think well beyond the theatrical implications of what they do.¹⁷

¹⁵ Aristotle uses the word *mythos* here, a reminder that “myth” represents a conscious attempt to resolve an otherwise chaotic sequence of data into narrative form.

¹⁶ Tert. *Spect.* 29–30. That Tertullian uses the term “spectacle” here as a metaphor is easily overlooked.

¹⁷ In the traditional Christian rite bread and wine become the Eucharistic species, transformed ultimately into the body and blood of Christ. And although Andrew Sofer notes the theatrical uses of props masquerading as these species in medieval drama (see Sofer 2003: 31–60), any comparison between the *actual* species and stage props would be problematical.

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It is this tension created by the perceived theatricality or narrativity of Christian ritual, the conceptual gap between the celebrant's intention and the observer's interpretation that lies at the core of the present study. Here we will attempt to address the relationship between traditional theatre and ritual in the Greek Orthodox Church from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries CE, Rome's "Byzantine" period when the Empire's capital moved to the eastern city of Constantinople (now Istanbul). If there is any confusion about how to approach Byzantine culture and its rituals, it is largely self-imposed; Constantinople served as the Roman imperial seat from its official dedication in 330 CE to its final capture by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II in 1453. In addition to being politically Roman, the Empire was linguistically and culturally Greek, a fact that would have surprised nobody at the time. Long before Rome became an empire its elite had studied Classical Greek, including the great tragedies and comedies of Antiquity. They had long been expected to speak Greek fluently, composing and delivering speeches in a wide variety of creative genres (fables, anecdotes, character monologues, etc.).¹⁸

It was in this classically steeped, creative, intellectual Greek-speaking culture that Christianity first became a legal religion in the early fourth century CE. Suspicious of its surroundings and hostile to popular theatre, the newly empowered Church was anxious to make its mark as a distinctive spiritual and social practice. By the early fifth century this new "cult" had pushed all others aside, becoming the sole official religion of the Empire; in schools, meanwhile, the Septuagint (Greek) translation of Jewish scripture became required reading alongside the great dramatists of Antiquity.

Under Emperor Justinian I (527–65), two centuries after Christianity's legalization, the closure of public theatres as well as the pagan School of Athens marked the ultimate "Christianization" of Roman society.¹⁹ But throughout those transitional years, the twin poles of Roman politics and Classical Greek culture remained intact. Perhaps because of Constantinople's role in preserving the dramatic literature of Antiquity, generations of Western scholars have maintained (despite a lack of evidence) that the Orthodox Church developed a taste for sacred plays.

¹⁸ The exercise books or *progymnasmata* from the early centuries CE emphasize creativity rooted in classical models and classical modes of speech. For translations of several manuals see Kennedy 2003. Of special interest for this study is the work of Aphthonius, a contemporary of (St.) John Chrysostom who studied alongside the future Church Father under the most gifted pagan orator of the age, Libanius of Antioch.

¹⁹ Not everyone was happy with these reforms; see Procop. *Arc* 26.8–15 (English translation in Procopius 2010: 114–15).

Western assumptions about the universality of our modern theatrical impulses have led to the creation of what Walter Puchner calls a “ghost chapter” on Byzantine sacred drama.²⁰ Rumors of this “ghost chapter” have persisted in spite of Orthodoxy’s consistent rejection of theatrical realism; its visual aesthetic, as witnessed by its iconography, represents a conscious departure from classical, realistic narrative form.

Orthodoxy’s emphasis on visual culture is evident from the moment you step into a church: Jesus hovers over the nave, looking down from his lofty perch in the central dome fully clothed, serene, and (by virtue of his placement at the highest point) clearly in charge. This vision of Christ as *Pantocrator*, “All-powerful,” contrasts sharply with the West’s emphasis on the crucified “all-suffering” Christ, reinforced since the Middle Ages by vividly realized performances of the Passion. In the Orthodox tradition Christ’s suffering, while an important part of salvation history, is characterized as voluntary and hence remains largely absent from the church’s iconographical scheme.²¹ Instead of a crucifix, the sanctuary features a serene Virgin Mary, high up in the apse, holding the baby Jesus in her lap. This is not to be mistaken for a family portrait; the “baby” Jesus shows clear signs of precocity, possessing as he does the head, expression, and gesture of a mature rhetor. In this way, both traditional narratives of the Western Church – the Crucifixion and the Nativity – are undermined, inviting non-narrative-based responses from the congregation.

When our gaze returns to ground level, however, the Orthodox sanctuary appears to tell a different and more earthly story with its *templon* screen, a wall of icons set between columns and punctuated by three sets of doors for the celebrants. The *templon*’s superficial resemblance to a Hellenistic stage front (complete with inter-columnar “scenic flats” or *pinakes*) has led to the over-interpretation of the sanctuary as a theatre. In one study, Marios Ploritis juxtaposed images of a theatre and a *templon* screen as evidence that the latter derives its spatial practices from the former.²²

²⁰ See Puchner 2002: 306. For an example of this “ghost chapter” see especially Berthold 1972: 210–27.

