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From Profane to Divine: The Hegemonic Appropriation of Pagan Imagery into Eastern Christian Hymnody

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**FROM PROFANE TO DIVINE:
THE HEGEMONIC APPROPRIATION OF PAGAN IMAGERY INTO
EASTERN CHRISTIAN HYMNODY**

By

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Abstract

Spanning the first seven centuries of Christianity, this paper explores how Eastern Christian and Byzantine hymn chant was developed alongside pagan and Jewish worship traditions around the Near East. Comparison of hymns by Christian composers such as St. Romanos the Melodist and pagan poetry reveals many similarities in the types of metaphorical imagery used in both religious expressions. Common in Christian hymn texts, well-known metaphors, like the “Light of God,” are juxtaposed with pagan mythological gods, such as Apollo and Helios. This paper attempts to explain how and why Christians appropriated and adopted ancient pagan imagery into the burgeoning musical tradition of Christian hymn singing.

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Chapter One

From the Heathens – Christian Adoption of Pagan Imagery

“The past is always instructive but not necessarily normative. What we do today is ruled not by the past but by the adaptation of tradition to the needs of the present. History can only help us decide what the essentials of that tradition are, and the parameters of its adaptation”

Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in the East and West*, 1986.¹

Robert Taft, a religious scholar and musicologist, explains the nature of religion and its inclination over time to adapt the past and traditions for its evolving religious audience. But what are the implications of a dominant religious power adapting and adopting the traditions of *another* religion? What can we learn of this relationship between two religious powers that borrow and share similar traditions such as music, literature, art, and worship practices? When political power shifts between two religions, how does this affect the nature of their relationship? In this paper, the Eastern Christian Church becomes the subject for the questions posed above. By the end of the sixth century CE, the Church had skillfully coopted the imagery and musical structures of their Greek neighbors, the “pagans,” while simultaneously usurping the power once held by the ancient religion. This rapid transference of power and tradition begs the question: Which traditions are uniquely Christian and which have been borrowed (stolen) over the centuries of its development from the politically weaker religions?

In the earliest years of the Christian religion, emerging after the life and death of Jesus Christ, this burgeoning new theology differentiated itself from the theologies of its

¹ Taft, xiv-xv.

Jewish and pagan predecessors by recognizing the coming of the Messiah to earth and worshipping only the “Almighty God.” Additionally, it became necessary to distinguish Christian practice from the two ancient traditions in other ways, for example: musical worship practices, art, and literature. The desire for a musical custom unique to Christianity was satisfied by the development of a new kind of hymn-singing tradition. In the Christian Church, hymns are religious musical events that are often sung to exalt the glory of God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ, as well as honor the Virgin, explain the faith, or depict a range of other theological topics. Frequently, the lyrics of Christian hymns explicitly depict the importance of an undivided Holy Trinity in contrast to monotheistic Judaism, which does not recognize Jesus as Christ, and polytheistic paganism, which recognizes multiple gods and therefore rejects the idea of a singular Almighty God. However, less well known are the veiled political underpinnings of many of these early poetic chants. Deeper analysis of hymn texts in this paper will show that Early Christian and Byzantine era hymn poetry also reflects the complexities of the religious and political struggles that occurred over the first centuries after the life of Jesus Christ. Although seemingly straightforward in their content and structure (being monophonic chants and normally repetitive), the old Christian hymns became the vehicle for a multifaceted social commentary of the time in which they were composed. This paper will attempt to reveal the deeper meanings of these hymn texts as they relate to Christianity’s climb toward religious dominance.

Egon Wellesz, in his book *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*, explains that though their tunes were developed “on the pattern of older melodies” from classical Greek, Pagan, Syrian, and Judaic origin, Early Christian and Byzantine hymns

are unique from other musical features of Eastern Liturgy, namely psalms, because the texts are not scripturally based.² The poetries of the hymns are “free paraphrases” of biblical teachings written by *melódos*, hymn composers.³ Although the content of Christian hymns was tightly regulated during the first eight centuries CE, a *melódos* had a certain level of artistic freedom afforded to him, which was often used to incorporate multiple levels of religious allegory. These allegories took the form of naturalistic and elemental metaphors for basic Christian beliefs, like baptism or Jesus as the Savior, using elaborate depictions of fire, water, light, and dark for example. As Ephrem Lash notes, any one of these elemental metaphors represents “the revelation of a mystery that is both present and yet beyond, both alluring and overpowering, so that [the worshipper] may cry out in awestruck worship.”⁴ The wondrous practice of Christian hymn singing, in all its allegorical complexity, was used as a tool for uniting the Christian followers and attracting potential converts.

But was this naturalistic imagery a Christian invention? Examination of the relics and documents of any number of ancient civilizations would prove otherwise. The sun as a symbol of universal light, for example, has been worshipped by countless societies of people spanning the entire globe as far back as archeologists have uncovered.⁵ But then, from whom did Christians borrow these elemental metaphors of fire, water, dark, and light? Evidence presented in the following chapters will point toward the ancient Greeks with their rich polytheistic mythology, including sun gods like Apollo. What were the implications of borrowing and remodeling this ancient imagery? How were the

² Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 43.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Lash, Introduction, xviii.

⁵ Odenwald, “Sun: Ancient Civilizations.”

metaphors deployed in Early Christian and Byzantine hymns? What sort of social commentary were the *melódos* attempting to make by using borrowed imagery from an competing religious power, as were the pagans? These questions will be explored in the pages to follow.

Even though today hymnic worship is a quintessential element of the Eastern liturgy and many other denominations of Christianity, the adoption of a hymn tradition was extremely contentious for more than two centuries from the beginnings of Christian worship. In the first and second centuries CE, Savas J. Savas states, in his book about Eastern Christian Hymnology, that the Church rejected the practice of singing hymns because they were considered “creations of contemporary men.”⁶ In other words, there was a Christian mistrust of any poetry or musical literature that was not found in the Scriptures: anything that was not divine, the Word of God, was considered profane and unacceptable.⁷ This sentiment was shaped by the insidious fear of pagan ideology, the dominant religion of the Near East, infecting and unraveling the fledgling Christian religion, the catalysts being represented by the theater, “a site of moral decomposition,” and by Olympic-style feasts, as well as polytheism, orgies, musical instruments, and idol worship.⁸ The singing of hymns that borrow pagan imagery was, therefore, met by a great deal of resistance before its adoption into the Eastern Christian liturgy.

With the advent of Constantine’s Peace in 312 CE, a political upheaval of pagan power, and the construction of Byzantium (Constantinople) as “New Rome,” the Eastern Church began to recognize the value of this flourishing musical tradition of hymn

⁶ Savas, 44.

⁷ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 79-94.

⁸ *ibid.*

singing. Perhaps it was the increased freedom that Christians enjoyed that allowed for the acceptance of pagan-inspired hymns, or the realization that hymn singing, a popular practice, could encourage more Christian converts; either way, eventually the Eastern Church appropriated these once “profane” musical practices into the liturgy.

The Church, originally averse to the pagan characteristics of this musical genre, recognized the symbolic significance of the secular, naturalistic imagery depicted in the hymns (light, dark, fire, water) and coopted it as symbolism for the Light of God and Darkness of sin, the burning Fires of faith and cleansing Fount of Christ’s teachings, for example. This “careful mixing of ancient literary traditions” (pagan and Jewish) is, as Michael Roberts clarifies in his article on Christian Latin poetry, what gives Eastern Orthodox hymnody so many rich layers of what is known as “*Christian allegory*.”⁹ The hegemony of the Christian Empire appropriated pagan elemental imagery into its own musical tradition, hymnody, and then attempted to erase the existence of its “heathenish” ancestry. The following chapters of this paper will present five different Christian hymns and explain the ways in which their authors have employed ancient elemental imagery and encouraged this deliberate erasure of pagan history.

⁹ Roberts, 631. Emphasis my own.

Chapter Two

Eastern Christian Terminology

Eastern Christian liturgy of the cathedral tradition is complicated even for those who have been immersed in the religious culture from a young age. The added complication of defining certain liturgical and musicological terms is exacerbated by the lack of systematic usage among modern scholars: in his book *At the Lighting of the Lamps*, Greek Orthodox priest and scholar, John A. McGuckin uses the term “hymn” when referring to Biblical psalms;¹⁰ even the New Testament itself is ambiguous in its meaning of certain terms like hymn and psalm (to the dismay of many scholars and musicologists) often using similar but fundamentally different terms interchangeably and without much discretion, according to Dimitri Conomos.¹¹ For the sake of continuity within this paper and to encourage the continued scrutiny and redefining of otherwise ambiguous Early Christian, Byzantine, and other religious terms, this chapter is dedicated to analyzing the various usages of recurring words and objectively synthesizing the various definitions found in sources spread over two millennia into cohesive and understandable descriptions.

It should be noted that this paper will cover only the music of the Cathedral tradition of the Eastern Christian Church. The Monastic tradition is rich and musical in its own right, but less accessible and less familiar to the millions of Eastern Christian congregants around the world. In this paper, I’ve chosen to analyze five Early Christian and Byzantine hymns that were sung (and some of which are still sung) during daily

¹⁰ McGuckin, *At the Lighting*, xi.

¹¹ Conomos, 1-4.

Cathedral services. Their relationships to three pagan and pagan-inspired poems will be analyzed in chapters five and six. This chapter begins by defining the common musical terms of the Eastern Christian Church as well as clarifying terms like paganism, for the sake of clarity.

The Subtle Variations of Hymnography, Hymnology, and Hymnody

“Hymnology is the study of the hymns of the church.”¹² By this definition, hymnography is the process of composing hymns and a hymnographer is the composer, hymnist, or, in Greek, *melódos*.¹³ The study of hymnology analyzes the historical and musicological facets of hymnody – the collective body of composed hymns¹⁴ – sung within denominations of Christianity and Judaism. These facets include theorizing of the origins and development of hymnody within the Church or Synagogue, critically analyzing a hymn’s musical structure and poetry, describing the relationship between ecclesiastical text and melody, and illuminating the importance of the hymnal relationship to liturgy and worship practices. The website of the St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Washington DC explains, “[w]hatever in the area of Orthodox worship is related to the ecclesiastical poetry and its creators is studied in both its philological and theological aspects in order that we may better understand the artistic quality of the hymns and their deeper relationship to the entire spirit of the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church.”¹⁵ Hymns are an integral part of Christian musical worship

¹² Savas, 1.

¹³ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 40.

¹⁴ “Vocabulary.”

¹⁵ Paschos.

practices making hymnography essential for a deeper understanding of the Christian religion as a whole.

Wellesz emphasizes in two of his publications the importance of the relationship between hymnal melodies and the corresponding text: “the close connexion [sic] between music and words in both Byzantine and Gregorian chant may be noted as of special significance.”¹⁶ Subsequent musicologists explain in more direct terms that, in fact, the music and text are “inseparable.” Unfortunately, much of the original music has been lost over the millennia. Therefore, this paper will focus on the lyrics of Christian hymns separate from their melodies. Through the analysis of Early Christian and Byzantine hymnody of the Eastern Christian liturgy, this paper will examine the fundamental relationship between the imagery depicted in the lyrics and imagery of pagan poetry.

Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs

It is important to note the differences between hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs within the Eastern Orthodox liturgy. Hymns, psalms and, to a lesser extent, spiritual songs are predominant musical elements that “were, and remain, the core of morning and evening cathedral offices” in the Eastern Christian Church (and in many other denominations of Christianity as well).¹⁷ Each of these musical elements, all of which are types of liturgical chant within the Church, are specially selected to represent the theme of the day, whether to serve a particular saint or to celebrate a feast day. However, the historical and philological contexts and performance practices of these three musical rituals differ dramatically.

¹⁶ Wellesz, *Eastern Elements in Western Chant*, 3.

¹⁷ Taft, 41.

First, psalms, being a part of the tradition of psalmody, are unique from hymns because their texts are derived from biblical Scripture. Early Christians, familiar with Jewish psalms, quickly adopted the Psalms of David and others to create their own psalter. A “precentor” in the Jewish Synagogue, and later “cantors” in the Christian churches, would sing a psalm in its entirety and the congregation would respond with an “interpolated phrase.”¹⁸ In Christian churches or cathedrals that were large enough, alternating choirs might take over the responsibility of the cantor and congregational singing. Alternatively, if the psalms were highly ornamented and melismatic, a soloist might sing in lieu of the choir or congregation to maintain the musicality of the piece.¹⁹

By comparison, hymns, separate from the Jewish tradition of psalm singing, are composed from non-scriptural, ecclesiastical poetry and were implemented into Christian liturgy as “creations of contemporary men.”²⁰ These “contemporary” creations had distinct structural differences from psalms as well as poetical originality. Hymns of the Eastern Church can be found in the Byzantine Hirmologion and Sticherarion tomes and are used for the purpose of praising God. Hymns range in musical complexity from “simple syllabic songs to richly embellished chants.”²¹ *Melódos* or composers wrote this music and – unlike psalms – the composers’ names and thus their legacies were immortalized in their works.²² Some *melódos* even wrote their names into the hymns

¹⁸ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 35-40.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Savas, 44.

²¹ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 42.

²² *ibid.*, 40.

themselves through the use of acrostics.²³ This is seen most notably in the compositions of St. Romanos (see “*Kontakion*” and chapter six).

Hymn singing began to take shape concurrently with the formation and translations of the New Testament. The act of singing worshipful hymns was a common practice among pagans and early Christians alike and therefore not unfamiliar to Christians before they adopted the tradition into their liturgy around the fourth century.²⁴ The following chapters will detail the importance of sharing this musical tradition with pagans and why the process of adopting hymnody was so contentious.

Spiritual songs are the final category of chant found in the Eastern Orthodox Church. These songs are characterized by their florid melismas and simple texts. Spiritual songs are “jubilant songs” of praise to God and are typically expressed through declarations of *Alleluia*.²⁵ The term “alleluia” is a Hebrew word that was adopted into the Christian rite. This adoption provides further evidence of Jewish influence on the burgeoning Early Christian faith. However, spiritual songs are so elaborately ornamented and melismatic that it is often difficult or impossible to understand the text at all.²⁶

While Wellesz makes the point “that, musically, no absolute differentiation between the three groups is possible,”²⁷ the development and liturgical usage of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs each have unique and distinguishable historical contexts and differences in the musical relationships to their texts. An inconsistency among scholars is whether or not psalms, spiritual songs and those musical structures based on scriptural

²³ Savas, 16-20.

²⁴ McGuckin, “Poetry and Hymnography,” 644.

²⁵ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 41.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 41.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 42.

texts are included in the study of hymnology. For this paper, the body of hymnody will only encompass those musical structures of poetical originality (excluding all psalms and spiritual songs) and those musical compositions that were created for the sole purpose of Christian worship practices, separate from traditional pagan and Jewish hymns. The richness of the hymn texts that will be analyzed in the following chapters plays an integral part in expressing the naturalistic elements of Eastern Christian liturgical music shared in pagan poetry.

The Hours: Orthros and Hesperinos

The Eastern Orthodox Church has canonical hours or offices just as the Catholic Church, some Protestant churches, and Jewish Synagogue have. Western terminology for the evening office is called Vespers, while in Greek it is called *Hesperinos*. Symbolism of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and light of the world, represented in the setting sun is preserved in both Eastern and Western traditions and reflected in the particular hymns that are sung during this office.²⁸ The metaphor of Jesus Christ being the Light of mankind has intimate ties to the pagan ideas of worshiping light and darkness. The influence of paganism on Christian hymnody becomes critically important in the following chapters of this paper.

The office of *Orthros* is the Eastern equivalent of the liturgical hour of Lauds in the Western Church. At an Eastern Christian morning office service, one can expect to hear even more hymns than in a *Hesperinos* service, making the office of *Orthros*

²⁸ Taft, 278.

musically colorful and celebratory. More hours exist in the Eastern Orthodox liturgical day; however, only *Orthros* and *Hesperinos* will be relevant to this paper.

Troparion

The plural *troparia* comprise the largest body of hymn types in the Eastern Orthodox liturgy. Like all hymns in the Eastern Christian rite, *troparia* are non-Scriptural, poetic, monophonic chants. According to Oxford Music Dictionary online, *troparia* are the equivalent to the Western antiphon and are similarly monostrophic. More specifically, “*troparia* typically consist of invocations, calls for mercy, prayers, praises, dogmatic statements, or descriptions of... saints”²⁹. *Troparia*, a subcategory of hymns, can be divided further into three musical categories denoting structure – *kathismata*, *stichera*, and *kanones* – and categories specifying the *troparion*’s “specific textual content (e.g. *theotokion*, ‘a piece in honour [sic] of Our Lady’), their liturgical function (e.g. *doxastikon*, ‘to be sung with the doxology’), the day on which they are sung (e.g. *anastasimon*, ‘on the Resurrection’, i.e. Sundays) or their origin (e.g. *anatolikon*, ‘of the East’).”³⁰ By this reasoning, a *troparion* can now be a *kathismata doxastikon* (a hymn following the doxology that praises God) or a *sticheron theotokion* (a hymn to celebrate the Virgin Mary), for example.

The *troparion apolytikion*, literally meaning “*troparion* of dismissal”, is another specific type of *troparion* that concluded the service of *Orthros*, the morning service.³¹ This version of the *troparion* is much older than the other forms listed above, having

²⁹ Troelsgård, “*Troparion*.”

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

originated during the Early Christian centuries (before the fifth century), and, unlike the *troparia* above, is no longer in use today. *Troparia apolytikion* were constructed of two *automela*, or short syllabic stanzas, and were used as formulaic models for developing more complicated and ornamented *troparia* (*kathismata*, *kontakia*, *psaltikon*, *kanon*, etc.) during the subsequent Byzantine era.³²

Kontakion

The plural *kontakia* were composed using the formulae of the old *troparion apolytikion* structures and their corresponding *automela*. These non-scriptural, poetic chants constitute a special type of “story-telling hymn” and are referred to as “homil[ies] or sermon[s] in verse that [are] chanted to music,”³³ which are sung during morning *Orthros* services. Most all hymns are reserved for *Orthros* with one exception being the *Phôs Hilaron*, which is still sung every day during *Hesperinos*³⁴ (see chapter 5).

Referring again to the Oxford Music Dictionary Online, the *kontakion* structure is revered for its “dramatic content.”³⁵ While only the first one or two stanzas of select *kontakia* are used in liturgical worship today, some complete compositions were first recognized in the sixth century as canonical hymns.³⁶ Lash, translator of the *kontakia* in his book, *On the Life of Christ*, explains that the composer credited with the development and refining of the *kontakion* is St. Romanos the Melodist or “known to the Church simply as ‘The

³² *ibid.*

³³ Lash, xxviii.

³⁴ *ibid.*, xxviii.

³⁵ Thodberg, “*Kontakion*.”

³⁶ *ibid.*

Melodist’.”³⁷ St. Romanos composed around 60 scholarly-accepted lengthy *kontakia* by the time of his death in 556, although “pious” fables suggest that he wrote upwards of one thousand.³⁸

This newly developed poetic structure of the Christian Byzantine Empire was much longer and more complex than its simple *troparia* ancestor. Observed in St. Romanos’ *kontakia* as well as in others, there is always a short initial strophe or prelude called either the *prooemion* or *koukoulion*. Today, only the *koukoulion* is sung during Eastern Orthodox services and is synecdochically and inaccurately referred to as a “*kontakion*,” negating the *kontakion*’s much longer more complex structure. The anonymously composed “*Akathist* to the Mother of God,” or “*Akathistos* Hymn,” is the only *kontakion* still “chanted in full on the fifth Saturday of Lent” (see chapter five).³⁹ However, in the original and more complete *kontakion* form, the *koukoulion* is followed by eighteen to twenty-four *oikoi* (pronounced “*ikoi*”) or longer stanzas, “all in identical metre [sic].”⁴⁰ Each *oikoi* is punctuated with a refrain – or *ephymnion* – that underlines the main theme of the chanted sermon. While a soloist would have sung the majority of the *kontakion*, the church congregants would have all joined in the singing of the recurring *ephymnion*.⁴¹ To draw attention to the poetical originality of these hymns, composers would often use “the initial letters of each stanza [to] form an acrostic. Those of St. Romanos normally take the form OF THE HUMBLE ROMANOS.”⁴²

³⁷ Lash, xxviii.

³⁸ Lash, xxiii-xxxii.

³⁹ *ibid.*, xxix-xxx.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, xxix.

⁴¹ Thodberg, “*Kontakion*.”

⁴² Lash, xxix.

Paganism and Judaism

According to broad Christian theology (encompassing both Eastern and Western rites), that which is labeled “pagan” is any religion or set of beliefs that falls outside of the beliefs and values of Christianity and Judaism, or, as described to me by Professor Andrew Jacobs at Scripps College, pagans are considered “everyone else.”⁴³ Although this broad definition does emphasize the dichotomized mentality of Christians and pagans alike, it does not provide a comprehensive definition of who the pagans were and what they believed. St. Romanos the Melodist classified “everyone else” as those people of different language and religion: Romans, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Arabs, Asians, and Phrygians,⁴⁴ showing how diverse and complex the pagan religions actually were in the sixth century. Laced into the lyrics of his *kontakia* (most notably that of the Pentecost), St. Romanos fervently “displays a contempt for the learning of the Greco-Roman world that was common with the Fathers [of the Church], not to mention the Emperor Justinian.”⁴⁵ Greco-Roman theology and imagery strongly influenced the educated members of the Church and state – even the emperor – and caused tension and political anxiety among Christian melodists, like St. Romanos. The poetic expression of St. Romanos’ religious zealotry against paganism is analyzed in chapter six.

As Michele Salzman, religious scholar, explains, the scholarly definition of the term “paganism” is murky and is often bent and stretched to reflect whatever definition a particular author needs it to be: sometimes paganism will encompass other polytheistic

⁴³ Jacobs, interview.

