

## Review of the Book *Orthodox Liturgy and Anti-Judaism*

The subject of anti-Judaism in Orthodox Christian liturgy has long been recognized as one of the most delicate issues in Jewish–Orthodox Christian relations. Over the past few decades, official dialogues between the two faith traditions have often acknowledged how certain liturgical texts and interpretations contain strong or subtle anti-Jewish motifs. Yet few concrete steps have been taken to address these elements within contemporary Orthodox practice. The recently published volume, *Orthodox Liturgy and Anti-Judaism*, offers one of the most comprehensive explorations of this sensitive topic to date. It gathers scholarly contributions from a 2019 conference, “Byzantine Liturgy and the Jews,” held in Sibiu, Romania. The conference and the resulting anthology underscore both the longstanding problem of anti-Judaism in certain liturgical texts and the emerging commitment among a growing number of scholars, clergy, and theologians to “look again” with fresh eyes—seeking to assess and, where necessary, revise the liturgical tradition to reflect the fullness of Christian truth and love.

This volume resonates with the aims of working group Orthodox Christians in Dialogue with Jews—a project of the Orthodox Theological Society in America—which has been meeting over the last couple of years to explore how best to address anti-Jewish themes and rhetoric in Orthodox worship. The group quickly realized that simply removing or modifying overtly anti-Jewish texts was insufficient. Instead, a deeper engagement with Orthodox theology, preaching, and pastoral practice is required. In fact, the renewal of liturgical texts, including their biblical and patristic foundations, calls for reevaluating the Church’s self-understanding in relation to Israel, Jesus’s own Jewish identity, and the emergence of the earliest Christian communities within Second Temple Judaism. Scholarship over the last century has highlighted how Jesus, his disciples, and the Apostle Paul operated wholly within the complex matrix of Judaism, proclaiming God’s grace, forgiveness, and love in ways deeply embedded in, rather than in opposition to, Jewish tradition. This perspective fundamentally challenges any reading of liturgical texts that presupposes a rupture with Judaism or holds Jews as enemies of God and collectively responsible for the crucifixion of Christ.

In the wrong hands and with the wrong interpretive lens, nearly anything in our liturgy—or indeed in the Scriptures or New Testament—can be wielded as an anti-Jewish weapon. Conversely, when approached with the right lens, grounded in the best of contemporary scholarship providing a window into the earliest theological traditions of the Church, ancient texts need not be read as hostile toward the Jewish people. The more we see Jesus, his first followers, and the nascent Church firmly within Judaism, the deeper and richer our own understanding of the gospels becomes. Furthermore, recognizing the Jewish context of the earliest Christian communities sheds new light on our liturgical tradition—often revealing layers of meaning and nuance that were previously overlooked.

In light of these convictions, the volume *Orthodox Liturgy and Anti-Judaism* seeks to chart a path toward constructive engagement with problematic texts and liturgical customs, offering a scholarly foundation for future dialogue and reform. This article presents an expanded review of the contents of this anthology, highlighting its major contributions and situating it within current conversations about Orthodoxy, Jewish–Christian relations, and liturgical renewal.

### *Overview*

The anthology is divided into three principal sections: (1) Biblical Texts and the Liturgy, (2) Post-Byzantine Tendencies, and (3) Twentieth Century and the Striving for Liturgical Renewal. While each author offers a unique perspective, the chapters collectively attest to

how anti-Jewish motifs developed over centuries of evolving theological, liturgical, and socio-political contexts.

### **Part I: Biblical Texts and the Liturgy**

Ruth Langer and Demetrios Tonia set the tone by examining both the Byzantine and the Jewish liturgical traditions, emphasizing how communities historically defined themselves over and against a religious “other.” The authors point out that hostile rhetoric in Byzantine hymnography was not always meant as a literal condemnation of living Jews; rather, it sometimes functioned as a theological device designed to bolster Christian identity. Nonetheless, even if originally intended in a polemical but largely abstract sense, these texts have shaped how generations of Orthodox Christians perceive Judaism. Langer and Tonia underscore the importance of looking again at these texts with critical and historical sensitivity. By comparing parallel trends in Jewish liturgical references to non-Jewish or Christian outsiders, they show how religious liturgies can be reflective mirrors of communal self-definition, carrying within them both legitimate forms of identity and the seeds of prejudice.

