Nikos Kazantzakis

Nikos Kazantzakis was a Greek writer and philosopher, famous for his Novel *Zorba the Greek*, considered his *magnum opus*. He became known globally after the 1964 release of the Michael Cacoyannis film *Zorba the Greek*, based on the novel. He gained renewed fame with the 1988 Martin Scorsese adaptation of his book *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

When Kazantzakis was born in 1883 in Heraklion, Crete had not yet joined the modern Greek state and was still under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. From 1902 Kazantzakis studied law at the University of Athens, then went to Paris in 1907 to study philosophy. Here he fell under the influence of Henri Bergson. His 1909 dissertation was titled "Friedrich Nietzsche on the Philosophy of Right and the State." Upon his return to Greece, he began translating works of philosophy. In 1914 he met Angelos Sikelianos. Together they travelled for two years in places where Greek Orthodox Christian culture flourished, largely influenced by the enthusiastic nationalism of Sikelianos.

Kazantzakis married Galatea Alexiou in 1911 and they divorced in 1926. He married Eleni Samiou in 1945. Between 1922 and his death in 1957, he sojourned in Paris and Berlin, Italy, Russia, Spain, and then later in Cyprus, Aegina, Egypt, Mount Sinai, Nice, China, and Japan. While in Berlin, where the political situation was explosive, Kazantzakis discovered communism and became an admirer of Vladimir Lenin. He never became a consistent communist, but visited the Soviet Union and stayed with the Left Opposition politician and writer Victor Serge. He witnessed the rise of Joseph Stalin, and became disillusioned with Soviet-style communism. Around this time, his earlier nationalist beliefs were gradually replaced by a more universal ideology.

In 1945, he became the leader of a small party on the non-communist left, and entered the Greek government as Minister without Portfolio. He
resigned this post the following year. In 1946, The Society of Greek Writers recommended that Kazantzakis and Angelos Sikelianos be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1957, he lost the Prize to Albert Camus by one vote. Camus later said that Kazantzakis deserved the honour "a hundred times more" than himself[citation needed]. Late in 1957, even though suffering from leukemia, he set out on one last trip to China and Japan. Falling ill on his return flight, he was transferred to Freiburg, Germany, where he died. He is buried on the wall surrounding the city of Heraklion near the Chania Gate, because the Orthodox Church ruled out his being buried in a cemetery. His epitaph reads "I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free.

The 50th anniversary of the death of Nikos Kazantzakis was selected as main motif for a high value euro collectors' coins; the €10 Greek Nikos Kazantzakis commemorative coin, minted in 2007. His image is shown in the obverse of the coin, while on the reverse the National Emblem of Greece with his signature is depicted.

Literary work

His first work was the 1906 narrative *Serpent and Lily* which he signed with the pen name Karma Nirvami. In 1909, Kazantzakis wrote a one-act play titled *Comedy*, which remarkably resonates existential themes that become prevalent much later in Post-World War II Europe by writers like Sartre and Camus. In 1910, after his studies in Paris, he wrote a tragedy "The Master Builder", based on a popular Greek folkloric myth. Kazantzakis considered his huge epic poem *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* to be his most important work. Begun in 1924, he rewrote it seven times before publishing it in 1938. According to another Greek author, Pantelis Prevelakis, "it has been a superhuman effort to record his immense spiritual experience." Following the structure of Homer's
Odyssey, it is divided into 24 rhapsodies.

His most famous novels include Zorba the Greek, Christ Recrucified, Captain Michalis, The Last Temptation of Christ, and Saint Francis (1956, UK title God's Pauper: St. Francis of Assisi). Report to Greco containing both autobiographical and fictional elements, summed up his philosophy as the "Cretan Glance."

Starting in his youth, Kazantzakis was spiritually restless. Tortured by metaphysical and existential concerns, he sought relief in knowledge and travel, contact with a diverse set of people, in every kind of experience. The influence of Friedrich Nietzsche on his work is evident, especially Nietzsche's atheism and sympathy for the superman concept. However, he was also haunted by spiritual concerns. To attain a union with God, Kazantzakis entered a monastery for six months. In 1927 Kazantzakis published in Greek his "Spiritual Exercises", which he had composed in Berlin in 1923. The book was translated into English and published in 1960 with the title The Saviors of God.

The figure of Jesus was ever-present in his thoughts, from his youth to his last years. The Christ of The Last Temptation of Christ shares Katzantzakis' anguished metaphysical and existential concerns, seeking answers to haunting questions and often torn between his sense of duty and mission, on one side, and his own human needs to enjoy life, to love and to be loved, and to have a family. A tragic figure who at the end sacrifices his own human hopes for a wider cause, Kazantzakis' Christ is not an infallible, passionless deity but rather a passionate and emotional human being who has been assigned a mission, with a meaning that he is struggling to understand and that often requires him to face his conscience and his emotions, and ultimately to sacrifice his own life for its fulfilment. He is subject to doubts, fears and even guilt. In the end he is the Son of Man, a man whose internal struggle represents that of humanity.

In Kazantzakis' day, the international market for material published in modern Greek was quite small. Kazantzakis also wrote in colloquial Demotic Greek, with traces of Cretan
dialect, which made his writings all the more controversial in conservative literary circles at home. Translations of his books into other European languages did not appear until his old age. Hence he found it difficult to earn a living by writing, which led him to write a great deal, including a large number of translations from French, German, and English, and curiosities such as French fiction and Greek primary school texts, mainly because he needed the money. Some of this "popular" writing was nevertheless distinguished, such as his books based on his extensive travels, which appeared in the series "Travelling" which he founded. These books on Greece, Italy, Egypt, Sinai, Cyprus, Spain, Russia, Japan, China, and England were masterpieces of Greek travel literature.