⁴⁴ Lash, 214.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 215.

religions of Europe, Asia, and Africa, or it is limited to only the Greco-Roman polytheistic theology/mythology. “Classic historians ‘invented’ the term ‘paganism’ to bring together a wide range of traditional religious and cultic practices in the Mediterranean world.”⁴⁶ Although the term is problematic, even Salzman explains there is no better word to describe these religious populations when comparing their theology to that of Christianity while avoiding further labeling confusion.⁴⁷ For the purposes of this paper, the term paganism will refer to those non-Christian and non-Judaic religions that occupied the same geographical space with Christianity, namely Greco-Roman theology with a heavy emphasis on the earlier Greek (Hellenistic) polytheistic religions.

During the explosive period of religious growth within Christianity, Judaism remained an important influence on the development of this new religion but is not included in the “heathenish” definition of paganism.⁴⁸ Judaism shared, and currently shares, more traditions and religious dogma with Christianity than most pagan religions did, evidence being the common texts of the Hebrew Scriptures (referred to as The Old Testament by Christians) including the Psalms of David. This legitimized, in the minds of fifth century Christians, the community of Jews above pagans and even heretical Christians.⁴⁹ Jews “were a marked race and, although granted legal existence (in contrast to heretical Christians who could anticipate only persecution), had limited rights and were expected to dwindle away as a nation as living witness to the curse that had fallen

⁴⁶ Salzman, 187.

⁴⁷ The term paganism is a hegemonic construction of an otherwise diverse collection of religious cultures. The term is used to homogenize and identify an adversarial “other” contra to Christian beliefs and practices.

⁴⁸ Salzman, 187.

⁴⁹ Lash, xxv.

on them for rejecting God Incarnate.”⁵⁰ Although Christians, after their rise to political power, did not actively support Judaism, Jews were not nearly as reviled as the pagans. For this paper, a distinct difference should be noted here between the local pagan religions, like Hellenistic polytheism, and Judaism, being monotheistic and a religious ancestor of Christianity.

Keeping in mind that Judaism has historically influenced Christian theology, literature, and artistic expression due to their relationship in ancestry, the following chapters will focus on the less-well-known pagan influences on Christian thought. This will be demonstrated by the analysis of elemental imagery in Early Christian and Byzantine hymnody juxtaposed by pagan poetry.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, xxv-xxvi.

Chapter Three

History of Eastern Orthodox Hymnody

The vastness of scholarly resources accessible concerning Gregorian chant must be recognized as a reflection of its importance in the Western construction of Christianity. The same cannot be said of Eastern Byzantine chant. As McGuckin, explains, “Greek Christian hymns are a massive part of the surviving literary record of the early church, but have rarely attracted the level of scholarly attention that they deserve.”⁵¹ This unfortunate disparity of analytical writing (especially in the English language) between these two original and still actively practiced forms of musical Christian worship is perpetuated by the unfair conclusions of some of the first attempts to describe and qualify Byzantine chant. In his book about chant, “one of the leading Byzantine musicologists of our time,”⁵² Dimitri Conomos quotes August Wilhelm Ambros, a nineteenth century Austrian composer and musical historian, who made some of the most notable criticisms of Byzantine chant: “Well trained musicians and singers Byzantium could not supply, for it was the most unmusical place in the world.”⁵³ Musicologists like Conomos and his contemporaries understand that this damning qualitative assessment of Byzantine chant is not a true reflection of the musicality of the Eastern Christians, but rather an important indication that this geographically unique genre is unfamiliar to Western ears. Likewise, the unfamiliarity of Byzantine chant is perpetuated by the shortage of scholarship on the topic. In fact, it wasn’t until 1867 that

⁵¹ McGuckin, “Poetry and Hymnography,” 641.

⁵² Conomos, back cover.

⁵³ Conomos, 29.

any musicologist approached Byzantine liturgical chant as a legitimate and relevant musical genre. This musicologist was French Cardinal Jean Baptiste Pitra and he published the first “critical study” of Greek hymns separate from the Western tradition of hymnody.⁵⁴ His work spurred the attention of many other Eastern liturgical scholars in the following century including Wellesz, Tillyard, Taft, and Conomos.

Many myths about Early Christian music have emerged and evolved over the last two millennia in an attempt to compensate for the general lack of understanding of this ancient music. Unfortunately, a vast majority of the original hymn melodies (and all of St. Romanos’ melodies; see chapter six) have been lost due to the original system of oral transmission of hymnody before the ninth century, after which a standardized written tradition for music emerged.⁵⁵ Analysis, for the purposes of this paper, will be concerned with the hymnal lyrics that were more easily preserved during the Early Christian and Byzantine eras. An initial misconception of Eastern Christian music was the idea that hymns did not reflect the “real theology” of the church. Because hymns written in the Early Christian era were constructed from original poetry rather than canonical Scriptural passages, the music was seen as “being merely the leveling down of significant Christian thought into a form of low-level catechesis”.⁵⁶ However, the prevalence and importance of the centuries-old hymns that are sung today in the Eastern Christian Church should be some indication of their theological relevancy. In short, hymns quickly became, and still are today, a fundamental part of the Eastern Orthodox liturgy.

⁵⁴ McGuckin, “Poetry and Hymnography,” 643.

⁵⁵ Conomos, 35.

⁵⁶ McGuckin, “Poetry and Hymnography,” 641-2.

Byzantine: A Scholarly Misnomer

Before investigating the historical mystery that is the development of Eastern Christian hymnody, one must first address the prevailing anachronisms and misnomers of this ancient tradition. Egon Wellesz, in his book *Eastern Elements in Western Chant*, addresses the term “Byzantine” and how it is used in scholarly writings. “‘Byzantine’ has been used by scholars indiscriminately as a term for everything of non-Latin origin... [M]ost influences go back to the earlier liturgies of Syria or even to the Synagogue.”⁵⁷ The older city of Byzantium was the site on which Emperor Constantine founded the city of Constantinople in 324, more than two centuries after the first stirrings of original Christian practices. There remains more than two centuries of music that is historically misrepresented. Furthermore, Byzantine music is often synonymous with liturgical Christian chant, suggesting that Byzantium produced only divine music. While Greek classicist, Constantine A. Trypanis, asserts that “the first flowering of the new Christian religious poetry [was] the only original Byzantine literary achievement,”⁵⁸ Wellesz counters in his major work, *Byzantine Music and Hymnography*, that non-Christian, non-Jewish (read pagan) music was indeed being composed and performed in Byzantium and that the lack of these music transcripts can be attributed to the negative social value of this music and the active restrictions against pagan music, and paganism in general, imposed by the Church.⁵⁹ Wellesz goes on to explain how other terms like “Psaltic” (meaning of or related to the Eastern Christian psalter) may more accurately label the

⁵⁷ Wellesz, *Eastern Elements*, 6.

⁵⁸ Trypanis, lii.

⁵⁹ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 1.

music that these scholars are often alluding to, both in terms of historical timeline and description of music.⁶⁰

Wellesz may not have changed the terminology scholars use to describe “Byzantine” or Psaltic chant for we must consider the intensity by which the word Byzantine still clings to this musical tradition,⁶¹ but more importantly, Wellesz was able to shed light on how this music is misrepresented in Western culture and provide a comprehensive timeframe for which Eastern Christian liturgical (“Byzantine”) chant and hymnody should be analyzed. In a modest attempt to correct some other misleading ideas of Eastern Orthodox musical practices and hymnody, this chapter will present an overview of the history during which the Christian religion and its unique musical tradition developed.

The Early Christian Era: “In the Beginning”

The developmental time period of Early Christianity, catalyzed by the life and death of Jesus Christ, occurred within a geographical region historically controlled by pagan emperors. Therefore, once Christian ideology began to spread from Byzantium to the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Northern Africa⁶² between the first and third centuries,⁶³ the new followers of Christianity were met with severe, state-supported pagan resistance. Christians were not allowed to build churches or temples within the

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ A Google search of the phrase “Byzantine chant” elicited over 1.6 million results as opposed to “Psaltic chant” with fewer than eighteen thousand. November 3, 2012.

⁶² The Mediterranean, Middle East, and northern Africa are part of a large region that I will refer to as the “Near East.”

⁶³ Sen, fig. Map of Christianity.

pagan-dominated Near East or worship in public areas for fear of persecution.⁶⁴ However, the fledgling Christian religion grew nonetheless and rapidly expanded due to conversions and baptisms. Religious and political unrest, generated by the threat of a growing adversarial religion, led to large-scale persecutions, as prescribed by the pagan-controlled state of Byzantium and other surrounding cities, of anyone caught worshipping in makeshift Christian “house-churches”⁶⁵ or those exposed by their “suspicious neighbours.”⁶⁶ Needless to say, Christianity was not a welcomed movement in its first three centuries, but the Apostles and later followers ardently continued to develop and spread their theology despite the threats on their lives.

The Byzantine Era: Recognition by the State

The event that marked the beginnings of change for the Christian movement was the enforcement of an edict sanctioned by first openly Christian Roman emperor, Constantine, referred to today as Constantine’s Peace in 312 CE. This edict “decreed toleration” of Christianity and its worship practices in the Near East.⁶⁷ A similar event took place in Milan one year later. “In 313 CE, Constantine and Licinius [another Roman emperor] issued the Edict of Milan which stipulated that the Roman state adopt a position of neutrality and allow religious freedom to all.”⁶⁸ After these two edicts were enforced, “Constantine soon took the opportunity to favour his new religion with gifts and

⁶⁴ Jacobs, interview.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Salzman, 186.

⁶⁷ Roberts, 629.

⁶⁸ Salzman, 186-187.

privileges.”⁶⁹ For example, “ecclesiastical dioceses and provinces were organized, synods held, monasteries founded, basilicas and baptisteries built, mosaics created to adorn them.”⁷⁰ Thanks to Emperor Constantine, Christians were now free to practice their religion without threat of persecution. Meanwhile, Constantine rebuilt the Greek city of Byzantium in 324 CE to create a “new Empire of the East” called Constantinople as a symbol of the “New Rome.”⁷¹

Within the course of a few short decades, Christianity had usurped the power once held by the pagans: “By the end of the fourth century, the interests of Christian institutions had begun to merge – fitfully and not without drama, to be sure – with the political interests of the Roman Empire.”⁷² This process of political turnover was by no means slow. As Roberts explains, “[t]he last decades of the fourth century saw the completion of the process by which Christianity became the sole official religion of the Roman state.”⁷³ With the perceived⁷⁴ tyranny of the pagan-controlled state still fresh in their minds, Christians banned pagan sacrifice and closed temples by the year 391 CE,⁷⁵ as well as “persecute[ed] pagans and coerc[ed] their conversion” to Christianity.⁷⁶ Clearly, the proverbial tables had turned for the Christians as they enjoyed their new religious dominance. This monumental “Constantinian” shift in power is reflected in the lyrics of the Christian hymns that will be analyzed in chapters five and six.

⁶⁹ Salzman, 187.

⁷⁰ Taft, 31.

⁷¹ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 17.

⁷² Jacobs, “Jews and Christians,” 174.

⁷³ Roberts, 629.

⁷⁴ Salzman, 189-190. Christian apologetic literature does reflect a high level of pagan oppression, however, there are scholarly disputes as to how tyrannical the pagan empire really was toward the Christian populations.

⁷⁵ Roberts, 629.

⁷⁶ Salzman, 187.

