God's Struggler

Religion in the Writings of Nikos Kazantzakis

Edited by

Darren J. N. Middleton and Peter Bien

Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia
Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Contributors ix

Prologue xli

Archbishop Stylianos of Australia

1. Introduction
Spiritual Levendia: Kazantzakis's Theology of Struggle
Darren J. N. Middleton and Peter Bien 1

2. Christ, Kazantzakis, and Controversy in Greece
Michael Antonakes 23

3. Nikos Kazantzakis: Orthodox or Heterodox?
A Greek Orthodox Appreciation
Demetrios J. Constantelos 37

4. The Orthodox Sources of The Saviors of God
Lambros Kamperidis 53

5. Kazantzakis and Mysticism
Daniel A. Dombrowski 71

6. Saviors of God: Soteriological Motifs
In the Theologies of Kazantzakis and Luther
Ann M. Pederson 93

7. Kazantzakis's Long Apprenticeship to Christian Themes
Peter Bien 113

8. 'Dwindling Down the Shore': Christology in the Odyssey
Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. 133

9. Christ's Jungian Shadow in The Last Temptation
John S. Bak 153
Nikos Kazantzakis: Orthodox or Heterodox?
A Greek Orthodox Appreciation

Demetrios J. Constantelos

A. Introduction

This essay examines the background of Nikos Kazantzakis's religious formation and evaluates his religious thought in the context of Greek Orthodox theological teachings and practice. I believe that Kazantzakis was profoundly religious in the Greek sense of the term θρησκεία (from διψάω “to examine, regard,” τρέω “to fear,” θρόω “to leap”): an ontological examination, a sense of fear and awe at the wonder of the cosmos, a leaping up in profound search. Indeed, I believe that much of his spirituality was close to, and even identical with, Greek Orthodox spiritual ascetic teachings. Whether in spirituality, doctrinal teachings, practices, or traditions, the Orthodox Church is in a process of continual evolution.\(^1\) Even though there are defined dogmas, Orthodox theology recognizes the importance of theologieouna—theological opinions that imply theological evolution and a constant becoming. These personal, developing theological opinions may or may not be accepted by the Church or defined as dogmatic teachings.\(^2\) For example, the teachings on hesychasm had been theologieouna for earlier Church Fathers, but in the fourteenth century they were synthesized by Gregory Palamas under circumstances that led the organizational Church to accept them as Orthodox theology.\(^3\) It is in the context of religious teachings that we ought to compare Kazantzakis's religious thought with Orthodox theology. In terms of Orthodox dogma he is heterodox, but in terms of religious teachings—spiritual-mystical religious teachings in

---


\(^2\) For the meaning of theologieouna, see Christos Andreouso, Dhogetikí tis Orthodóksou Anazitídkes Ekklesiás, 2d ed. (Athens 1956) 3.

particular—he is Orthodox. Furthermore, I believe that Kazantzakis’s struggles with the Greek Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities arose out of a failure to understand his writings and a lack of systematic study of his idiosyncratic religious thought. This thought deserves to be studied in the context of the evolutionary spirit of the Greek mind, both sacred and profane, spiritual and secular. Despite all the outside doctrines that influenced him, Kazantzakis remained to the very end a searching Greek mind, defiant, restless, and torturing himself with unanswerable questions.

B. The Greek Mind

From its origins down to the present, the Greek mind has been a continuum. Classical antiquity retained the memory of the Mycenaean and archaic past. The Hellenistic and Roman centuries made constant reference to the heritage of the golden age. And the Christian Hellenism of both the Byzantine and the Ottoman centuries was conscious of its continuity with the preceding millennia. While each Hellenic period retained the memory, historical records, and language of the past, as well as some past institutions, each selected only those components that would be useful for its particular needs and, in adapting them, developed its own features.

Throughout four millennia, the Greek spirit has been hostile to materialism. In its search of meaning, it has sought to identify itself with an uncreated universal essence, the original source of life—whatever name we may choose to give to it. The physical and metaphysical, the created and the uncreated, the visible and invisible, the microcosm around us and the macrocosm beyond us have preoccupied the Greek mind in religious and philosophical terms as well as idealistic and practical ones, in both pagan and Christian Hellenism, ancient, medieval, and modern.

At no time has the Greek mind been monolithic and uniform; at no time has Greek Orthodox Christianity been consistent and static. One cannot squeeze Orthodox Christianity into formulas and categories such as apocalyptic versus cataphatic, or the like. Thus in reviewing Kazantzakis’s religious thought in a Greek Orthodox context, we should have an expansive view of Orthodox theology, avoiding the stereotypical characterizations we find in textbooks and manuals. Orthodoxy is sufficiently broad to escape confinement in molds, and to defy the question “How orthodox is Orthodox?”

The first problem that needs to be addressed is where to look for Kazantzakis’s religious beliefs. Which of his many books is our best source? To be sure, there is no unanimity among his readers. Every one of his works includes material relevant to my inquiry. I have read, I find that Saint Christ, Saint Francis, Christ Rhetor, and the biographical Report to Greece are significant. Kazantzakis has left a oeuvre on a developing mind, while the imitation of the poet’s life, travels, and the search for Kazantzakis’s report on his own decades after his death in 1923, in Berlin, where he revisited the treatise, the pessimistic and destructive, sizes the harmonious unity of Report to Greece and other late works as both joyful and heroic. In the mythology, tragic poetry, pagan Hellenism, or the hymn literature of Christian Hellenism, eternal, life rather than death engages in a constant quest writing displays a perpetual.

