

KAZANTZAKIS: BRILLIANT SKEPTIC

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By James A. Haught

In 1988, fundamentalist Christians in several nations vented rage and violence because a movie, "The Last Temptation of Christ," portrayed Jesus as a wavering human, lusting for the prostitute Mary Magdalene.

A Parisian theater showing the film was firebombed, sending 13 people to hospitals. Another at Besancon, France, suffered a similar attack. Tear gas was loosed in some French moviehouses. Israel's government banned the film. In America, theaters were ransacked, one was burned, another had its screen slashed, and a screaming protester crashed a bus into a theater lobby. About 25,000 evangelicals picketed Universal Studios in Hollywood, and smaller throngs protested in several cities. Catholic bishops and TV evangelists denounced the movie angrily. Some filed lawsuits and appealed to politicians in attempts to ban it. Campus Crusade for Christ leader Bill Bright offered \$10 million to buy the movie and burn it. Most theaters in the southern United States, fearing savage reprisals, refused to show the film.

All this tumult provided an epitaph for a brilliant, brooding, funny, sad, profound, Greek writer who had died three decades earlier. The movie was drawn from his most controversial novel.

Philosopher-author Nikos Kazantzakis was a literary giant who left an indelible mark on the modern world. Born in Crete in 1885 (some references say 1883), he attended a Catholic school, then studied law in Athens, then philosophy in Paris under Henri Bergson, the eventual Nobel laureate who focused on the "vital force" of the human spirit.

Fascinated by spiritual questions, Kazantzakis published his first book and play in 1906 while still a student. During ensuing years, he traveled through Europe and Asia, writing dramas, epic verse and travel books.

In 1917, he and a foreman operated a lignite mine on a Greek island -- an experience he later fictionalized in his most renowned novel, *Zorba the Greek*.

In 1919, Kazantzakis was appointed welfare minister of Greece. By the time he resigned in 1927, he had fed and rescued 150,000 Greek residents trapped by a civil war in the Caucasus.

Sympathetic to Marxism, he was a war correspondent during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s and eventually was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize - but trips to the Soviet Union disillusioned him, and he never joined the Communist Party.

Before World War II, he lived on the Greek island of Aegina. After the war, he married late in life, became a Greek government minister again, then worked for UNESCO. Finally, he and his wife settled at Antibes, France.

Kazantzakis didn't begin writing novels until mid-life, but they brought his greatest fame and impact. His *Zorba the Greek* portrayed a bookish young intellectual operating a lignite mine on a Greek island - while learning about life from Zorba, his lusty, crafty, uneducated, smart, exuberant foreman. Zorba danced wildly, laughed at social and religious lunacy, and personified Bergson's "vital force."

Like most agnostic philosophers, Zorba and his young employer tried in vain to discern a meaning in life. The unlettered workman begged his educated companion for answers -- then scorned his scholarly learning when he could provide none:

Here's a profound passage:

Zorba looked at the sky with open mouth in a sort of ecstasy, as though he were seeing it for the first time....

"Can you tell me, boss," he said, and his voice sounded deep and earnest in the warm night, "what all these things mean? Who made them all? And why? And, above all" -- here Zorba's voice trembled with anger and fear -- "why do people die?"

"I don't know, Zorba," I replied, ashamed, as if I had been asked the simplest thing, the most essential thing, and was unable to explain it.

"You don't know!" said Zorba in round-eyed astonishment, just like his expression the night I had confessed that I could not dance.... "Well, all those damned books you read -- what good are they? Why do you read them? If they don't tell you that, what do they tell you?"

"They tell me about the perplexity of mankind, who can give no answer to the question you've just put to me, Zorba." (p. 269)

Burly Zorba and his egghead "boss" observed absurd religious superstitions of the villagers surrounding them. They laughed at the pretense of priests and the gullibility of believers. Zorba scoffed: "God makes them deaf or blind, and they say: 'God be praised.'" (p. 62)

"But we have no God to nourish us, Zorba," the employer observed. (p. 184)

And Zorba commented:

"Would God bother to sit over the earthworms and keep count of everything they do? And get angry and storm and fret himself silly because one went astray with the female earthworm next door or swallowed a mouthful of meat on Good Friday? Bah! Get away with you, all you soup-swilling priests! Bah!" (p. 234)

Yet they returned, again and again, to the enigma that haunted them.

"When a man dies, can he come to life again?" he asked abruptly.

"I don't think so, Zorba."

"Neither do I...." (p. 106)

Zorba urged his employer to pursue a buxom village widow who exuded sensuality. "If you're looking for any other paradise than that, my poor fellow, there is none! Don't listen to what the priests tell you, there's no other!" (p. 101)

Zorba shrewdly perceived that his intellectual friend had little interest in succeeding as a lignite miner - that his real dream was to create a retreat for thinkers and scholars. When their mine failed, and they finally parted, the owner reassured him:

"Don't fret, Zorba, we shall meet again, and, who knows, man's strength is tremendous! One day we'll put our great plan into effect: we'll build a monastery of our own, without a god, without a devil, but with free men; and you shall be the gatekeeper, Zorba...." (p. 298)

Zorba the Greek was published in 1946, gaining great popularity, and became a successful movie two decades later with Anthony Quinn as the cunning hero. Neither the novel nor the film caused noticeable controversy.

But a later novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, printed in 1955, was a bombshell. Multitudes of Christians were outraged by its portrayal of Jesus as uncertain and self-doubting, distracted by his yearning for Mary Magdalene. The Vatican banned the book and the Greek Orthodox Church excommunicated Kazantzakis, a nominal member. Movie producers avoided the novel - until 1988, when it finally was directed by Catholic-born Martin Scorsese, who cast no Jews in the film to avert bigoted hostility. Even with that precaution, it nonetheless provoked rage.

Kazantzakis received the International Peace Award in Vienna in 1956. He was nominated repeatedly for the Nobel Prize in Literature, and in 1957 he lost by a single vote to Albert Camus. Later that year, he died of leukemia in Germany.

Albert Schweitzer wrote: "Since I was a young boy, no author has made such a deep impression on me as Nikos Kazantzakis. His work has depth and durable value because he has experienced much and in the human community he has suffered and yielded much."

Of dramas Kazantzakis wrote in France, a critic said: "At the center of these plays stands the same figure, a solitary anti-hero, understanding (as the rest of the world does not) that the struggle at the heart of the play's action justifies itself but is inevitably fruitless."

Unable to find ultimate meaning in life, the narrator of *Zorba* contents himself with small treasures: "How simple and frugal a thing is happiness: a glass of wine, a roast chestnut, a wretched little brazier, the sound of the sea."

Kazantzakis saw the perplexity of mankind, who can give no answer to the final riddle.