With the dawn of a new century, Rome fell in 410 leaving “New Rome” or Constantinople as the regional capital.⁷⁷ Although controlled now by Christians, pagans and paganism still lived and worshipped within this new empire. Christians homogenized the pagan religions by lumping them into categories and referring to them as “Gentiles,” “heathens,” “the nations,” “Greeks,” and “Hellenes”.⁷⁸ In reaction to this newly acquired Christian power, “the [pagan] theater was apparently used as a means of ridiculing Christian religion and its rites.”⁷⁹ This is evidenced by the Eastern Christian Church’s fear of heretical hymns or “psalmoi idiotikoi,” which were pagan compositions that resembled those of the Church in structure but lyrically undermined and satirized Christian theology.⁸⁰ “For Christians, poetry, and fine writing generally, had long been seen as dangerously seductive”⁸¹ with its ties to “heathenish” pagan indulgences like theater, as in the case above, as well as feasts, the Olympics, orgies, instrumental music, and most notably, gods.⁸² In response to the heretical artistic expressions of pagan literature and celebration, actors of theater were refused last sacrament, baptism, and holy communion and also suffered politically: they were denied the right to inheritance and witness of court, for example.⁸³ By 527, devout Christian Roman Emperor Justinian “finally closed the pagan schools of Athens whose origins went back to Plato and Aristotle” in an attempt to discourage the dissemination of pagan beliefs.⁸⁴ “Theology

⁷⁷ Lash, xxii.

⁷⁸ Salzman, 187.

⁷⁹ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 87.

⁸⁰ Taft, 28.

⁸¹ Roberts, 629.

⁸² Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 87-94.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 87.

⁸⁴ Lash, xxiv.

was by no means a marginal matter in sixth century Byzantium.”⁸⁵ The Christian Empire effectively left paganism to fizzle out and die by the end of the sixth century.⁸⁶

Hymnody: The Musical Expression of Christianity

“From its earliest days, the Christian Church has used chants in its worship” and still, in the Eastern Church, the chanting of hymns and psalms is a daily practice.⁸⁷ Due to the volatile first few centuries of Christian development demonstrated above, Christian musical expression in the form of hymnody, created to serve the deeper understanding of Scriptural text,⁸⁸ changed and developed dramatically within the shifting historical and sociopolitical contexts in which it was written.

Although the lyrics of hymns, unlike psalms, are original ecclesiastical expressions of the Scriptures, “[t]he activity of the hymnodists was restricted to the reiteration and elaboration of certain poetical ideas from the canticles and psalms.”⁸⁹ This does not mean, however, that the *melódos* lacked the ability to create beautiful, original poetry. They composed their lyrics not through the expressions of personal ideas, as most secular poetry is free to explore, rather “the inspirations of the Byzantine hymn-writer came from a different source”: the divine lessons or the Bible.⁹⁰ But even the degrees by which the Church would accept these compositions varied greatly depending on the century.

⁸⁵ Lash, xxiv.

⁸⁶ Trypanis, li.

⁸⁷ Lash, xxviii.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 147.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 148.

It would seem that hymns, being so ubiquitous in Christian practice today, would have been equally as important from the very beginning. However, the hyper-vigilant, anti-pagan, Eastern Christian Church of the fourth century, having just celebrated the Peace of Constantine, was actually quite strict on the criteria for new hymns. This was due to the widespread fear of the perversion of Christian doctrine from heretical pagan theater, poetry, and music. The Council of Laodicea at the end of the fourth century “prohibited the singing of private psalms in churches, admitting only ‘the book of the 150 psalms’” and rejected new hymns all together regardless of theological content.⁹¹ Later, by 563 CE when paganism seemed less of a threat, the Council of Braga lessened the restrictions against hymns by issuing a new edict. Wellesz explains, “all hymns which were not based on passages from the Scriptures were excluded from use in liturgical service.”⁹² Although Wellesz’s explanation of the edict seems quite restrictive, this amendment actually enabled the Church to adopt some ecclesiastical hymns from composers like St. Romanos and others into the liturgy; a clear relaxation of the liturgical dogma.

Over the first few centuries of Christianity, the fluctuating regulations for adopting new hymns, dictated by the state edicts (Laodicea, Braga, and others) played a major role in determining which certain compositions would be persevered in the liturgy of the Church. These hymns texts have been passed down over time to the form one sees them in today. The original *melódos* of these hymns, regardless of their time in history or the severity of the Church regulations on their craft, have always been able to incorporate their political views into their poetry. Using English translations of Early Christian and

⁹¹ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 147.

⁹² *ibid.*, 147.

Byzantine hymns, chapters five and six will analyze the political commentaries of the Christian composers of the first seven centuries. The use of pagan imagery within strictly regulated Christian hymnody will be analyzed as a tool by which Christian *melódos* would critique their “heathen” neighbors and encourage their baptisms.

Chapter Four

The Transference of Theological Imagery from Pagans to Christians

From the previous chapter, it is clearly seen that Christians and pagans occupied the same geographical spaces within Constantinople and other regions of the Near East and West.⁹³ Therefore, the artistic expressions of these two competing religious powers (their music, poetry, literature, etc.) were being developed within a multicultural atmosphere despite the contention between them. “In a world in which these groups lived side by side... Christians and pagans influenced each other.”⁹⁴ This is evidenced by the Christian development of hymnody. Before it was a predominant feature of Christian worship “hymnic worship was the bedrock of ancient Greek [pagan] religion.”⁹⁵ Pagans sang hymns to honor their deities like Zeus, Apollo, and Poseidon. From the very beginnings of Christianity, the baptized followers of this new religion appropriated the pagan tradition and structures of hymnal singing to worship a new god: Jesus Christ.

McGuckin explains, “Greek Christians did not need extensive tutoring in the art of hymnody as integral to religious devotion, but hymns that were distinctively Christian took some time, about two centuries, to accumulate their own tradition.”⁹⁶ McGuckin’s claim suggests that Christians eventually developed a musical singing tradition that was uniquely their own. However, I would argue that the inter-religious sharing of poetic imagery, musical structures, and theology, especially in the first centuries after the life of Jesus Christ, prevented the Church from creating a hymnic custom entirely distinctive

⁹³ Trypanis, xlix.

⁹⁴ Salzman, 189-190.

⁹⁵ McGuckin, 644.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

from that of the pagans. Within this two-century period of development that McGuckin refers to, Early Christian hymns adopted the imagery and theology of familiar practices, like those of paganism and Judaism. Meanwhile, the Church espoused a “hostile attitude” toward pagan literary, musical, and artistic expression, like that of the theater,⁹⁷ and this antagonistic trend would persist for centuries. Early Christian followers frequently criticized paganism as being “the site of moral decomposition.”⁹⁸ After the Peace of Constantine, in an attempt to eradicate these “perverse” pagan traditions, the Church tried first to eliminate the ubiquitous tradition of feasts. “But when the clergy became convinced that it was impossible to abolish the feasts, which were too deeply rooted in the minds of the people, they changed their policy, taking all the performances under their control and gradually Christianizing them.”⁹⁹ Pagan hymnody shared the same fate of “Christianization” as the pagan feasts did, as evidenced by the universality of hymnody in the Christian tradition today. Contra to McGuckin’s assertion, the acknowledgement of Eastern Christian hegemony that reframed pagan traditions, absorbed them into the Christian rituals, and then erased the pagan roots is a more accurate and comprehensive look into the history of Christian hymn development. It also provides an explanation for the saturation of pagan elemental imagery in Christian compositions (chapters five and six).

After having briefly explored the intimate relationship between Christian and pagan artistic expression, the question left to answer is why the Church was so invested in the hegemonic absorption of the pagan theology and imagery even after the

⁹⁷ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 79. “‘Theater of the Devil’ destroyed the modesty of family life.”

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 81.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 79.

Constantinian Empire had supplanted paganism with Christianity. Before Constantine's Peace, Christians suffered (or claimed they suffered)¹⁰⁰ violent persecutions at the hand of the pagan-controlled state. Therefore, it is easy to understand why Christian hymnody would have reflected both the cooptation of pagan imagery (in order to remain undetected by the tyrannical empire) and the condemnation the religious authority that oppressed them. However, another reason why the Christian melodists adopted pagan thought was in order to encourage the conversions of the unbaptized Greeks. Paul D. Garrett, in his article about liturgical translation, states,

Within a remarkable three decades, from AD 30-60, the followers of the risen Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, realized that which Pentecost had symbolized: the destruction of the long standing and violent enmity which divided Jews and Greeks, and succeeded remarkably well in imparting to the latter a thoroughly Jewish Gospel in terms which they could fully comprehend.¹⁰¹

Christianity took it upon itself to adapt the Gospels from Judaism into new terminology, new symbolism, new allegory “capable of evoking in [the Greek pagans] equally rich emotional reactions”¹⁰² and thereby extend the Christian doctrine across the Mediterranean. The easiest way in which to indulge their pagan audience and encourage the most baptisms was for Christian composers to utilize the same imagery that was familiar within the ancient traditions. Despite all the religious animosity, the Eastern Christian Church realized the value in a large following and proceeded to pander to their pagan rivals and lure them into converting.

¹⁰⁰ Salzman. The accuracy of Christian apologetic literature is still contested by scholars.

¹⁰¹ Garrett, “A Preliminary Study,” 85.

¹⁰² *ibid.*

Gregory Dix, religious scholar, explains the phenomenon of Christian absorption in this way: “‘Hellenization’ of some sort ‘the Gospel’ had to undergo, from the mere fact that it had to be accepted by Greeks from Jews and the Greek did not think like the Jew. The starting point, the process and the objective of his thinking were not the same.”¹⁰³ Dix recognizes the way in which Early Christians catered to their pagan neighbors while maintaining the theological integrity of the Scriptures. The delicate mediation of the necessary “Hellenization” of the Gospels coupled with a strong fear of “Hellenic perversions” of their theology resulted in the construction of a multifaceted hymnic tradition.¹⁰⁴ “In a way that is typical of Christian poetry, particular actions... take on a variety of meanings through the multiple interpretative levels of Christian allegory.”¹⁰⁵ For example, a “building” could refer to a physical structure as well as metaphorically comment on the “moral formation of the soul.”¹⁰⁶ This sophisticated “Christian allegory” was used throughout late antiquity to both coopt pagan imagery into the new Christian musical practice as well as criticize the ancient religions, simultaneously.

The advent of Constantine’s Peace marked a dynamic shift in the explicitness of the anti-pagan sentiment laced into the liturgical hymn compositions of the Eastern Church. “[A] Christian thinking and writing about Jews [or pagans] in the second century operated from a very different political and social position than his counterpart three centuries later, when the full weight of Roman imperial authority potentially lay behind his words and ideas.”¹⁰⁷ A sixth century Christian *melódos*, like St. Romanos (see chapter

¹⁰³ Dix, 80-81.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, 107.

¹⁰⁵ Roberts, 631.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Jacobs, “Jews and Christians,” 175.

six), had the freedom to condemn the pagan traditions as he pleased, whereas a composer of the first three centuries, like that of the anonymous *Phôs Hilaron* hymn (see chapter five), had to disguise his grievances with the aforementioned “Christian allegory” or risk persecution. This intensity of anti-pagan rhetoric in Christian hymns is analyzed in the following chapters.