Kazantzakis was immersed in

\[\text{Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek}\]

\[\text{works includes material relevant to my inquiry. I have read, I find that Saint Christ, Saint Francis, Christ Rhetor, and the biographical Report to Greece are significant. Kazantzakis has left a oeuvre on a developing mind, while the imitation of the poet’s life, travels, and the search for Kazantzakis’s report on his own decades after his death in 1923, in Berlin, where he revisited the treatise, the pessimistic and destructive, sizes the harmonious unity of Report to Greece and other late works as both joyful and heroic. In the mythology, tragic poetry, pagan Hellenism, or the hymn literature of Christian Hellenism, eternal, life rather than death engages in a constant quest writing displays a perpetual.}

Kazantzakis was immersed in

\[\text{Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek}\]

\[\text{works includes material relevant to my inquiry. I have read, I find that Saint Christ, Saint Francis, Christ Rhetor, and the biographical Report to Greece are significant. Kazantzakis has left a oeuvre on a developing mind, while the imitation of the poet’s life, travels, and the search for Kazantzakis’s report on his own decades after his death in 1923, in Berlin, where he revisited the treatise, the pessimistic and destructive, sizes the harmonious unity of Report to Greece and other late works as both joyful and heroic. In the mythology, tragic poetry, pagan Hellenism, or the hymn literature of Christian Hellenism, eternal, life rather than death engages in a constant quest writing displays a perpetual.}

\[\text{Kazantzakis was immersed in}\]

\[\text{Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek}\]

\[\text{works includes material relevant to my inquiry. I have read, I find that Saint Christ, Saint Francis, Christ Rhetor, and the biographical Report to Greece are significant. Kazantzakis has left a oeuvre on a developing mind, while the imitation of the poet’s life, travels, and the search for Kazantzakis’s report on his own decades after his death in 1923, in Berlin, where he revisited the treatise, the pessimistic and destructive, sizes the harmonious unity of Report to Greece and other late works as both joyful and heroic. In the mythology, tragic poetry, pagan Hellenism, or the hymn literature of Christian Hellenism, eternal, life rather than death engages in a constant quest writing displays a perpetual.}

\[\text{Kazantzakis was immersed in}\]

\[\text{Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek}\]

\[\text{works includes material relevant to my inquiry. I have read, I find that Saint Christ, Saint Francis, Christ Rhetor, and the biographical Report to Greece are significant. Kazantzakis has left a oeuvre on a developing mind, while the imitation of the poet’s life, travels, and the search for Kazantzakis’s report on his own decades after his death in 1923, in Berlin, where he revisited the treatise, the pessimistic and destructive, sizes the harmonious unity of Report to Greece and other late works as both joyful and heroic. In the mythology, tragic poetry, pagan Hellenism, or the hymn literature of Christian Hellenism, eternal, life rather than death engages in a constant quest writing displays a perpetual.}

\[\text{Kazantzakis was immersed in}\]

\[\text{Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek}\]

\[\text{works includes material relevant to my inquiry. I have read, I find that Saint Christ, Saint Francis, Christ Rhetor, and the biographical Report to Greece are significant. Kazantzakis has left a oeuvre on a developing mind, while the imitation of the poet’s life, travels, and the search for Kazantzakis’s report on his own decades after his death in 1923, in Berlin, where he revisited the treatise, the pessimistic and destructive, sizes the harmonious unity of Report to Greece and other late works as both joyful and heroic. In the mythology, tragic poetry, pagan Hellenism, or the hymn literature of Christian Hellenism, eternal, life rather than death engages in a constant quest writing displays a perpetual.}

\[\text{Kazantzakis was immersed in}\]

\[\text{Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek}\]

\[\text{works includes material relevant to my inquiry. I have read, I find that Saint Christ, Saint Francis, Christ Rhetor, and the biographical Report to Greece are significant. Kazantzakis has left a oeuvre on a developing mind, while the imitation of the poet’s life, travels, and the search for Kazantzakis’s report on his own decades after his death in 1923, in Berlin, where he revisited the treatise, the pessimistic and destructive, sizes the harmonious unity of Report to Greece and other late works as both joyful and heroic. In the mythology, tragic poetry, pagan Hellenism, or the hymn literature of Christian Hellenism, eternal, life rather than death engages in a constant quest writing displays a perpetual.}

\[\text{Kazantzakis was immersed in}\]

\[\text{Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek}\]

\[\text{works includes material relevant to my inquiry. I have read, I find that Saint Christ, Saint Francis, Christ Rhetor, and the biographical Report to Greece are significant. Kazantzakis has left a oeuvre on a developing mind, while the imitation of the poet’s life, travels, and the search for Kazantzakis’s report on his own decades after his death in 1923, in Berlin, where he revisited the treatise, the pessimistic and destructive, sizes the harmonious unity of Report to Greece and other late works as both joyful and heroic. In the mythology, tragic poetry, pagan Hellenism, or the hymn literature of Christian Hellenism, eternal, life rather than death engages in a constant quest writing displays a perpetual.}

\[\text{Kazantzakis was immersed in}\]
the Writings of Nikos Kazantzakis

e, I believe that Kazantzakis's astical authorities arose out of a lack of systematic study of his ght deserves to be studied in the Greek mind, both sacred and the outside doctrines that influence end a searching Greek mind, ith unanswerable questions.

Greek mind has been a continuity of the Mycenaean and archaic made constant reference to the lan Hellenism of both the Byzantine or its continuity with the ic period retained the memory, past, as well as some past insi- nents that would be useful for its developed its own features.

spirit has been hostile to materi- sought to identify itself with an source of life—whatever name we d metaphysical, the created and me microcosm around us and the the Greek mind in religious and practical ones, in both pagan al, and modern.
monolithic and uniform; at no time consistent and static. One cannot lulas and categories such as apo. Thus in reviewing Kazantzakis's x context, we should have an iding the stereotypical character- s. Orthodoxy is sufficiently broad y the question "How orthodox is addressed is where to look for is many books is our best source? ng his readers. Every one of his

Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek Orthodox Appreciation

works includes material relevant to the theme of this essay. Among those I have read, I find that Saviors of God (Askittik). The Last Temptation of Christ, Saint Francis, Christ Recrucified (The Greek Passion), and his autobiographical Report to Greco abound in either explicit or implicit formulations of his credo.