Alexandru Mihăilă investigates how New Testament passages are appropriated in Byzantine Holy Week services. He carefully traces the liturgical recontextualization of Gospel narratives and Pauline texts that lay blame on “the Jews” for Jesus’s crucifixion. By exploring how these passages are interwoven into hymnographic structures, Mihăilă reveals how powerful the fusion of Scripture and liturgical poetry can be in reinforcing negative stereotypes. The chapter highlights the theological repercussions of attributing a timeless culpability to the Jewish people, showing the potential damage such themes can inflict on contemporary Jewish–Christian relations.

Sandrine Caneri offers an especially illuminating piece on how Orthodox congregations receive and absorb anti-Jewish hymns. Many believers do not fully register the harmful implications because they do not understand the nuances of the language used, or they focus on the musical setting rather than the textual content. Still, as Caneri argues, unconscious absorption can be as potent as overt comprehension. Subtle biases may be passed down through generations of worshippers. She champions the idea that liturgical education, combined with a careful reconsideration of hymn texts, is essential if the Orthodox Church is to rid its worship of unintentionally hostile rhetoric.

Vadim Wittkowsky tackles three New Testament passages often abused in anti-Jewish polemics: 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16, John 8:44, and Matthew 27:25. Through rigorous historical and exegetical analysis, Wittkowsky dismantles the notion that these verses permanently indict the Jewish people. He notes how historical contexts—such as the intra-Jewish disputes of the first century—came to be reinterpreted through theological lenses in later centuries. By showing how these passages have been wrenched out of their original context and distorted, Wittkowsky paves the way for a more responsible use of Scripture in Orthodox worship.

Bogdan G. Bucur adds a different angle, arguing that many hymns considered anti-Jewish are in fact deeply Christological, focusing on the affirmation of Christ’s divine identity. Bucur’s analysis highlights the patristic emphasis on theophanies and the ways in which Christ’s role as the Son of God was defended in the face of all who did not accept his divinity. While the text can include negative rhetoric about Jews, Bucur suggests that it was not the primary thrust of these liturgical pieces to denigrate Judaism *per se*. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the polemical idiom of the period allowed for such texts to be read—and misused—as anti-Jewish.

Basilius Groen addresses the striking inconsistency between Orthodox veneration of Old Testament saints like Moses, Elijah, and David, and liturgical language that implicitly or explicitly vilifies “the Jews.” By celebrating figures from the Scriptures as holy ancestors while simultaneously perpetuating negative portrayals of later Jewish people, Orthodox Christians cultivate a paradox that deserves attention. Groen calls for new hermeneutical strategies to align the reverence for biblical patriarchs and prophets with a more reverential attitude toward the living descendants of that same biblical tradition.

## **Part II: Post-Byzantine Tendencies**

The second section of the book offers historical case studies demonstrating how these anti-Jewish themes persisted, and in certain contexts intensified, after the fall of Byzantium.

Charalampos Minaoglou delves into post-Byzantine Orthodox literature and its polemical imagination. Beyond repeating older theological tropes, such literature increasingly integrated social and economic accusations against Jews, linking them to usury, conspiracy, or ritual wrongdoing. Minaoglou’s investigation underscores how changing socio-political climates, especially in the Ottoman world and later in emerging Balkan nation-states, shaped and reinforced stereotypes already embedded in certain liturgical texts.

Konstantinos M. Vapheiadis takes a revealing look at Byzantine painting manuals, noting how they set down guidelines for depicting Jewish characters—particularly those involved in the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Christ. This codification of anti-Jewish iconographic elements perpetuated harmful stereotypes visually, ensuring that negative portrayals of Jews (often with caricatured features or sinister expressions) remained a staple in church frescoes and icons. Vapheiadis emphasizes the enduring formative power of liturgical art, arguing that these images, just as much as texts, merit renewed examination and critique.