Chapter Five

The Struggle for Religious Power Via the Imagery of Light and Fire

In order to analyze the influences of paganism on Eastern Christian and Byzantine hymnody, one must investigate the origins of hymnody and worship practices in the geographic area of Constantinople and around the Near East. It is popularly believed that hymn singing is a uniquely Christian tradition stemming exclusively from the inherited practice of Judaic psalmody. But as demonstrated in chapter three, the singing of hymns is in fact a pre-Christian phenomenon. And although, like Jews, pagans were considered “religious adversaries,”¹⁰⁸ it was the polytheistic Hellenes, or pagans, that worshiped their gods with hymns of praise centuries before the life of Jesus Christ that influenced the development of the Early Christian and Byzantine hymnody. My analysis of Christian hymns asks these research questions: 1) How was Early Christian and Byzantine hymnody directly influenced by pagan symbolic imagery? 2) Prior to Constantine’s Peace, how did Early Christian hymnody coopt pagan imagery in order to stay undetected by political authorities and avoid persecution? 3) Furthermore, after Christianity became the sole religion of the state and as the sociopolitical hostility against pagans increased, how did Byzantine hymnody evolve into a vehicle for anti-pagan rhetoric? In this chapter, I will draw upon literature written within the first four centuries after the life of Jesus to answer these questions through the analytical comparison of pagan poetry and Early Christian hymns. The literature will show that historical context plays an integral role in the formation and expression of pagan symbolism within Christian hymn lyrics.

¹⁰⁸ Jacobs, “Jews and Christians,” 175.

Poetry of “Phôs Hilaron” and “The Ancient Gods are Dead”

The Christian hymn, “*Phôs Hilaron*” or “Joyous Light”, as noted by musicologist Timothy J. Keyl, “represents one of the earliest hymns of the church and forms a constitutive part of the Lucernarium,” the candle lighting ceremony of *Hesperinos* (Eastern Vespers).¹⁰⁹ It is, to this day, still sung in the Eastern Orthodox liturgy every evening.¹¹⁰ The “*Phôs Hilaron*” in conjunction with the Lucernarium was integrated into the Eastern Christian liturgy in the fourth century but its compositional origins are much older.¹¹¹ Although musicologists and religious scholars cannot be exact, it is believed that the anonymously composed “*Phôs Hilaron*” was written as early as the second half of the first century or early second century.¹¹² Paganism, being the predominate religious and state authority during the conception of the “*Phôs Hilaron*,” uniquely influences the poetry of this hymn from a variety of political and theological perspectives that will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

As one might expect the hymn of a nightly candle lighting ceremony to be, the “*Phôs Hilaron*” is based on the metaphor of the Father, and by extension the Son and Holy Spirit, as light,¹¹³ *phôs* being the Greek word for light. Keyl explains, “the reality of living in a world of both light and darkness has played an important role in the history of religions.”¹¹⁴ The sun, as it rises in the morning and sets in the evening, is a universally shared human phenomenon, which created the “practical necessity” of artificial light (i.e.

¹⁰⁹ Keyl, 355.

¹¹⁰ Taft, 37.

¹¹¹ Keyl, 355.

¹¹² *ibid.*, 356.

¹¹³ Garrett, “Addendum.”

¹¹⁴ Keyl, 355.

fire) in the night hours for religious worship.¹¹⁵ Christians along with Jews and pagans have all used this metaphor of light in various representations of theological figures. These light allusions can be found in Old Testament stories of God creating light from darkness, and then from light creating the heaven and earth, not to mention the many pagan gods that were figures of light. For many early religious communities, even beyond the three mentioned here, this close relationship to sun cycles and to artificial light encouraged a symbolic representation of the sun as being a sign of “salvation and comfort”.¹¹⁶ Long before the existence of Christians, pagans had worshiped the god Apollo as a symbol of the light of the sun, and, by extension, of healing.¹¹⁷ Even Zeus, “the spiritual leader of both gods and men,” represented light in the form of lightning and thunder.¹¹⁸ As Keyl notes, by the first century, “[t]he Christian community quickly transferred the qualities of salvation and comfort associated with pagan deities to Christ.”¹¹⁹ This is evidence of Christian absorption of pagan ideology. Using the ubiquitous light-worship traditions (as well as hymn-singing practices) from the pagan religions as a model for their own, Christians composed new hymns to reflect this allegory of light onto their godhead, Jesus Christ. The texts of “Joyous Light” are explored below.

Two different translations of the “*Phôs Hilaron*” depict the Father, or Jesus Christ depending on the translation, as a joyous light deserving of continuous praise. The English translation in *The Penguin Book of Greek Verse* reads as follows:

¹¹⁵ Taft, 36.

¹¹⁶ Keyl, 355.

¹¹⁷ “Apollo.”

¹¹⁸ “Zeus.”

¹¹⁹ Keyl, 355.

Joyful light of holy glory, Christ Jesus, son of a deathless heavenly Father, holy and blessed; we have come to the setting of the sun, and seeing the light of the evening we celebrate the Father, Son and Holy Ghost as God. You are worthy to be praised at all times with voices of propitiation, Son of God, giver of life; for this the world glorifies you.¹²⁰

Here the Christ Jesus is addressed as “Joyful light of holy glory,” or a comforting light that continues to shine after “the setting of the sun.” Note that the Son of God does not simply exude light in the metaphorical way one might describe someone with a particularly charming personality, but rather He is the embodiment of Light in totality. The hymn’s description of an unwavering, heavenly, comforting Light as a symbol the body of Christ is, again, a Christian metaphor for faith and salvation. Another translation provides a slightly different emphasis of God’s glory:

Joyous light of the holy glory of the immortal Father, heavenly, holy, blessed Jesus Christ; Having come to the sun’s setting (and) beholding the evening light we praise God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is fitting at all times that you should be praised with auspicious voices, Son of God, Giver of Life: Wherefore the world glorifies You.¹²¹

In contrast with the first translation, subtle poetic differences have changed the fluidity of the poetry with added prepositions in the opening line (“*of* the holy glory *of* the immortal Father”), and have caused variances in poetical meaning.¹²² Light in this translation still refers to Jesus Christ; however, the subject (Christ) is now more removed from his title, “Joyous light,” with the intermediate addition of “the immortal Father” and extra qualifiers (“heavenly, holy, blessed”) in the opening line. This positions Jesus and Father

¹²⁰ Trypanis, 359-360.

¹²¹ Keyl, 355-356.

¹²² Garrett, “Addendum,” 37-41.

as equal parts of the Holy Trinity rather than Jesus simply being the “son of” the Father. In this way, the second translation emphasizes the equality amongst the three parts of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In either case, Jesus, as a Trinitarian representation of God, is also clearly referred to as the “Giver of Life,” and what He “gives” is life-sustaining light to all mankind. In either translation, the symbolism of Jesus Christ, Father, and Holy Spirit embodying one comforting light of salvation remains clear.

Still other translations of the *Phôs Hilaron* can be found in Garrett’s article entitled “The Problem with Liturgical Translation: An Addendum.” The following first lines of each translation are as follows: “You are the quiet light,” “O gladsome radiance of the holy glory of the Father,” “O Jesus Christ/the joyous light of the holy glory,” “O brightness of the immortal Father’s face,” “Shining torchlight of God the Father.”¹²³ Each of these translations represents a different nineteenth or twentieth century interpretation of the original *Phôs Hilaron* text, nevertheless, a conclusive theme can be seen: that Christians of the first century, and still today, viewed God, the Holy Trinity, as the Light of the world and, therefore, the “Giver of Life.”

Long before the life of Jesus of Nazareth and the composition of the *Phôs Hilaron*, Greek polytheistic religions had been worshiping light through gods and goddesses. “Pagans were accustomed to greet the light with the exclamation ‘*Chaire Phôs agathon* (Hail, good light)!’ or ‘*Chaire Phôs philon* (Hail, friendly light)!’”¹²⁴ The pagan tradition of light worship can be observed in this anonymously composed pagan verse “The Ancient Gods are Dead” (fourth-century CE):

¹²³ Garrett, “Addendum,” 39-46.

¹²⁴ Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours*, 36-37.

Tell this to the king: the decorated court has fallen to the ground, Phoebus
 [Apollo] no longer has a cell, nor laurel of prophecy, nor babbling
 fountain; even the chattering water has dried up.¹²⁵

Light in this poem is represented in the Greek god, Phoebus, an alternative name for Apollo, who was worshiped as the sun, healer, and musician – “radiant or beaming... he was sometimes identified with Helios the sun god.”¹²⁶ Additionally, the laurel wreath is commonly used as a metaphor for Apollo in Greek writing and in this poem. If “the laurel of prophecy” in the second line of poetry is a metaphor for Apollo’s worshipful magnificence, the author suggests that its absence represents the symbolic usurpation of a kingdom that was once controlled by pagan deities. The title “the Ancient Gods are Dead,” the imagery of the poem depicting crumbling courts and dried up fountains, and references to Apollo as far back as Homer’s Iliad and further all suggest the collapse of a religious culture that had reigned over Constantinople for centuries.¹²⁷ The “ancient” pagan mythology of Apollo, the light god, as represented in this poem, far predates the symbolism of the light of Christ.

Written in the same century that Christians adopted the Lucernarium, the candle lighting ceremony, into liturgical practice, as well as the same century in which Emperor Constantine ruled and enforced Christianity as the sole religion of the state, this pagan verse provides evidence of the worship of Hellenic gods as late as during this period of rapid religious and political development for Eastern Christians. Since we can infer that Christians in Constantinople and around the Near East had lived among polytheistic Greeks such as this particular composer, it becomes clear how Constantine’s efforts to

¹²⁵ Trypanis, 356.

¹²⁶ “Apollo.”

¹²⁷ Trypanis, 3-66; “Apollo.”

free Christians from religious persecution by granting them the power of state had resulted in a severe and violent reaction against those pagans who had historically oppressed the followers of the burgeoning Christian faith. Ultimately, within two or three centuries of this controversial political decision, the prominent pagan religions had all but disappeared. “The Ancient Gods are Dead” hymn laments the “dying ancient world” of Hellenism and represents one of “the last spasms of ancient culture.”¹²⁸

Scholarly arguments have questioned the validity of pagan mythological influence on the Christian Lucernarium, *Phôs Hilaron*, and general theology.¹²⁹ As Keyl articulates so well, “[t]he sense of mystery regarding light spanned pagan, Jewish, and Christian understandings.”¹³⁰ Thus one asks which of the two older religious rites was the first to introduce light worship into Christian theology? Contemporaries of the late 20th century religious scholar, Robert Taft, have suggested that the Lucernarium was actually a Judaic ritual stolen by pagan Greeks and later adopted by early Christians. Taft, refutes this theory in his book *The Liturgy of the House in East and West*:

Whom they [(the Christians)] borrowed it from is a matter of dispute. Tertullian, in his *Ad Nationes* 1:13, accuses the pagans of having borrowed “the Jewish lucernarium rite” and other Jewish practices “that are certainly foreign to your gods.” But I am skeptical that this general pagan usage would have been borrowed from a “despised minority” such as the Jews. Furthermore, although there are parallels to the lucernarium in the Jewish ritual of the Sabbath eve and Hanukkah lights, I know of no Jewish parallel in the *daily* domestic or synagogue rituals of the Jews, and

¹²⁸ Trypanis, l-li.