Kazantzakis himself has asserted, and others agree, that his entire oeuvre is. In effect, a commentary on Saviors of God. But this credo, more poetry than creed, was written long before Report to Greco and is the work of a developing mind, while the autobiography is more a definitive distillation of the poet's life, travels, contacts, readings, and total experience. In our search for Kazantzakis's religious beliefs, then, we should rely more on the Report than on his other books. It was completed in 1956, three decades after his Saviors of God, which, composed between December 1922 and March 1923 in Berlin, reflects what he heard and experienced during those turbulent years in Germany, and then later in the Soviet Union, where he revised the treatise's ending in 1928. It was inspired more by pessimistic and destructive ideas than by the Greek mind, which emphasizes the harmonious unity of life's Apollonian and Dionysiac elements. In Report to Greco and other late works, Kazantzakis celebrates life, seeing it as both joyful and heroic. In this he is typically Greek, for whether we turn to the mythology, tragic poetry, art, architecture, philosophy, or religion of pagan Hellenism, or the hymnology, Patristic discourses, or even the ascetic literature of Christian Hellenism, we discern an emphasis on life—life the eternal, life rather than death, eternity rather than time. The Greek mind engages in a constant quest for the continuity of life. In addition, Greek writing displays a perpetual dialogue between divinity and humanity. Kazantzakis was immersed in this rich, broad spiritual heritage.


To Odysseus's anguished outcry, "Miserable man that I am, who is going to save me?" divinity, in the person of Ino, responds by stressing that the solution is synergy between God and humanity (Homer, Odyssey 5, 299-354). To the similar outcry of Paul of Tarsus, "Wretched man that I am: Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:24), the answer is that human rescue will come from God through Christ. In both cases "divinity became human in order to save the human." It is for this reason that Maximos the Confessor emphasized that the "Son God Logos became son of man and human in order to make gods and sons of God" ("Peri Theologias kai Oikonomias," B. 25, in J. P. Migne, ed., Patrología Graeca, 162 vols. [Paris 1857-1912], 90:1136B; cf. 401A, 520C). Maximos and Nicholas Kavaslas were among Kazantzakis's favorite Greek Christian mystics.
C. The Evolution of Kazantzakis's Religious Thought

Kazantzakis's religious philosophy is subject to a constant *gignesthai*, a continuous becoming; it is never static. Although his views are dispersed in texts composed over a fifty-year period, the best place to look for the finality of his religious creed is, as I emphasized earlier, his semi-autobiographical *Report to Greco*, a "mixture of fact and fiction" that nevertheless includes, as Mrs. Kazantzakis assures us, "a great deal truth, a minimum of fancy."

In this book, Kazantzakis related many childhood religious experiences and his change of attitude toward religion, the Church, monasticism, and Christian teachings. Later in his life, he recalled with nostalgia his youthful experiences: "When I wish to speak of . . . theoignosial to the neighbors."

We should speak of religious thought rather than theology, because the latter has a specific meaning. In an Orthodox context, theology accepts, defines, and codifies its teachings. Theology includes dogmas; religious thought is open-ended, a perpetual questioning. Kazantzakis rejected codified dogmas. His religious philosophy changed any new experience—whether in dialogue with churchmen, in monastery life, or in travels abroad—leading to a rethinking. He brilliantly illustrated that our very existence implies change, that change leads to maturity, and that maturity means to go on recreating ourselves endlessly.

The religious interests, pieties, fears, ascetic tendencies, and idiosyncratic ways of Kazantzakis can be traced back to his childhood and youthful years. He related that as a child he loved to read apocalyptic literature such as the *Agatha Epistoli* ("Sacred Epistle") and to observe strictly the canons of the Church on fasting. On Wednesdays and Fridays (fasting days for Orthodox Christians) he would check on neighborhood wives to see whether they had violated Church canons by preparing meals of meat or fish. Every time he discovered violations, he threatened the neighbors with eternal condemnation, lifting his *Sacred Epistle* aloft and crying out, "Woe to you, woe to you!" whereupon the terror-stricken neighbors caressed [him] and implored [him] to be still."

---

10Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, 49.
11Ibid., 71.

Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek

As a teenager, Kazantzakis youngsters in order to read the to my friends," he recalled, "I pt pamphlet-sized editions. Each e and marigolds of our courtyard the saints had endured in order gregated around him, they listen to ring with lamentations for t l passers-by stopped to ask whet them. "It is nothing. Just my ... [theognosial to the neighbors."

Love for saints and heroes "Freedom was my first great desire for holiness. Hero togeth."

In addition to the saints' live such as Makarios of Egypt (Psec the author of the *Klimax of Divine Dionysios*), and Maximos the C Reverend Emmanuel Papastefan. In the United States from 1921 Kazantzakis reveals his mystic writings of the mystics inspired Where do we come from? Where places such as Mount Athos, Jet at Mt. Sinai, in search for Chri child, had loved Him ever since Christ "had become invisible." I realize that Christ wanders amc world. He went to Jerusalem speaking son of Mary" but inst eater" of the Old Testament."

Among the mystics, Kazantzakis (c. 580–662), the Byzantine arts monk and became a prolific asc in *Report to Greco* and in his c reality, let us change the eyes wh when a child; I do it now as well wrote Kazantzakis.15

12Ibid., 71-72.
13Ibid., 71.
14Ibid., 197-234 passim. 248.
15Ibid., 45.
Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek Orthodox Appreciation

As a teenager, Kazantzakis would gather together friends and other youngsters in order to read the Lives of Saints to them. “Selling all my toys to my friends,” he recalled, “I purchased the lives of the saints in popular, pamphlet-sized editions. Each evening I sat on my little stool amid the basil and marigolds of our courtyard and read out loud all the various ordeals the saints had endured in order to save their souls.” The neighbors congregated around him, they listened, and little by little the courtyard “began to ring with lamentations for the saints’ sufferings and torments.” When passers-by stopped to ask whether someone had died, Nikos’s father told them, “It is nothing. Just my son trying to impart a knowledge of God [theognostia] to the neighbors.” Knowledge of God remained one of Kazantzakis’s perpetual obsessions.

Love for saints and heroes accompanied him to the end of his life. “Freedom was my first great desire,” he wrote. “The second ... was the desire for holiness. Hero together with saint: such is mankind’s supreme ideal.”