²¹ One exception is the *epitaphion*, an embroidered cloth featuring the image of the dead Christ and placed in a symbolic tomb or sepulcher during modern Orthodox Easter-week services. Available evidence indicates the cloth was an innovation that did not reach its fullest development until the sixteenth century, i.e. after Byzantium’s fall. The most common theory is that the *epitaphion* was of monastic origin (see Taft 1978: 216–19). The symbolic bier or sepulcher, on the other hand, is so recent that it is not even mentioned in the Greek instructions for Easter Week; it is included only in the English translation (see the services for Holy Friday in Papadeas 1999: 358–409).

²² See Ploritis 1999: 160–2.

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As we shall see the *templon* screen has a complex history, one that makes Ploritis' theory untenable; the perception of similarity between a theatre and an Orthodox sanctuary fails to account for the unique histories of both institutions. Accordingly, another goal of this study will be to examine points of rupture between theatrical and ritual performance practices; past studies of theatre and drama in Byzantium have failed to account for the ways in which Orthodox ritual established a presence distinct from the theatrical culture in which it operated.²³ For all the visual and aural splendor of the Divine Liturgy, Orthodox ritual shows clear signs of an anti-theatrical aesthetic; especially in the wake of Byzantium's iconoclastic crisis in the eighth and ninth centuries, the Church paid special attention to how it realized the visibility of the sacred and achieved a unique aesthetic rooted as much in classical theories of optics as in traditional Orthodox theology.

Thanks to the recent completion of a multi-volume history of the standard Orthodox rite, the *Divine Liturgy of John Chrysostom*, and seminal studies of late Byzantine liturgical innovations, we now have a much clearer vision of how Orthodox ritual was constructed and how it grew and changed down through the centuries. What may come as a surprise is that some of Orthodoxy's most striking liturgical reforms – the theology of sacred icons, the introduction of hymnographic cycles like the *Kanons*, the adoption of kalophonic or “beautified” chant – emerge from branches of the Church that were either already under Muslim domination or soon to fall. We are talking in some sense about a ritual poetics of captivity, which becomes more brilliant and spiritually focused as the Empire's fortunes decline. We are accustomed to viewing Christian ritual as a hegemonic, top-down affair; but in this instance we must allow for a more nuanced, dynamic process of ritualization that responds directly to the situation “on the ground.”

As I write this, the evidence for traditional theatre in Byzantium remains fragmented and contradictory; a proper narrative of its historical development must await future study.²⁴ But it is still possible to discuss specific features associated with it, features which will help us to see how they were altered, discarded, and/or “ritualized” in an Orthodox context. We will begin in Chapter 1 with a comparison of spatial practices, and the “consecration” of pagan theatrical space under Roman rule through the *pompē* (processions) and the sculptural program of the *scenae frons*.

²³ See for example La Piana 1912, for “ritual-to-theatre” theory. For continuity theory see Cottas 1931.

²⁴ The most thorough treatment in English remains Puchner 2002.

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The adoption by early Christians of the *basilica* or “imperial” hall – not the theatre – as a ritual space was rich with implications; and the spatial dynamics of both the *basilica* and the great cathedral church of Hagia Sophia, which stands to this day in Constantinople, prove to be quite distinct from those of the theatre.

For Chapter 2, on Orthodox ritual performance, we begin with evidence of an anti-theatrical bias in the biblical tradition going as far back as the Septuagint. The choices made by the Orthodox authors of the Divine Liturgy, some centuries later, become clearer once we understand the Church’s deep-seated theological objections to Aristotelian enactment as well as the nature of higher education in Byzantium.²⁵ The chapter will go on to detail strategies, rooted in the rhetorical tradition, that were taken to avoid perceptions of theatricality as well as ritual agency – and the mixed success these strategies enjoyed.

One area where the Orthodox rite’s practices appear to intersect with ancient drama is in musical performance. Then as now the borders between liturgical and secular music were porous, with composers and performers working routinely in both milieus. Although early Christian hymnography emerges from a culture whose musical tastes had changed significantly since the days of the Dionysia, the principles of composition were remarkably similar. Chapter 3 will attempt to demonstrate how Orthodoxy developed its own musical tradition in tandem (and in competition) with the Roman theatre music scene. Possible links between tragic odes and Byzantine chant, while tenuous in a sense, are worth further study; Byzantine composers received training in ancient music theory, and tragedy was taught primarily as a musical form. Although the precise nature of ancient music’s influence on Byzantine chant is not fully understood, even in Byzantium’s final years music theorists perceived a direct link between the modal patterns of Antiquity and Orthodoxy.

The study culminates in a detailed analysis of a unique fourteenth–fifteenth-century Orthodox rite, the *Office* or *Service of the Furnace*, with Chapter 4 treating the *Service*’s literary and ritual origins as well as its iconography, Chapter 5 its historical context and firsthand accounts, and culminating in an analysis of its performance (and its possible modes of reception) in Chapter 6. This unique late Byzantine rite was regarded by contemporary eyewitnesses, and is still seen by some

²⁵ For the purposes of this study, “enactment” renders Aristotle’s term *dromenon*, which he uses to distinguish acting from epic or narrative performance. Ronald Grimes uses the term in a different, more general sense when he defines ritual (see Grimes 2012: 37).