¹²⁹ Taft, 37.

¹³⁰ Keyl, 355.

the pagan and Christian greeting of the evening lamp was a *daily* affair. So I am inclined to think the Christian lucernarium is a baptized pagan rite.¹³¹

This analysis by Taft provides an alternative theory in favor of Eastern Christians adopting the religious symbolism of light and the Lucernarium straight from pagan ritual, despite other scholarly hypotheses to the contrary.

Although the contention between Christians and pagans prior to Constantine's Peace was demarcated by the active persecution of Christians, the religious animosity did not stop the inevitable absorption of pagan ideology into the Christian rite as reflected in the first century composition of the *Phôs Hilaron*. In fact, persecuted Christians recognized that the security of their community and individual survival hinged on the appropriation of pagan dogma. Michele R. Salzman's article "Pagans and Christians" explains that Emperor Trajan, a pagan himself, ruler of the Roman Empire during the late first and early second century, was suspicious of this growing underground Christian religion. He employed Pliny the Younger, his imperial magistrate, to report on the activities of these rogue worshippers. As a result of Pliny's findings, "Trajan stipulated the pardoning of Christians who proved by worshipping 'our gods' that they were no longer 'atheists.' But those who refused to recant were to be killed."¹³² At this time, the adoption of pagan symbolism into the Christian rite was more than a convenient allegorical model for their own deity, Jesus Christ, but a necessary tool for survival. Christians had to find a way to appease the state and "recant" by exhibiting pagan behaviors, like worshipping light, without compromising their own theology. "In response to this threatening state policy and to the hostility from their suspicious

¹³¹ Taft, 37.

¹³² Salzman, 186.

neighbours [sic], Christians sought to explain their religion; Christian apologetic literature flourished.”¹³³ The means by which Christians “apologized” for or explained their religion to outsiders (pagans) was through the incorporation of familiar pagan metaphors (the light allegory, etc.) into hymns like the *Phôs Hilaron*.

Poetry of “The Akathistos Hymn” and Macedonius’ “On the Morning Star”

Two centuries after the composition of the *Phôs Hilaron*, after the Edict of Milan and the Peace of Constantine, both of which marked the beginning of a dynamic transference of power from pagans to Christians, the “newly Christian world,”¹³⁴ presented opportunities for Christian artistic expansion and exploration. During this time in the fourth century, the *kontakion* hymn structure was created. The life of the full-scale *kontakion* hymn (see chapter two) in the Eastern Christian tradition was relatively short-lived, but carved a path for the creation of other hymn structures, like the *kanon*, which can still be heard today.¹³⁵ Though the practice of composing and performing *kontakia* was popularized by St. Romanos the Melodist (his work analyzed in detail below), he “was not the only important composer of *kontakia* in the sixth century. There are others, mainly anonymous, like the author of the famous *Akathistos Hymn*, whose poems show impressive workmanship and a deep religious feeling.”¹³⁶ The *Akathistos Hymn* is one that still services the Eastern Church during Lent and, for this reason, is essential for analyzing the appropriation of pagan theology and its effects on Christian hymnic expression in a new age of Christian political power.

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ Jacobs, 176.

¹³⁵ Thodberg, “*Kontakion*.”

¹³⁶ Trypanis, liii.

Wellesz explains that no original *kontakion* that has “come down to us with all its music,” except for the “*Akathistos Hymn*.”¹³⁷ The *Akathistos* or *Akathist*, twenty-four stanzas long and found in the liturgical Horologion (the Eastern Orthodox equivalent of a hymnal), is a “panegyric” to the Virgin Mary, or Theotokos in Greek.¹³⁸ The first *koukoulion* reads as follows:

To you, Mother of God, champion and leader, I, your city
[Constantinople], delivered from sufferings, ascribe the prize of victory
and my thanks. And may you, in your invincible power, free me from all
kinds of dangers, that I may cry to you: ‘Hail wedded maiden and
virgin’¹³⁹

The city of Constantinople, in which Christianity was now the state religion (see chapter three), is acknowledged here as a city dedicated to the Mother of God. At the time, this was a highly charged, political statement against Hellenism considering Christianity now ruled over and persecuted the very demographic that had persecuted its followers mere decades before.¹⁴⁰ This anti-pagan sentiment becomes clearer in the subsequent *ephymnion* (refrain).

The *kontakion* punctuates each of the following *oikoi* (stanzas) with a corresponding *ephymnion* that lists “salutations” to the Virgin Mary:¹⁴¹

Hail, mother of a star that does not set;
Hail, dawn of a mystic day;
Hail, quencher of the furnace of deceit;
Hail, illuminator of the initiates of the Trinity...

¹³⁷ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 144.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, 24; 141; 192.

¹³⁹ Trypanis, 374.

¹⁴⁰ Lash, xxv.

¹⁴¹ Wellesz, *Byzantine*, 192.

Hail to you that free us from the pagan worship;
 Hail to you that deliver us from deeds foul;
 Hail to you who put an end to the worship of fire;
 Hail to you who released us from the flame of passions...¹⁴²

Despite its condemnation of pagan religious practices, this long passage of reverent exclamations to the Theotokos is saturated in pagan influences, both in its affirmative imitations of polytheistic theology (read light worship) and a vehement and specific declaration against the same pagan practices. The first line refers to Jesus Christ as “a star that does not set.” This is directly parallel to the metaphorical expressions of unwavering light in the “*Phôs Hilaron*” and in “The Ancient Gods are Dead” in that the same allegory is used to describe Christ, Apollo, and now the Theotokos. The words “dawn” and “illuminator” add to this illustration. The Virgin Mary, and thereby her Son, are both symbols of light to be worshiped – originally a doctrine of paganism. But the melódos of this *kontakion* beseeches the Theotokos to “free us from the pagan worship,” “deliver us from deeds foul,” and “put an end to the worship of fire.” A theological distinction is made here between the pagan customs of light and fire worship as embodied in the gods Apollo, Helios, Phaethon, etc. and the nuanced allegory for Jesus Christ as Light. The pagans in this hymn are depicted as worshipers of light and fire *disembodied* from their deities (note that none of the pagan gods are mentioned in this *ephymnion*). This is deliberate neglect, on the composer’s part, of the sophisticated metaphors frequently used by the pagans, thereby over-simplifying their theology in an attempt to perpetuate the trope of the “heathen” religion. On the other hand, the melodist (though anonymous, we can assume is Christian) clearly expresses the imagery of light through the bodies of

¹⁴² Trypanis, 379-380.

Jesus Christ and the Theotokos, thus distinguishing and elevating Christian theology as superseding paganism. Keyl theorizes that “the Christian emphasis on Christ as light and as a reflection of the Father not only represented a way of doing the pagan rite differently, but it also showed a growing doctrinal emphasis.”¹⁴³ In this hymn, it is unclear whether the imagery expresses light differently than that of pagan poetry as Keyl suggests, or whether it deliberately elides the theological intricacies of a rival religious presence. Regardless, what is important for this paper is the acknowledgement that Christians, after seizing power over their pagan neighbors, continued to borrow (steal) pagan imagery to embellish their own poetry.

The aggressive and “unapologetic” nature of this *kontakion* suggests, as Roberts explains, a “period of increasing Christian confidence and self-assertiveness [that] coincided with... [a] wide dispersal of basic Christian beliefs.”¹⁴⁴ This “dispersal” was due in part to the “Hellenization” of Christian texts: through analyzing the influences of Judaism and paganism on the Christian rite in chapter four, I cited Gregory Dix’s explanation for the “Hellenization” of the Gospels or the way in which Christians expressed the religious symbolism in their literature to reflect that of pagan theology in order to encourage Greeks to be baptized.¹⁴⁵ Garret responds, “In a word, this transfer [“Hellenization”] was successfully made, and Christianity spread first and best among the Greek-speaking populations of the large coastal cities of the Roman Empire.”¹⁴⁶ As Christianity effectively spread its theology from Constantinople to other regions of the

¹⁴³ Keyl, 355.

¹⁴⁴ Roberts, 630.

¹⁴⁵ Dix, 80-81.

¹⁴⁶ Garrett, “A Preliminary Study,” 87.

Near East and westward,¹⁴⁷ the entire population of the pagan religions dwindled. This power shift is reflected in Christian hymns like the “*Akathistos*,” but also provides evidence of the religious conversions by pagans to Christianity that were occurring in the fourth century by the droves.

Even as paganism was bleeding in faithful numbers, due to statewide persecutions and baptismal conversions to Christianity, Greek poets like Macedonius “clung to the old Hellenistic models – a last autumnal glow of the dying ancient world.”¹⁴⁸ His poem “On the Morning Star” reads as follows:

Morning Star, do not force Love away; and do not follow Ares, your neighbor, in having a pitiless heart. But as once before, when you saw Phaethon [the sun] in the hall of Clymene, you did not come to one who painfully longed for it, delay your coming as you do among the Cimmerians.¹⁴⁹

This Hellenic love poem is full of allegories expressed through the gods Ares and Phaethon and the mythical Cimmerians,¹⁵⁰ which highlight the Greek fascination of the mysteries of light and fire. Macedonius, the pagan poet, demonstrates in this poem a high level of artistry and facility of language with his use of flowery religious imagery.

Clearly Macedonius, as a representative of the pagan population around Constantinople, possessed an intelligence that is denied in the *Akathistos kontakion*. The “heathen” pagan

¹⁴⁷ Sen, fig. Map of Christianity.

¹⁴⁸ Trypanis, li.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 391.

¹⁵⁰ “Cimmerians.” Ryan Tuccinardi describes the Cimmerians as “[a] mythical tribe who lived at the end of the world in a place of mists and darkness, where the sun never arrived.”

trope, therefore, was a Christian construction of pagan identity,¹⁵¹ generated by and encapsulated within the lyrics of Christian hymns and other literature to dehumanize the pagans and to make their religious practices illegitimate. This effective political strategy resulted in a religious boom, spanning the Mediterranean, of Christian values and mass baptisms of pagans.

¹⁵¹ Salzman, 187. Early Christians carved out an identity for the Hellenes in the same way the term “paganism” was later created by Christians to “refer to persons who had not been baptized” in order to construct the “other.”

Chapter Six

The Continuation of Cooptation Through Elemental Dualities

“The Lighted Dome will Guide the Sailors” by Paul the Silentiary

The epigram¹⁵² poem, “The Lighted Dome will Guide the Sailors,” written in 563 CE by Paul the Silentiary, is analyzed here to support the existence of pagan literature (or at least classical pagan poetical structure) and theological relevancy as late as the mid-seventh century, despite the dwindling pagan population. This poem will help to illuminate the historical context of what was happening to the pagans during the seventh century, which will provide evidence for the ways in which Christians coopted their imagery.