In addition to the saints’ lives, Kazantzakis studied Byzantine mystics such as Makarios of Egypt (Pseudo-Makarios), Evagrios of Pontos, Ioannis the author of the Klimax of Divine Ascent, Dionysios the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysios), and Maximos the Confessor. In his correspondence with the Reverend Emmanuel Papastefanou, who served as a Greek Orthodox priest in the United States from 1921 to 1955, as well as in his Report to Greco, Kazantzakis reveals his mystical tendencies and ascetic philosophy. The writings of the mystics inspired him to seek answers to basic questions—Where do we come from? Where are we going?—by spending time in holy places such as Mount Athos, Jerusalem, and Saint Catherine’s Monastery at Mt. Sinai, in search for Christ. “I had loved Him when I was a small child, had loved Him ever since,” he wrote. But wherever he searched, Christ “had become invisible.” His experience on Mount Athos led him to realize that Christ wanders among the hungry and the homeless—in the world. He went to Jerusalem hoping to find there the “kind, sweetly speaking son of Mary” but instead found Jehovah, the “terrifying man eater” of the Old Testament.

Among the mystics, Kazantzakis’s favorite was Maximos the Confessor (c. 580–662), the Byzantine aristocrat and imperial secretary who turned monk and became a prolific ascetic writer. He cited him several times, both in Report to Greco and in his correspondence. “Since we cannot change reality, let us change the eyes which see reality,” wrote Maximos. “I did this when a child; I do it now as well in the most creative moments of my life,” wrote Kazantzakis.

---

10 Ibid., 71-72.
11 Ibid., 71.
12 Ibid., 197-234 passim, 248.
13 Ibid., 48.
As the years passed, the saints’ legends became “too confining. . . . It was not that I had ceased to believe. I believed, but the saints struck me now as much too submissive. They continually bowed their heads before God and said yes.” He came to admire the man “who resists, struggles, and is not afraid . . . to say no, even to God.” In other words, the hero. His frequent references to life as a struggle, and his view that life is worth living only when it displays the strength and integrity to withstand the sufferings and misfortunes of existence, reveal his relentless agony and perpetual search for ultimate rest in an Ithaca of the spirit. For example, his correspondence indicates that he was familiar with Stoicism’s teaching of ekpyrosis (conflagration), attributed first to Heraclitus, which reminds us of the Old Testament God portrayed as πύρ καταναλίσκον (“consuming [or devouring] fire,” Deut 4:24; Heb 12:29). As did Stoicism, Kazantzakis held that we must find happiness in ourselves, independent of the external world; we succeed in overcoming the world by mastering our passions, our emotions, our material desires. His anthropology considers the perfect man the one who has risen above the ordinary flow of society and has built a strong and creative character. His own ascetic life and the recurrent themes of agony, struggle, temptation, restlessness, and victory that permeate his writings indicate that he considered himself the prototype of the creative spiritual person—the “superman.” His thought was further influenced by Stoicism’s concept of the universe as Oneness, its doctrine of pantheism, and its view of the world as logos—reason—by which we must seek to regulate our lives.

But Kazantzakis’s religious thought evolved and changed. Although in one of his letters to Father Papastefanou he said that he lived “enwrapped by the motionless vision of God, like light,” and added, “I am tranquil because I know that if I lift up my head, stretch out my hand, I will touch

large, invisible wings,” yet in a too Christian and kind, protest

No, not God is not what you absolutely beautiful.” God is things and also everything op things and abandons them be remained along the way. If w bodies in order to pass on, ar blood and tears, destroying i to his fearsome face.

This is not foreign to Greek Orth. Time and eternity are interrelated, alw God as ever present, constantly involve everywhere. The opening prayer in an αλεθείας, ο πανταχού πάρον κατ’ ανάφερα and filling all things; Horologion to A. J. Phillipou (Oxford 1964) 37-40. (Brookline MA: Holy Cross Press, 19 pneumatology, see Blair Reynolds, The Susquehanna University Press, 1990).


14Kazantzakis, Suffering God, 34; what I said earlier about the problem of beliefs, and my feeling that those bel Saviors of God is the work of a develop Papastefanou were written for the most composing Saviors of God and are, in
Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek Orthodox Appreciation

large, invisible wings,”18 yet in another letter he rejected the priest’s God as too Christian and kind, protesting.

No, no! God is not what you write to me: “... love for the spiritual, the absolutely beautiful.” God is something deeper that contains all those things and also everything opposite to them, indeed that hates all those things and abandons them behind... for the simple, naïve people who remained along the way. If we say: God is an Erotic Wind that crushes bodies in order to pass on, and if we think: Love always works amidst blood and tears, destroying Individuals—then we come a little nearer to his fearsome face.19


19Kazantzakis, Suffering God, 34; Kazantzakis, Milei yia Theô, 83. Keeping in mind what I said earlier about the problem of where to look for Kazantzakis’s definitive religious beliefs, and my feeling that those beliefs are best found in Report to Greco, whereas Savors of God is the work of a developing mind, we should remember that the letters to Papastefanou were written for the most part precisely at the time when Kazantzakis was composing Savors of God and are, in effect, a defense of the theories therein.
D. Was Kazantzakis a Christian Orthodox?

Christianity posits a God who is love; a divine Being in whom all things have their being; a Creator who moves within the creation and supervises it; an incarnate God who becomes man to elevate humanity spiritually and save it; a God who preserves human beings even after physical death. Kazantzakis rejected this creed. His insatiable thirst for the absolute provides no possibility for fulfillment. For him, there is no individual salvation, no preservation of the human person; instead there is an absorption of the individual by the nation, the species, the earth, and ultimately the entire cosmos, all made one. "The entire Earth" cries out for redemption, he wrote, "with her trees and her waters, with her animals, with her men and her gods, calls from within your breast." Even though he echoed Saint Paul's cry, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together... and not only the creation, but we ourselves... groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:22-23), his own concept of redemption was panentheistic.21

Kazantzakis was fervently religious, but was he a Christian Orthodox? Not in a formal, traditional, or canonical way. Whether willingly or unwillingly, he was baptized Orthodox; his two marriages were solemnized according to the Orthodox Church; he was given an Orthodox funeral. His daily life was deeply ascetic and spiritual. His basic agony was a pursuit to find and understand ultimate Being; his constant struggle was to liberate his divine self from his earthly self. He believed in God and saw the human being as a creature involved in a continuous labor to discover God.