Agnieszka Gronek focuses on 19th-century Orthodox iconography related to the Sanhedrin that tried Jesus. She charts how Western European artistic influences filtered into Orthodox contexts, sometimes amplifying the demonization of Jewish authorities. This synergy of Western and Eastern pictorial traditions led to uniformly negative representations, with implications for how the average Orthodox Christian visualized the events of Holy Week.

Nadieszda Kizenko discusses the Church Slavonic service dedicated to St Gavriil of Białystok, a figure historically tied to the “blood libel” myth (the false accusation that Jews murdered Christian children for ritual purposes). Kizenko illuminates how the tone and content of this service echoed language from Holy Week hymnography—language that ascribed murderous intentions to the entire Jewish community. The harmful conflation of liturgical expressions with local antisemitic legends deepened the suspicion and hostility many Orthodox harbored toward Jewish neighbors.

## **Part III: Twentieth Century and the Striving for Liturgical Renewal**

The final section examines more recent efforts—both formal and informal—to address anti-Jewish rhetoric in Orthodox worship and theology.

Stefanos Alexopoulos provides a detailed look at how certain Greek-American Orthodox parishes approach problematic Holy Week hymns. He notes that some parishes have softened translations into English, excising or replacing blatantly hostile phrases. Yet these changes are often made ad hoc, by individual translators or parish clergy, lacking any universal or synodal authority. Alexopoulos contends that while this grassroots approach is a step in the right direction, a more systematic methodology is required if changes are to be enduring and widespread. He therefore advocates for an official ecclesial process—one that upholds

Orthodox tradition while still acknowledging the Church's responsibility to avoid perpetuating harmful prejudice.

Marian Pătru analyzes the Romanian Orthodox Church's interactions with Jewish identity in the interwar period, showing how antisemitic narratives were woven into nationalist ideologies and repeated in homilies. Pătru's research reminds us that anti-Jewish liturgical elements can become potent instruments for political manipulation, shaping not only the religious self-understanding of communities but also their social and political policies.

Ionuț Biliuță explores how certain post-Communist Romanian Orthodox groups have continued to embrace anti-Jewish motifs, linking them to veneration of questionable saints, such as individuals associated with interwar fascist movements. He describes how new liturgical texts can serve as vehicles for rehabilitating extremist ideologies under the veil of piety and martyrdom. The chapter thus underscores the urgency of addressing anti-Jewish elements at every level, from official hymn books to local devotions.

Alina Pătru returns to the question of how average believers experience the anti-Jewish rhetoric embedded in hymnography. Like Sandrine Caneri, she finds that many worshippers profess to be unaware of or unaffected by anti-Jewish content. Nevertheless, through subtle repetition and communal reinforcement, such negativity can shape collective mindsets over time. Pătru thus calls for pastoral and catechetical interventions that help Orthodox faithful understand and filter the rhetoric they encounter in worship.

Peter Ebenbauer examines the *Improperia* ("Reproaches") for Good Friday, a text shared in some form by both the Latin and Byzantine traditions. He documents how a text originally intended as a theological meditation on the ingratitude of humanity—God's chosen people turning away—came, over centuries, to be heard as a specific condemnation of the Jewish people. Ebenbauer proposes that re-translating and reinterpreting these texts, clarifying their universal significance, can restore their original intent without excising them from worship altogether.

Simona Ștefana Zetea focuses on Romanian Greek-Catholic liturgical traditions, noting how that Eastern-Rite community has only belatedly received Vatican II's teachings on Jews and Judaism. Zetea argues that rethinking anti-Jewish formulae in Byzantine worship stands not just to improve relations with contemporary Jewish communities, but also to further Catholic-Orthodox rapprochement, for both churches increasingly grapple with shared liturgical texts containing problematic references.

### *Evaluation*

Overall, *Orthodox Liturgy and Anti-Judaism* stands out as a landmark scholarly contribution to the study of anti-Jewish rhetoric in Orthodox Christian worship. The volume's strengths are many. First, it encompasses a remarkable interdisciplinary range, featuring experts in liturgical studies, patristics, history, art history, biblical scholarship, and pastoral theology. Second, rather than merely diagnosing the problem, the authors propose constructive pathways for reform. They largely agree that a blunt "cutting out" of questionable texts is neither sufficient nor theologically prudent. Instead, they collectively argue for a process of re-education, re-translation, contextual interpretation, and, where necessary, discrete liturgical revision.