Classical pagan imagery in “The Lighted Dome” is prevalent even within its title. The lighted dome is, in this case, a lighthouse – a fire, a beacon – used to “guide the sailors.” This sailor imagery can be found in Romanos’ *kontakia* as well and will be discussed at length later in this section. For now however, attention must be paid to the reference of the lighthouse. Paul the Silentiary used this guiding light metaphor to describe the magnificence of St. Sophia or Hagia Sophia, the Eastern Orthodox Cathedral in modern-day Istanbul. Trypanis also explains that the metaphors used in the poem highlight “the twin grandeurs of the church and state around which Byzantine life was to revolve”.¹⁵³ Here the allegory of light, customarily reserved for the descriptions of pagan gods and then later Jesus Christ, is extended to encompass the entirety of the Christian

¹⁵² A definition of the term “epigram” in the *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece* explains that it is an ancient Greek poetic structure that was commonly used for the inscriptions on monuments “while its content was usually dedicatory or funereal.”

¹⁵³ Trypanis, li.

Church. Keeping in mind that a light of salvation traditionally represents Christ, the title of this poem transfers the allegorical “light” onto St. Sophia. And, since St. Sophia is thought to be a symbol of the power of the Christian rite, light is made a symbol for all of Christianity, bringing salvation to the unbaptized, unsaved pagans, or in this case, sailors.

While the title alone may be full of provocative imagery, further examination of the text is needed for thorough analysis. An abridged version of the poem is recreated below in two parts:

The sparkling building [St. Sophia] holds within it countless other lights which hand in the air from richly twisting chains. . . .some pour out a flashing beam of fire to the east, others to the west. . . . Even night smiles, full of light, rose-ankled like the dawn. And any man who looks at the glittering grief-curing trees of this crown and of the stand of the choirs is healed in his heart; and of those who look upon the small boat which is wrapped in fire, one is delighted to gaze at the single lamp, another rejoices at this symbol of the heavenly Christ and forgets all his troubles. . .¹⁵⁴

Allusions to the god Apollo (and other light-bearing, pagan gods) as well as direct references to Jesus Christ bring these two deities into close proximity. The light metaphor traditionally used to describe Christ and Apollo appears again in dazzling prose: the “flashing beam of fire,” the “rose-ankled” dawn that penetrates the night sky, the boat “wrapped in fire,” the “single lamp,” etc. Here the fiery light is referring to St. Sophia but the use of imagery is comparable to that of the familiar poems, “The Ancient Gods are Dead” or “On the Morning Star,” two uniquely pagan works. Additionally, the description of “the crown” in the fifth line could suggest images of Christ’s crown of

¹⁵⁴ Trypanis, 417.

thorns or, conversely, Apollo's laurel wreath. But by the end of this short passage Paul the Silentiary confirms that the imagery he uses is a "symbol of the heavenly Christ," which obscures the idea that the origins of this imagery were founded in pagan roots. As the *Akathistos* did, "The Lighted Dome" denies the involvement of "heathens" on the formation of Christian theology.

This poem would seem that straightforward if it ended there. More of the poem text and analysis of its structure reveal that the author's religious commentary is much more complicated:

A holy light illuminates all; and even the sailor, as he guides the seafaring rudder... even he does not look at the Great Bear,¹⁵⁵ nor at the sweet light of the Little Bear as he steers his life-bearing ship, but looks to the godly torch of your temple to guide his daring vessel. And this is not only because of the light it casts at night... but also because of the generous gift of help that the living God gives.¹⁵⁶

The light of the Church (both the literal St. Sophia Cathedral and the metaphorical whole of the Christian rite) helps to guide the sailor, a man lost at sea or perhaps spiritually lost, toward the gift of salvation in the arms of "the living God." However, the author deliberately mentions the Big and Little Bears of Greek mythology. In the poem, the sailor, who would normally navigate the sea using these constellations or bright stars, turns now to an even brighter light – the light of the Church – thus rejecting the ways of paganism in accepting a new theology or new lighthouse as his guide. Another metaphor

¹⁵⁵ "Callisto." Greek mythology recognizes the Big and Little Bears as Callisto, the nymph, and her son, Arcas, respectively. Zeus raped Callisto, a protégé of Artemis, the huntress, and then she and her demigod son, Arcas, were transformed by the jealous Hera into bears ("the hunter becomes the hunted") and then banished to the sky as Ursa Major and Ursa Minor.

¹⁵⁶ Trypanis, 418.

in support of this analysis is represented, again, in the light symbolism. Universally, when the sun rises, the stars appear to fade away. In this case, if the sun, or a similar light bright enough to make night appear to be morning (“Even night smiles, full of light, rose-ankled like the dawn”), represents the Eastern Christian Church and the celestial constellations represent paganism, a metaphor is constructed in which the dawning of Christianity brings the dissolution of paganism. Although veiled in symbolism and metaphor, “The Lighted Dome” directly comments on the general Christian sentiment toward the dying ancient tradition: that paganism is archaic, even heathenish, and should make room for the development of a new religious power.

Despite the seemingly pro-Christian poetry, the nature of the structure of this poem implies a more tongue-in-cheek commentary on the fate of the ancient pagan traditions. And through close examination, “The Lighted Dome” no longer fits nicely into any one theological category. The poem is an epigram as stated above. Epigrams were typically used for the purpose of dedicating a monument and were usually “funereal” in content.¹⁵⁷ “Satirical epigrams also became very fashionable” right before the birth of Christianity in the first century.¹⁵⁸ Why then did Paul the Silentiary use this pagan form of poetry to glorify the Church of Christ? The author’s true intent may never be known, however, after review of the literature, I have two theories. The more likely of the two theories is that Paul the Silentiary was a devout Christian serving Emperor Justinian I (also a Christian) and employed the use of the ancient epigram structure, traditionally used like an elegy, in order to mock the “dying ancient world”.¹⁵⁹ This would mean that

¹⁵⁷ “Epigram”.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Trypanis, li.

Christian writers were thieving pagan tradition and incorporating it into their theological poems in the seventh century. My other theory is that Paul the Silentiary was more or less a Christian with pagan sympathies (or perhaps even secretly pagan himself) and wrote in epigrams to preserve the literary traditions of the ancients. By expressing pro-Christian sentiments through his secretly pagan poetry he may have been attempting to avoid persecution, just as the Christians had once used pagan imagery in their hymnody when pagans were in power. Regardless of the author's intent, through his poem, "The Lighted Dome," the boundaries between paganism and Christianity are blurred. The imagery and poetical structure of the two traditions are woven together into one poem. From this analysis, one can reaffirm the transference of influences between both rites supporting the idea that Christians absorbed pagan imagery into their theology and hymnody.

Three Kontakia of St. Romanos the Melodist: "On the Holy Theophany," "The Harlot," and "The Samaritan Woman"

While one can speculate Paul the Silentiary's intentions for his pagan-inspired poem, the theology of St. Romanos and the purpose of his works, commissioned specifically for the Church around 540 CE,¹⁶⁰ are indisputably Byzantine Christian. According to Lash, St. Romanos is, "above all," one of the most revered melodists in the Eastern Orthodox rite; in fact, St. Romanos alone holds the title of *the* Melódos in the Greek Orthodox Church.¹⁶¹ A tenth-century account of St. Romanos documented in Lash's introduction to Romanos' works states that he "“delivered around one thousand *kontakia* for the feasts of the Lord”" although Lash retorts that this is a "pious

¹⁶⁰ Lash, xxvi.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*

exaggeration:” scholars have only confirmed between 60 and 89 to be genuinely composed by “the Melodist”.¹⁶² I will analyze the lyrical imagery of three hymns by St. Romanos as it reflects the imagery used in “The Lighted Dome” and other pagan traditions.

Some of the major themes in the Christian *kontakia* of St. Romanos include popular imagery of the properties of light and fire borrowed from pagan deities, as we’ve seen in all the previous examples. By utilizing what I will refer to as “elemental mysteries,”¹⁶³ St. Romanos expresses this imagery through the body of Christ, describing Him as a “star,” a “beacon,” a “lamp,” the “illuminator,” the “unapproachable Light,” the “sun,” a “blaze,” etc.¹⁶⁴ Each metaphor listed has its own nuanced connotation but the imagery remains the same: St. Romanos describes Christ Jesus as being the Light of humankind, the herald of salvation and comfort, just as the sun, worshiped by pagans through the bodies of Apollo and other gods, brings light and comfort and warmth with every rising. Strikingly similar to the imagery in chapter five, St. Romanos continues the now four hundred year-old tradition of coopting the pagan allegory of light into Christian canonical hymnody.

New Christian symbolism, from what has been explored in previous examples, is introduced in the extensive works of St. Romanos. These “elemental mysteries” are still

¹⁶² *ibid.*, xxvii.

¹⁶³ I have defined “elemental mysteries” as the naturally occurring and universally experienced – albeit “mystifying” – elements like light, fire, and darkness, including other similarly enigmatic phenomena like the cleansing and simultaneously destructive properties of water, the awesome power of an earthquake, the banal yet still perplexing occurrences of birth and death, etc. Philosophically, it is human nature to ponder these “elemental mysteries,” which is why they appear in artistic and literary expressions of most, if not all, cultural and religious communities around the world in some form or another.

¹⁶⁴ Romanos.

used to underscore the divinity of Christ and include such ubiquitous dualities such as darkness (being the metaphysical and theological opposite to light), water (the opposite of fire), “heaven” (or the heavens, the sky) and earth, flesh and blood, food and drink, birth and death, etc. Analysis of St. Romanos has inspired whole books and countless articles on the content of his *kontakia*, but for the purposes of this paper, I intend to focus on only those properties that represent the elemental opposites of imagery already discussed – darkness and water – and how they relate to paganism.

In the *kontakia* of the Melodist entitled “On the Holy Theophany,”¹⁶⁵ allusions to darkness and water, as well as light and fire, are explicitly made. In this Christian hymn, having been written for the Church, the congregants and/or the soloist are instructed to proclaim Jesus Christ as “the unapproachable Light”,¹⁶⁶ a phrase sung in the beginning *koukoulion* and in every repeated *epymnion*. The first (abridged) *oikoi* reads as follows:

In Galilee of the nations, ...
 as the prophet said, a great light has shone – Christ.
 For the darkened, a shining beam has appeared, blazing out of Bethlehem,
 or rather, out of Mary – the Lord, the sun of justice,
 has made his rays dawn on the whole inhabited world.
 Therefore let us all, Adam’s naked children,
 put him on that we may be kept warm;
 for as a covering for the naked and a light for the darkened
 you have come, you have appeared,
*the unapproachable Light*¹⁶⁷

In opposition to the motif of light so common in Christian hymnody of this time, St. Romanos’ hymn contains the first example of the use of darkness to refer to “Adam’s

¹⁶⁵ Romanos, 38. Theophany means baptism or enlightenment.

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 39-47.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 39.

naked children.” It is well known in the Old Testament that Adam sinned against God when he consumed the Forbidden Fruit, resulting in Adam’s banishment from the Garden of Eden. The children of Adam, here referring to “all of us” who still live on earth as banished people awaiting our invitation back to the garden, are commonly denoted as sinners, or in this case, “the darkened.” This is a deliberate parallel between the salvation-bearing Light (Christ) and the darkness of sin. In “The Lighted Dome” a similar parallel was made between the Light of the Eastern Christian Church and the star-speckled night (darkness) of paganism. In both scenarios Light represents salvation while darkness represents either one’s personal sins, as demonstrated in the hymn by St. Romanos, or a reaction against the heathenish pagans, in the poem by Paul the Silentiary.