Yes, in Kazantzakis's religious thought there is a God, but in some ways that God seems to be identified with everything.22 There is a profound believer in Kazantzakis the man, but the object of that belief is mankind itself. "Purpose and means become identified,"23 as do object and objective, the searcher and the searched for: "God is the supreme expression of man's

Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek
tireless and struggling element Seeker." Physics and theology Socratic philosophers such as Kazantzakis's God, as the entire substance but also the creative human beings, present in our to presence in us and our response two must achieve unity ultimate man." Death, therefore, is an ever sense. Our evolution to pristine p about God's purity.25

The difference between Kazan- dox Christian understanding is human in the divine, annihila- theology emphasizes community ontology of the individual. Kazan- certainty and presence, led him to present, and future have constitu- Divinity, cosmos, humanity, pha, and the One is present in all. Ultimate God is inherently unattainable, if he raised questions, but he recu- to a religious life of chaos.

In contrast to Kazantzakis’s ten- tuality and presence, with faith Kazantzakis’s eschatology leads in the sense of eternal life in this hand, although some of Kazantz with the Church’s teachings, they are able, just as many elements of them are not necessarily in agreement.

21Panentheism... is proposed by process theists in contradiction to both traditional theism (which sees an absolute separation between God and the world) and pantheism (which simply identifies God and the world). Process theists argue that God is the whole of reality, while the world is merely a part of God, a modest part of the infinite potential within the reality of God, the potential which has been actualized. There persists in God a boundless abyss of creative potential which remains unactualized" (Barry L. Whitney, What Are They Saying about God and Evil? [New York and Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1989] 53).
22Perhaps, however, it would be more accurate to say that Kazantzakis is keen to express the unfathomable intimacy of God with all things—how the divine is All in all.

24Ibid.
25Kimon Friar, The Spiritual Odyssey (Minneapolis MN: North Central Public the doctrine that the world is not ident (classical theism), but within God, who
26At least it leads nowhere if our con- conscious existence after death. I read immortality, by which they mean the- in the everlasting divine memory. Since becoming—the richness of the ongoing "saving God" is indeed an eschatology from Orthodox doctrine. For more about The Living God: A Christian Theology E Hodder and Stoughton, 1967) 97-141.
the Writings of Nikos Kazantzakis

Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek Orthodox Appreciation

...45

tireless and struggling element. He is the Indestructible and Incurable Seeker." Physics and theology merge in Kazantzakis, as they do in pre-Socratic philosophers such as Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, and Protagoras. Kazantzakis's God, as the entire evolutionary process, is not only a primary substance but also the creative action in nature and the creative urge in human beings, present in our thought, our life, our very existence. God's presence in us and our response determine God's relation to humanity. The two must achieve unity ultimately at death, "that point when God kisses man." Death, therefore, is an event leading to apotheosis in a panentheistic sense. Our evolution to pristine purity depends on the concept that we have about God's purity.

The difference between Kazantzakis's conception of God and the Orthodox Christian understanding is that while Kazantzakis's God absorbs the human in the divine, annihilating him or her as a person, Orthodox theology emphasizes community with God's uncreated glory, preserving the ontology of the individual. Kazantzakis's longing for divine knowledge, for certainty and presence, led him to identify eternity with time. For him, past, present, and future have constitutive elements of the ever-present Oneness. Divinity, cosmos, humanly, physical and metaphysical realities are One and the One is present in all. Ultimately Kazantzakis realized that knowing God is inherently unattainable. He saw darkness and he experienced light, he raised questions, but he received no answers. Thus he resigned himself to a religious life of chaos.

In contrast to Kazantzakis's thought, Orthodoxy is concerned with certainty and presence, with faith, with life—indeed eternal life. While Kazantzakis's eschatology leads nowhere, Orthodox's promises salvation in the sense of eternal life in the presence of God's glory. On the other hand, although some of Kazantzakis's bold statements are not in agreement with the Church's teachings, they are nevertheless permissible and debatable, just as many elements of the mystical theology of the Byzantine era are not necessarily in agreement with established dogma, yet permissible

Ibid.

25Kimon Friar, The Spiritual Odyssey of Nikos Kazantzakis, ed. Theofanis G. Stavrout (Minneapolis MN: North Central Publishing Co., 1979) 26. Once again: panentheism is the doctrine that the world is not identical with God (pantheism), nor separate from God (classical theology, but within God, who in His divine nature nevertheless transcends it.

26At least it leads nowhere if our criterion is "subjective immortality"—i.e., continued conscious existence after death. I realize that process theologians talk about "objectivity of immortality," by which they mean the persisting of all perishable occasions of experience in the everlasting divine memory. Since, according to this doctrine, we can affect divine becoming—the richness of the ongoing divine experience—perhaps Kazantzakis's idea of "saving God" is indeed an eschatology that does lead somewhere. But it is very different from Orthodox doctrine. For more about process views of immortality, see Peter Hamilton, The Living God: A Christian Theology Based on the Thought of A. N. Whitehead (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967) 97-141.
in the life experience of the faithful. The poet’s religious thinking may be
categorized as a process leading ultimately to union with God. But when he
says that there is no other way to reach God except to follow the blood-
stained steps of Christ, to transubstantiate the inner person into spirit until
it is mixed with God, it is not clear whether he is speaking in panentheistic
terms or in terms of Patristic thought, which stresses theosis.

Nevertheless there is much that is Orthodox in Kazantzakis. First of all,
he typically employed Chalcedonian or Patristic theological terms to express
his beliefs, terms such as dyadike, hypostasis, theanthropos. For example:

This dual nature [dyadike hypostasis] of Christ has always been a
deep, inscrutable mystery to me, and especially the yearning, so human, so superhuman, of Christ the man to attain to God, or, more
exactly, to return to God and become identical with Him.27

Or:

Every human being is divine and human [theanthropos], . . . both spirit
and flesh. That is why the mystery of Christ is not simply a mystery for
a particular creed; it is universal. The struggle between God and human
breaks out in everyone, together with the longing for reconciliation.28

