

Insights into the Sinful Self: Liturgy and Subject-Formation in Byzantine Christianity

Elisabeth Engler-Starck

Abstract:

With his latest monograph *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative, and the Formation of the Self in Byzantium*, Derek Krueger provides a detailed study of Christian selfhood in Byzantine Christianity from the sixth to eleventh century. The study traces the development of a certain form of Christian identity in the works of Romanos the Melodist, Andrew of Crete, Theodore the Stoudite and Symeon the New Theologian. By examining liturgical texts like hymns and prayers and their placement within the liturgical calendar, Krueger shows how, through expressions of guilt, repentance, and compunction, Byzantine Christians identified themselves as sinners in need of salvation.

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How did liturgy influence the self-formation of Byzantine Christians? This is the question Derek Krueger, professor in the department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, asks his reader to consider in the first of the book's seven chapters. Krueger explores mechanisms of interiority which applied biblical patterns of sin and redemption and by this means shaped Christian selves. Krueger makes clear that in his study, he does not seek to analyse the religion of Byzantine individuals, but rather "collective modes for constructing and expressing a common individuality that in its generated force is not quite individual at all" (p. 8). In order to limn this liturgical self, Krueger commits himself to an eclectic approach that takes both liturgical texts and sacred images into account.

The following three chapters – addressing the hymns of Romanos the Melodist, the liturgical calendar, and Eucharistic prayers – explore the Byzantine Christian self of the sixth century. In Romanos' hymns, Krueger observes two different kinds of first-person-passages: The 'I' of the singer that sings and prays not only for his own sake, but also for the sake of modeling self-presentation for his lay Christian audience (p. 32). The other first-person passages consist of "speech-in-character" (ethopoeia) where Romanos elaborates the interior dispositions of biblical characters that form models for the Byzantine Christian (p. 45). Krueger also identifies the liturgical calendar as an instrument for relating Christians to biblical narratives: in the yearly liturgical cycle, the Christian could perceive the biblical drama as part of his or her own life. Krueger points out that by using the present tense in the hymns, Romanos and other hymnographers would transfer the biblical past into a liturgical present and therefore turn the audience from mere listeners to actual subjects within the story of salvation (p. 72-75). Turning to material evidence, Krueger shows that visual arts also reminded the Christian of his need for salvation: By depicting scenes of Christ's life and passion, distant times and places became part of the present life (p. 67-72). The anaphoral prayer spoken before the Eucharist recalled the story of salvation and asked the audience to examine their own moral state before receiving communion (p. 106). Through all of this, the audience could designate themselves as sinners that are in need of God's help.

Chapter five and six follow the construction of the Byzantine self through the eighth and ninth centuries. By examining the interior dialogues between the singer and his soul in the Great Kanon of Andrew of Crete, Krueger shows that for Andrew the whole Bible was a penitential text (p. 138). Figures from the Old and the New Testament occur here as models of proper comportment before God. Similarly, the new hymnal for the season of Lent by Theodore the Stoudite uses the form of "speech-in-character" in order to enforce self-identification with the penitential interiority of biblical figures like the Prodigal Son (p. 179). Comparing the examined texts, Krueger points out that in contrast to Romanos, who places the Christian directly within the biblical drama, Andrew focusses much more on the act of self-reflection (p. 159).

In the last chapter, Derek Krueger turns to the tenth/eleventh century monastic liturgies which Symeon the New Theologian introduced for his novices' education. Through ritual repetition of interior monologues, for example in private prayers recalling faults, the new monk can get closer to the ideal of monastic identity. This confessional exercise also called on the body to perform penitential subjectivity by adopting different postures (p. 205-208). Krueger concludes that the frame of the exercise in which redemption is assured alters the perception of the self as sinner: the subject perceives itself as a sinner, but as a redeemed one (p. 214).

In the conclusion, Krueger briefly describes the role icons and images play in self-perception by placing the subject in the presence of Christ and therefore under the divine gaze (p. 216). Krueger argues that guilt and sin turned out to be cultural products: The "inquiry has articulated the cultural construction of self-blame and penance as a method for resolving the potential effects and apparent consequences of sin. [...] Liturgy acknowledged sin in the formative apprehension of the self" (p.218-19). Krueger concludes that "in a moment before their amnesty, the liturgy called selves into being with interpellative force. It produced a communication of liturgical subjects poised between self-recognition and salvation." (p. 221)

Derek Krueger's monograph provides detailed insight into an important part of Byzantine cultural history. His study fills a gap in the field of examinations of selfhood in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, a field that previously focussed mainly on western Christianity and monastic contexts. A closer look at how the treatment of monastic prayers in the last chapter relates to the formation of selves of lay Christian communities analysed in the previous chapters could have shed useful light on the relationship between the piety and the construction of the self of monks and lay people. Nonetheless, with a consistent interpretive frame built on biblical patterns of sin and redemption, the book gives a clearly structured account of how mechanisms of interiority shaped Christian selves over a period of several centuries. Krueger's approach, connecting material and iconographic evidence with textual sources, is especially effective at generating insights into these historical processes of Christian formation of the self, and further research extending this analysis of the material evidence would be a welcome contribution to the field.

Krueger not only shows how models of selfhood were constructed in late-antique and medieval Byzantine Christianity, but also gives an extensive account of Byzantine liturgy, its content

and development. Liturgical Subjects is a valuable study not only for scholars working on constructions of the self, but also for those interested in Byzantine Christianity. It will be a welcome resource for both scholars already familiar with this period, and graduate students in the fields of Byzantine or Religious studies.