Similarly to this metaphor of the salvation of light remedying the darkness of sin (or heathenism), Christians of the sixth century typically employed a similar theme in their hymnody with the term *enlightenment*.¹⁶⁸ Enlightenment is often synonymous with the practice of baptism. In “The Harlot,” another Christian *kontakia*, St. Romanos describes the desires of a promiscuous woman who seeks “forgiveness from the shame of the filth of [her] deeds.”¹⁶⁹ In the hymn she proclaims, “I [the harlot] shall make the Pharisee’s house a place of enlightenment, for there I shall wash away my sins.”¹⁷⁰ The darkness of sin is again healed by light, but this time, the term enlightenment bears a different connotation. Lash interpolates in a footnote to explain this “place of

¹⁶⁸ Romanos, 79.

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 77. This statement, the *ephymnion*, actually reads “the filth of *my* deeds” (Romanos, 77-84; emphasis my own). This would have been the part that the entire congregation sang together at the conclusion of each *oikoi*. Thus, the worshippers of the Church beseeched of God the forgiveness of their sins through the body of the harlot, further supporting the idea that “all of us” are Adam’s children, born into sin.

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 79.

enlightenment”: “[i]n Greek *photisterion*, that is a ‘baptistry’.”¹⁷¹ Here in this *photisterion*, the harlot can receive the Light of God Jesus, thereby dispelling the darkness of her sins, through the cleansing properties of the baptismal water. In a sense, St. Romanos has introduced and juxtaposed a new element, water, with light, water being the means through which enlightenment can be achieved. The linkage between these two elemental mysteries adds yet another layer to the multifaceted allegory for the salvation of the Christian soul.

This fascination with water and its cleansing properties is far from uniquely Christian. Pagans also worshipped water in the form of rain, storm, and sea gods, the most notable being the god Poseidon. Ancient Greeks often sacrificed horses to the “moody” sea god to keep sailors safe from Poseidon’s vengeful storms as they travelled across the Mediterranean.¹⁷² Less well known is the mythological story of Hera, the goddess of birth and fertility, as it connects to the pagan imagery of water. According to a Greek mythology online source, “it is said that each year Hera's virginity [is restored] by bathing in the well of Canathus.”¹⁷³ The restoring properties of the water in the well of Canathus could be likened to the baptismal water of the *photisterion*. Upon reflection of St. Romanos’ hymn, the harlot functions very much like the goddess, Hera. Both women seek to be cleansed of their “sins” (neither the harlot nor Hera are virgins) and they do so by bathing in sacred water; Hera in the well and the harlot at the baptistry. The pagan tale of Hera bathing in the virginity-restoring well and the general reverence of Poseidon, king of the sea, would have been well known to Eastern Christian melodists like St.

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*

¹⁷² “Poseidon.”

¹⁷³ “Hera.”

Romanos. And, as demonstrated in “The Lighted Dome” written during the life of St. Romanos, pagan theology was becoming increasingly entangled with Christian literature, so much so that in some cases, it became hard to identify the purpose of the composition. This supports the theory of pagan influence upon the metaphor of baptismal water used to “wash away [one’s] sins.”¹⁷⁴

The allegory of water, in the example of “The Harlot,” is also expressed in an earlier *oikoi* as the harlot describes “Christ’s words like sweet drops of fragrance raining down everywhere, granting the breath of life,”¹⁷⁵ this being her inspiration for seeking Christian enlightenment. While water is clearly associated with baptism in the previous example, the imagery in this stanza extends further to encompass the idea of water being an essential element for the creation and sustainability of life.

Another example of water as an essential life-sustaining element is depicted in St. Romano’s “The Samaritan Woman.” Jesus says:

One who drinks every day of this water will thirst again,
while the water that I shall give to those aflame with faith, is relief from
thirst,
because, from within those who drink the stream, there will come
a fount of immortality springing up and pouring out eternal life.¹⁷⁶

In this abbreviated *oikoi*, the Melodist demonstrates the importance of water and its religious association with life and immortality (or eternal salvation) to Eastern Christian theology. Jesus Christ, in the example above, is the sole bearer of this life force, and within the context of the rest of the hymn, all 22 *oikoi* long, it is suggested that this water

¹⁷⁴ Romanos, 79.

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 77.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 67.

comes from Jesus' body, his blood.¹⁷⁷ This is an allusion to the Last Supper, when Christ told the Apostles to drink of his blood, the water that came for from Christ's spear wound during his crucifixion, and to the tradition of communion in which the baptized congregants of the Church accept the blood of Christ, his life force, as a symbol of faith and veneration.¹⁷⁸ In Romanos' text, the symbolism of water and the blood of Christ are one and the same, both a metaphor for one's salvation and the divine liquid of immortality that quenches one's "thirst" for faith.

In opposition to this gentle, life-giving water-allegory for Jesus Christ, in pagan theology, the god Poseidon was often thought to bring death upon those who angered him, usually unsuspecting sailors or fishermen.¹⁷⁹ This dangerous and malevolent image of water is quite a departure from the tales of the harlot's search for salvation and Hera's well, and the founts of immortality of Jesus Christ. The motif of the sailor-fisherman navigating dark water is common in the poetry of both pagan and Christian hymns and literature, like those guided by the light of St. Sophia in "The Lighted Dome" (an allusion to Christianity providing salvation for those pagans "lost at sea") and the metaphor illustrated by St. Romanos in the same *kontakia*, "The Samaritan Woman."

Though I had husbands before, I now do not want
 those that I had, for now I possess you who have caught me in a net
 drawn up by faith from the filth of my evils,
 that I may receive

*joy and redemption.*¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Romanos, 63-72.

¹⁷⁸ Keep in mind that the sacrament "blood" is actually consecrated wine (or grape juice in some religions). Wine becomes an important motif in the following example.

¹⁷⁹ "Poseidon."

¹⁸⁰ Romanos, 69.

The woman of Samaria, in this passage, expresses how Jesus Christ has “caught [her] in a net” to save her from the “filth of [her] evils.” In this way, Christ becomes a fisherman who rescues the young woman from a sea – or life – of sin.¹⁸¹ Water, in the poem “The Lighted Dome,” is depicted in a similar fashion. The sea, in which the sailors must guide their “life-bearing ship,” easily becomes a metaphor for a life of sin, or in other words paganism or heathenism, unnavigable without the bright, guiding light of the St. Sophia Cathedral, a symbol of Christianity. Whereas water is associated with godliness and light in the earlier examples, this imagery of water is flexible and therefore used here to emphasize the dark, watery depths of sin. If the sea is a metaphor for paganism, and paganism was synonymous with sin according to Christian thought, then the Samaritan woman realized she was drowning in “filthy” waters before being “caught” by Christ’s fishing net.

This new, more violent metaphor for water in Romanos’ *kontakia*, “The Samaritan Woman,” has its connections to Poseidon who is recognized as a god of seaside disasters, earthquakes, and death as much as he is worshipped for being the god of the oceans.¹⁸² But an even more direct connection between the Christian hymn and pagan theology is in the myth of Britomartis. Pursued by Minos, another, lesser-known god, after having vowed a life of celibate maidenhood, the nymph, Britomartis, “fled from him and... leaped from mount Dictynnaeum into the sea, where she became entangled in the nets [of the fishermen].”¹⁸³ She was later saved by Artemis, goddess of the hunt, and transformed into a symbol of protection for the Greek island of Aegina.

¹⁸¹ Matthew 4:19. Jesus tells the Apostles to become “fishers of men.”

¹⁸² “Poseidon.”

¹⁸³ “Britomartis.”

Although the stories are not identical, this pagan legend has striking similarities to the story of the Samaritan woman who is saved by Jesus Christ in the same way. The imagery of Christ as a fisherman, saving those who have fallen into sin, into heathenism, or into the sea, is a hegemonic cooptation of the original pagan myth of Britomartis. St. Romanos makes a point to turn this pagan fable of Britomartis into a Christian one, thereby creating new symbolic metaphors for Christianity that are recognizable to pagans and to encourage potential converts (that is pagans converting to the state religion), while simultaneously reinforcing the Church's intolerances of the ancient religion. Whether St. Romanos employs the imagery of water in a gentle, life-giving, positive way or in a dangerous, sinful, and heathenish way, both representations were borrowed from earlier pagan theology that had been around for centuries.

Confirmed in the examples above, St. Romanos, as late as the mid-sixth century, was still applying and appropriating pagan symbolism into his hymn compositions just as his predecessors had done before Constantine's Peace and before Christianity's rise to power. Whereas the appropriation of pagan imagery and musical structure was an Early Christian practice, perhaps used for avoiding religious persecution by the pagans before the early fourth century, the political circumstances were drastically different for St. Romanos in the 540's. His decision to continue to exploit the literary traditions of the "ancient dying world"¹⁸⁴ demonstrate the hegemony of the Eastern Christian Church in its systemized strategy to take credit for the rich mythology of the pagan traditions. By effectively stealing and transforming the metaphors and imagery developed by the ancient Greek stories, St. Romanos and other *melódos* of his time erased the traces of

¹⁸⁴ Trypanis, li.

pagan roots or “heathenism” from their music, thus developing a musical practice that was seemingly uniquely Christian.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

The common belief that hymn singing is a uniquely Judeo-Christian tradition is disproved by the examples above. Ancient Greek pagans sang hymns to worship their gods centuries before Early Christians appropriated their practice. And along with adopting a structure for a new Christian musical custom, the *melódos* of the Church employed in their hymns the elemental mysteries of light, dark, water, and fire, typical of pagan literature and mythology. After Christianity's rise to political dominance with the onset of Constantine's Peace, the Eastern Christian Church began to erase the pagan roots from their hymn tradition. St. Romanos the Melodist as well as many other Byzantine composers denounced and vilified the pagan religions in the texts of their hymns, describing pagan practice as heathenish. This condemnation paired with the state-supported persecutions of non-Christians aided in the eventual annihilation of the ancient Greek religions as more and more people converted to Christianity. But through all the political and religious turmoil of the first seven centuries of Christianity, Christian hymns still utilize the secular imagery of fire, water, light and dark originally used by pagans to worship their gods. The Christian "Light of God" motif, for instance, provides sound evidence of the hegemony of the Byzantine era Eastern Christian Church as it established dominance over weaker religious populations.

The study of pagan influences on Christian hymnody is by no means exhaustive. I chose to focus this study on a series of popular Christian hymns and pagan poetry between the first and seventh centuries of Christian development. This was in order to

investigate to what extent pagan naturalistic imagery has been incorporated into and preserved in Early Christian hymnody. The similarities between these two religious traditions, recorded in the chapters above, supported my original hypothesis that Early Christian and Byzantine hymn texts had indeed borrowed pagan imagery. But future scholarship could analyze a more diverse array of literature, including Judaic psalms and hymns, ancient (pre-Christian) pagan hymns and poems, or even more recent Christian hymns. Conversely, future studies could explore an entirely different path of influence, taking into account, for example, the ways in which paganism has impacted Judaism and how that has in turn affected Christianity. Surprisingly, only after extensive research was I able to find a small body of research that addressed the ways in which these ancient religions influenced each other. The knowledge that pagans and Christians shared more musical traditions than originally thought suggests a need for future research and continuing investigation of the subject.

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