Even his obsession with the idea of human beings saving God reminds
us of Maximos the Confessor, whose fundamental theology is the belief in
reciprocity between God and humanity. Kazantzakis admired Maximos’s
mysticism, although he was selective regarding the saint’s other religious
views. Maximos emphasizes the unity of all things achieved through the
creative and redemptive philanthropia of God—humanity’s unity with God
and God’s reciprocal unity with humanity. The unity of all creation is found
in a human being when he or she responds to the call to serve as mediat
ator between Creator and creation. The human being as microcosm is
called to serve the macrocosm; reciprocally, the Being under whom all
things became subject is invited to lift them up to their original Creator. For
Maximos, the ultimate reciprocity between God and humanity was mani
fested when God’s Logos became Incarnate in Christ. It is through God’s
Logos that God moves toward humanity. By virtue of humanity’s response
to this initiative, God’s name is “saved,” remaining alive not only in memory
but also existentially in humanity. Maximos’s theology, like that of other
major Greek Fathers, is not only apophatic, emphasizing the mystery, the
incomprehensible, the indescribable, the invisible, the uncontainable and
unintelligible: it is also cataphatic, speaking of the revealing activity of God,

Orthodox or Heterodox? A Gree

the Unity of God-in-Trinity. All through the incarnation that I
with God and achieve the state
Kazantzakis as Orthodox (de-
panentheistic rather than Patristic)

Struggle between the flesh reconciliation and submission
struggle—union with God
theosis); this was the ascetic
invites us to take as well, fo’

As in the writings of Grego
has invited us to ascend con
Furthermore, when he has a de
. . . He is too big to fit insid
has echoed Clement of Alexan
sues God its own mask. But b
race is always the same God. A
with this never changing Go
Orthodox mysticism.29

Kazantzakis’s criticism of l
taken as proof of anti-religious
toward the Orthodox Church.
Theologian, Eustathios of Thes
other Church Fathers who criti
ditions, Kazantzakis expected
than vocational functionaries.
destructive criticism.

Unlike Nietzsche, who den
the person of Christ, Kazan
Last Temptation, he wrote that
to offer a supreme model to
him that he must not fear pa
can be conquered, all the 
failed suffered pain, and since th
fought until the very last mo

27Kazantzakis, Report to Greco, 290.
28Ibid.

29Maximos the Confessor, Pros 1
and cataphatic theology in the Orth
excellent study.
30Kazantzakis, Report to Greco, 2
31Ibid., 152.
32Clement of Alexandria, Protre
Pronolos; cf. John Chrysostom, Hon
n the Writings of Nikos Kazantzakis

... the Unity of God-in-Trinity. Although the Trinity remains a mystery, it is through the incarnation that humanity is able to enter into communion with God and achieve the state of theosis. Perhaps nowhere else was Kazantzakis as Orthodox (despite what I said above about a possible panentheistic rather than Patristic basis) as when he wrote,

Struggle between the flesh and the spirit, rebellion and resistance, reconciliation and submission, and finally—the supreme purpose of the struggle—union with God (precisely what Orthodox theology calls theosis): this was the ascent taken by Christ, the ascent which He invites us to take as well, following in His bloody tracks. As in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and John Sinaiotis, Kazantzakis has invited us to ascend constantly toward God, following many steps. Furthermore, when he has a dervish proclaim, “God does not have a name... He is too big to fit inside names. A name is a prison. God is free,” he has echoed Clement of Alexandria, who wrote that every race and every age gives God its own mask. But behind all the masks in every age and every race is always the same God. Man’s ultimate destiny is to achieve a union with this never changing God. This doctrine of theosis is central to Orthodox mysticism.

Kazantzakis’s criticism of bishops, priests, and monks should not be taken as proof of anti-religious, anti-Christian sentiment, or of hostility toward the Orthodox Church. Like John Chrysostom, Symeon the New Theologian, Eustathios of Thessaloniki, Athanasios of Constantinople, and other Church Fathers who criticized various priests and ecclesiastical conditions, Kazantzakis expected priests to behave like spiritual men rather than vocational functionaries. His mode was that of creative rather than destructive criticism.

Unlike Nietzsche, who denounced not only Christian morality but also the person of Christ, Kazantzakis admired Christ. In his prologue to The Last Temptation, he wrote that he wanted to offer a supreme model to the man who struggles; I wanted to show him that he must not fear pain, temptation or death—because all three can be conquered, all three have already been conquered. Christ suffered pain, and since then pain has been sanctified. Temptation fought until the very last moment to lead him astray, and temptation

29Maximos the Confessor, "Pros Thalassion," Migne, PG, 90:401, 520C. On apophatic and cataphatic theology in the Orthodox Church, see Trempeles, Mystikismos, 20-27, an excellent study.
30Kazantzakis, Report to Greco, 290.
31Ibid., 152.
32Clement of Alexandria, Protreptikos II; Stromateis, Ill.1; Apospasmata, IV Prel Pronolas; cf. John Chrysostom, Homily 42.2 (the Gospel of Matthew).
was defeated. Christ died on the Cross, and at that instant death was
vanquished forever.

Every obstacle in his journey became a milestone, an occasion for
further triumph. We have a model in front of us now, a model who
blazes our trail and gives strength. 33

Is there a more Orthodox proclamation of faith in Christ’s sacrifice and its
ultimate results? As in the case of Christ, who became perfect through
suffering (John 19:17-18; Heb 2:10-11), human perfection, too, is achieved
through pain and suffering.

E. Problems with Kazantzakis’s “Orthodoxy”

However, in several respects, Kazantzakis’s theological position remains
contradictory. When he sought to understand Christ and his teachings
naively, logically, he appeared to be an agnostic, even an atheist; yet on
other occasions, when his heart flowed, he revealed himself as a person
who had surrendered himself to Christ. His mind and heart were in con-
stant conflict. On the one hand, he wrote of the existence of an abyss, of
nothing—no God, no Creator; on the other, his definition of ἀρχήγορη
οὐσία or ἡ ἀρχή—“primeval essence,” “life increate”—may be identi-
fied with what we commonly call God.

For Kazantzakis, human beings come from and end in a dark abyss.
What lies between is called life. But is death or life the ultimate purpose
of our existence? Both death and life, time and eternity, derive their existence
from the primeval essence. However, Kazantzakis did not identify this es-
SENSE with the ontos or, the One that really exists. Life for him is “increate”
in the sense that it is without a beginning, evolutionary, an indestructible
movement. Again, he did not identify Life with the Creator, nor did he hold
life on earth to be the creation of a God. Kazantzakis here is contradictory
and heterodox.