Another notable contribution is the volume's clear demonstration that anti-Judaism in Orthodox liturgy did not appear out of nowhere. It was shaped by patristic debates over Christ's divinity, influenced by medieval polemics with Jewish communities, hardened by social and political factors in post-Byzantine societies, and sometimes harnessed for nationalist or extremist agendas in modern history. Recognizing these layers of context helps

to disentangle the theological core from later accretions of hostility. It also reminds us that texts—both verbal and visual—always operate within a living tradition. The Church may legitimately revisit such texts, clarifying their theological meaning and, if needed, reforming them in a manner faithful to the broader arc of Christian truth.

Yet the volume also acknowledges the challenges ahead. Several authors note the lack of formal structures within Orthodoxy for reviewing and revising liturgical texts, especially if such texts are thought to carry the authority of patristic tradition. Others underscore the potential for resistance among clergy and laity who fear that changing these texts somehow compromises Orthodoxy's historic faith. It is a large, complex, and admittedly controversial project to reconceptualize or recontextualize centuries of worship. However, participants in this volume are convinced that such work is essential if Orthodox worship is to reflect the fullness of the gospel's love and reconciliation.

Langer and Tonia's comparative perspective reveals the universal phenomenon of self-definition through theological "othering." Caneri and Alexopoulos bring an often-neglected practical dimension, illuminating how Orthodox Christians in the pews encounter and sometimes unconsciously absorb anti-Jewish rhetoric in the liturgy. Bucur and Groen both reinforce the importance of approaching texts theologically rather than just polemically. These contributions highlight the variety of angles from which anti-Jewish bias in Orthodox liturgical tradition can be studied and, crucially, mitigated.

### *Looking Ahead*

In reflecting on *Orthodox Liturgy and Anti-Judaism*, it is valuable to recall the words of the OTSA working group, Orthodox Christians in Dialogue with Jews: "We know that the problem is that almost anything in the Bible and in our liturgy can be anti-Jewish if held in the wrong hands, with the wrong lens. So we want to look again with the right lens." Indeed, this book represents a collective effort by scholars who share that conviction. Building on modern biblical scholarship and retrieving the best insights of the early Church, contributors here present a vision of Christ, his apostles, and the early Christian community as an outgrowth of Israel's own religious tradition, rather than an antagonistic opponent.

At no point do faithful Christians need to harbor contempt toward Jews or Judaism. It is simply not necessary for Jews to serve as a negative foil in order to affirm that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world. Instead, the deeper one probes the Jewish origins of the Church, the clearer it becomes that the good news proclaimed by Christ is inseparable from the goodness and indissolubility of God's covenant with Israel. Properly understood, Orthodox worship itself contains many vestiges of Jewish prayer, psalmody, and ritual—reminders that Christian faith was never meant to develop in hostility to its Jewish roots.

*Orthodox Liturgy and Anti-Judaism* opens a path for ongoing reflection, dialogue, and reform. As the book's contributors demonstrate, these efforts will involve more than simply deleting a handful of hymns or re-translating a few scriptural passages. A renewal of Orthodox liturgy must include a wider pastoral and catechetical program, so that worshippers understand both the historical context of the texts they sing and the living theological meaning of the feast or service being celebrated. By addressing hidden biases, clarifying misinterpretations, and encouraging a theologically sound reading of Scripture, the Orthodox Church can remain true to its ancient heritage while ensuring that its prayers and hymns express the fullness of God's truth and love—toward both the Jewish people and all humanity.

This volume, therefore, stands as a compelling testament to the seriousness with which contemporary Orthodox scholars and pastors are engaging with a difficult legacy. Its carefully researched chapters offer hope that the pursuit of a deeper biblical and patristic vision—one that reaffirms the Jewishness of Jesus and the continuity between God's covenant with Israel and the Church—can lead to a liturgical practice free from centuries-old polemics. In so doing, the Church's worship can become a beacon of reconciliation and grace, rather than a stumbling block in Jewish–Christian relations.