

Vasileios Marinis. *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium: The Fate of the Soul in Theology, Liturgy, and Art*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 202 pages. \$105.

Religious belief and practice are messy—they can vary widely across communities and time, and they are not always consistent with doctrine. While a student of church history might acquire the (false) impression that there was a single dominant or representative belief at a given time, history—as usual—is more complicated. *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium: The Fate of the Soul in Theology, Liturgy, and Art* demonstrates that there were in fact many simultaneous discourses (as reflected in the plural titles of the book’s two parts: “Theologies” and “Liturgies”).

In *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium*, Vasileios Marinis sets out to investigate what the Byzantines believed happened after death. More specifically, Marinis focuses on the phenomena of provisional judgment (as opposed to, say, the Last Judgment) and the “intermediate state,” that is “the period from death to the Last Judgment” (1). Although the book does address precedents in Jewish literature and the early Christian texts, it largely focuses on Byzantine Christianity during the ninth century through the fifteenth century. It is intended primarily for a specialist audience—namely, graduate students and scholars of Byzantine art and theology; however, Marinis’ clear prose may make this book accessible for a wider readership. As he notes, “the fate of the soul after death is still for many a topic of momentous consequence” (133).

Illustrated with 38 figures, the book is organized into two parts. The first, “Theologies,” traces motifs related to the intermediate state from the Jewish apocrypha that influenced early Christian conceptions to increasingly systematic and detailed articulations in the Middle Byzantine period, which then culminated in the unique context of the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-1445)—an attempt at reconciliation between the Latin and Greek churches. Marinis’ sources include saints’ lives, theological treatises, apocryphal texts, frescoes, mosaics, and manuscript illustrations. Of his visual sources, Marinis rightly notes, “they are not mere illustrations of the written word. Rather, they interpret and comment on the text’s meaning, and often they impart subtle theological points that require a serious engagement from the viewer” (5, see also 72-3). Every artistic rendering, no matter how simple, involves a process of editing: “A composition involves a process of inclusion and omission; what is depicted and what is left out is of great significance” (49).

The second half of the book, titled “Liturgies,” investigates expressions of provisional judgment and the intermediate period in funeral and commemorative rites, prayers for the dying, and the remembrance of the dead at the Divine Liturgy. Here Marinis notes that these sources, which emphasize Christ’s role as judge, vary greatly from nonliturgical sources because liturgies have a special function and draw primarily on biblical texts (83-4). The prayers for the dying and the rite of unction are distinct from other liturgies because of their emphasis on intercessory prayer. (The book concludes with an appendix of the original Greek and Marinis’ translation of the *Kanon eis Psychorragounta*, the prayers for the dying.) After chapter 4, “Visualizing the Afterlife,” of Part I, chapter 8, “Two Exceptional Services,” is the book’s other image-focused chapter. Its visual material consists of illustrations of the *Kanon eis Psychorragounta*, found in a late-twelfth to early-thirteenth century manuscript of monastic hours, and in fresco cycles found in a thirteenth-century chapel at Chilandar Monastery at Mount Athos and the fourteenth-century exonarthex of St. Sophia, Ohrid. Marinis demonstrates that these images do not merely illustrate the *kanon*, but “represent conscious choices intended to elucidate and enhance the message of the hymns” (122).

Marinis manages to accomplish a lot in 202 pages. In addition to its contribution as a study of Byzantine beliefs about the intermediate state, *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium* is an excellent model for interdisciplinary study, which successfully exhibits the benefit—and even necessity—of seeking theological meaning in a variety of textual and visual sources.

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