He was often closer to the ancient Greek or early Christian spirit than
to the theology of post-Constantinian Orthodoxy. Ancient Greek thought as
well as early Hellenized Christian thought avoided the formulation of dog-
mas. The freedom to seek and search, to understand and debate, is a mark
of both profane and early Christian Hellenism. The plethora of sects and
heretical teachings that emerged during the first three centuries after
Christ forced the Christian Church to formulate dogmas in order to guide
its faithful and guard the essence of Christian theology. The process leading
to dogmatic formulations was a slow one. It is relevant to emphasize that
the earliest dogmas—pronouncements of defined creeds for ecumenical

33Nikos Kazantzakis, The Last Temptation of Christ, trans. Peter Bien (New York: Simon
Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek Orthodox Appreciation

application—were formulated by ecumenical councils from 325 down to 843, when the Church's positions on theology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and eschatology received their final form. But even dogmas can be changed provided that they are debated in an ecumenical council and modified or reformulated accordingly.

Therefore, one should not rush to condemn Kazantzakis's questioning. His poetic imagination led him to extremes, but basically his spirituality and asceticism are closer to Orthodoxy than some people would have us believe. For example, how different is Kazantzakis's defiance of death from that of John Chrysostom as related in his Paschal catechetical oration? Perhaps no other modern writer has been so obsessed with the eschaton as was Kazantzakis: he had faith in continuity of life, he defied death because he believed in life. Or how different is his emphasis on the conflict between spirit and matter, flesh and mind, from St. Paul's outcry: "I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:22-24).

Should we doubt Kazantzakis's Orthodoxy because he proclaimed that God is imprisoned within humanity? Indeed he was Orthadox when he wrote that God's presence in humanity is in danger because of man's passions, lust for matter, and inherent sin. He was concerned about the liberation of humanity's divine self from sin. By ourselves, he explained, we are miserable, heartless, and insignificant, but there is within us a power that constantly pushes us higher. This doctrine concerning humanity's spiritual self-perfection and achievement is very Orthodox indeed. Orthodox spirituality has no other purpose than the purification of human life and the revelation of God's glory in humanity. The human being, not self-sufficient, needs God and is a collaborator of God's, a synergos Theou. In Greek Orthodoxy, however, eternal truth is enclosed in the immutable nature of dogma that derives from divine revelation, both natural and scriptural. While Kazantzakis accepted the divine presence in the cosmos, he provided no indication that he saw the Scriptures as the work of divine inspiration. On the other hand, both Orthodox theology and Kazantzakis's religious thought converge in their perception of historical progression: the human effect on the interpretation of the mystery that surrounds the cosmos. Yet they depart once again because Orthodoxy sees a Creative Power and personal God behind phenomena whereas Kazantzakis saw primordial chaos everywhere and an undefined evolutionary process.

In sum, Kazantzakis's creed is idiosyncratic. It is profoundly religious, but not in a doctrinal Christian Orthodox sense. In fact, according to Orthodox theological criteria, Kazantzakis is heterodox. Is he unorthodox because he criticized bishops and priests? Definitely not. Kazantzakis condemned the likes of Papa-Grigoris but exalted the likes of Papa-Potis. Is he unorthodox because he imagined daring temptations for Christ, the
Son of God? Of course not. The Gospels confirm that Christ was subjected to "every temptation" (Luke 4:13); the Epistle to the Hebrews asserts that Jesus is "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning" (Heb 4:15). Kazantzakis, too, saw Christ as tempted but not sinning, in full agreement with the biblical account.

Kazantzakis's relationship with the Greek Orthodox Church remains a controversial subject. He admired the simple piety and faith of individuals of any persuasion but had little sympathy for organized religion or hierarchical structures, whether Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or Islamic. The question remains: Was he Orthodox or heterodox? There is no official pronouncement by the Greek Orthodox Church on this question. Opinions concerning his person and work vary.

Although certain officials of the Greek Orthodox Church attacked Kazantzakis, as did some prominent hierarchs in the United States, some of the leading Greek theologians of Kazantzakis's era—for example, Nikolaos Louvaris—refused to condemn him as a blasphemer. Even less liberal Greek theologians like Vassilios Moustakis, although disagreeing with the terminology Kazantzakis used to describe churchmen and Christ, advised the Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece to be cautious and avoid the mistake of excommunicating the famous author. And among the Orthodox clergy in the United States, those whose reading includes not only theological works but also literature have frequently expressed themselves more objectively and sympathetically toward Kazantzakis as a religious thinker. The fact is that since Kazantzakis was not a theologian, his religious thought should not be subjected exclusively or even primarily to theological scrutiny. As a poet and novelist, he let his fancy run free. His religious views appear frequently like a collage combining much that is Orthodox and much that is not. In any case, Kazantzakis was never excommunicated, nor were his writings ever officially condemned by the Greek Orthodox Church. The Synod of the Church of Greece, in its meeting of 30 June 1954, discussed the issue of Kazantzakis on the basis of his books *O Kapetán Mihális* (Freedom or Death) and *O Telestías Petrasmós* (The Last Temptation). It issued a statement advising the Church's faithful to avoid reading these books, but it neither condemned them.

I prefer to differentiate the two books, but it neither condemned them.

F. Conclusion

Kazantzakis was an eclectic, philosophical, and religious man. Christian Orthodox, many are not. The humble flowers as well as the thorns of the Church of Greece, to identify everything with God, is not. To be sure, some apocalyptic theology of Byzantine Patristic tradition, and Pontos, Dionysios the Areopagite, 

37 See "I lerá Sýnodos peri tou zítíma" (July 1954, 221-22; cf. Georgios Pyrouras, *Apó tìn Ekklesia. Tríψαλτικα*).

38 For the chronicle of Kazantzakis's yíro apó to thánato tou Nikou Kazantzik (Athens 1985) 31-32 et passim.

39 Archibishop Germanos wrote: "Speculum that Mr. Kazantzakis is an eminent man. People inside and outside of Greece, through the translation of many of his works by Your Grace to Him [sic] will be, I daresay. Kazantzakis sent to the Author of this book, and I beg you to provide everyone with more information." See A. Tillyrides, "Archibishop Germanos and the Orthodox Theology of Greece, 17th-19th Centuries."
confirm that Christ was subjected to the Hebrews asserts that
en tempted as we are, yet without
saw Christ as tempted but not
al account.

eek Orthodox Church remains a
pley and faith of individuals
organized religion or hier-
Roman Catholic, Protestant,
Was he Orthodox or heterodox?
eek Orthodox Church on this
and work vary.
eek Orthodox Church attacked
archs in the United States, some
zkis's era—for example, Nikolaos
blaosopher. Even less liberal
, although disagreeing with the
churchmen and Christ, advised
esece to be cautious and avoid the
or.56 And among the Orthodox:
reading includes not only the-
ently expressed themselves more
zystakis as a religious thinker.56
not a theologian, his religious
ly or even primarily to theological
s collection continue free. His religious
ing much that is Orthodox and
s was never excommunicated, nor
ed by the Greek Orthodox Church.
its meeting of 30 June 1954,
he basis of his books O Kapetán
aios Petramós (The Last Temp-
Church's faithful to avoid reading

Orthodox or Heterodox? A Greek Orthodox Appreciation

these books, but it neither condemned them nor excommunicated their
author.57

I prefer to differentiate the totality of the Church from churchmen and
individuals. Thus, perhaps it is fairer to say that Kazantzakis found little
comfort from some Greek Orthodox churchmen than from "the Church."
Ecclesiologically speaking, the Church is not a monolithic body of clerics.
A theological opinion—whether of a bishop, archbishop, or even patriarch—
is not binding on the totality of the faithful clergy and laity. One bishop
condemned Kazantzakis as a Judas; Archbishop Theokletos of Athens, out
of fear of conservative churchmen, refused permission for Kazantzakis's
body to lie in state in an Athenian church. But the archbishop of Crete
allowed an Orthodox funeral, albeit an abbreviated one.58 While some
believed that Kazantzakis deserved excommunication, Archbishop Germ-
manos of Thyateira wrote to the archbishop of Uppsala in support of
Kazantzakis's candidacy for the Nobel Prize.59 This letter, not to mention
Patriarch Athenagoras's refusal to yield to pressures from certain con-
servative individuals, indicates that one cannot speak of the attitude of "the
Greek Orthodox Church" toward Kazantzakis as if the Church were a
monolithic organization.

F. Conclusion

Kazantzakis was an eclectic. His religion was a syncretism of various
philosophical and religious beliefs. Although some of those beliefs are
Christian, many are not. For example, to find God everywhere, in
the humble flowers as well as in the most obscure soul, is Christian Ortho-
dox, but to identify everything with God, to be absorbed and annihilated
by God, is not. To be sure, some of his religious beliefs are close to the
apophatic theology of Byzantine mystics such as Pseudo-Makarios, Evagrios
of Pontos, Dionysios the Areopagite, Maximos the Confessor, Symeon the

56See "Ierá Sýnodos peri tou zitématos N. Kazantzákis," In Ekklesia 12-13, 15 June-5
July 1954, 221-32; cf. Georgios Pyroumaks, "O Kazantzakis kai to érgo tou den échoun

57For the chronicle of Kazantzakis's death and burial, see Yannis Goudells, "Chronikó
yíro apó và thánato tou Nikou Kazantzákis, Kainoúrta Epochi (Athens, Autumn 1957;”
reprinted in Kρασός (Iraklio, Crete), May 1958, 8-14.

58Archbishop Germanos wrote: "Speaking from my own experience, I can assure you
that Mr. Kazantzakis is an eminent man of letters, known not merely among the Greek
people inside and outside of Greece, but also among the international literary world
through the translation of many of his works. Knowing how valuable the support given
by Your Grace to Him [sic] will be. I dare to recommend to you the petition in support of
Mr. Kazantzakis sent to the Authorities of the Nobel Committee by the Literary Societies
of Greece, and I beg you to provide every possible assistance for the fulfillment of his aim."
See A. Tilbyrides, "Archiepiscopal Germanos of Thyateira and Nikos Kazantzakis," Texts and
New Theologian, and Nicholas Kavaselas. When he wrote of God as spirit, present everywhere, filling all things, and when he saw God's spirit imprisoned in evil humans seeking liberation through virtue and spiritual training, Kazantzakis was in agreement with Orthodoxy. When he wrote of God's transcendence and said that God is wholly unknowable, he spoke like the Byzantine mystics, who insisted on the ineffable and incomprehensible nature of the divine essence.

However, Orthodox theology is just as cathartic as apocalyptic. Dogmas, credal statements, decisions of ecumenical synods, and especially Christology are in total disagreement with Kazantzakis's religious view. But, as I emphasized earlier, he was not a systematic theologian and therefore his writings should not be criticized solely or even primarily on the basis of theological criteria. It is doubtful whether he read any Orthodox theologians of his time, just as it is certain that most of the churchmen who condemned him read very few, if any, of his writings. As a poet and freethinker he took liberties, some of which were offensive to certain individuals. His books condemn some churchmen (bishops, priests, monks) and praise others. This ambivalent attitude toward the servants of the Greek Orthodox Church is not atypical; it reminds us of others of his time who reacted in a similar fashion.

Like his God, who is a cosmic panentheistic presence, not a metaphysical personal Being, Kazantzakis's human being is all-powerful, a citizen of the cosmos. There is a small shop in Neapolls, Crete, that has a sign over its door reading *To Sympanto* ("The Universe"). Every one of Kazantzakis's heroes—whether Odysseus, Zorba, Kapetán Mihális, Papa-Fotis, or Saint Francis—is a universal man, a citizen of the *sympanto* in his agonies, struggles, and triumphs, in his wretchedness, pristine immateriality and purity, in his perpetual search for an answer to where, why, and how.40

As for Kazantzakis himself, his physical, intellectual, and spiritual life remained a perpetual struggle.41 Not only was he a profoundly spiritual man; he was, and continues to be, a superbly articulate spokesman for many thinking persons who have embarked upon their own quests. He did not arrive at an Orthodox Ithaca. But religious feeling is very personal, and wisdom may be approached by many roads. It is according to his or her own capacity that each of us grasps God, who is known in history under many names, with different attributes, and behind many masks.

---

40Pyrounakis, *Kazantzákis kai to érgo tou*, 304.