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Who is Nikos Kazantzakis' God?

Abstract

The work of Kazantzakis is saturated with theological language, but disagreement continues as to how such language is to be understood. In some readings, Kazantzakis is interpreted as a non-religious, or even anti-religious, writer who rejects or is skeptical towards belief in God; while other readings emphasize the deeply religious character of his writings, seeing in them a 'post-Christian' or postmodern development of traditional Christian concepts. Critics, however, have surprisingly neglected a promising proposal, which would bring to the fore Kazantzakis's lifelong engagement with Eastern religion. This proposal, although not denying that Kazantzakis was influenced by many of the streams of thought identified by others (e.g., evolutionary theory, process philosophy, apophatic theology, etc.), holds that Kazantzakis's most fundamental commitment lay with a monistic and idealist worldview, prominent in Eastern philosophy and religious thought, which conceives reality as a unified whole that is ultimately spiritual in nature.

*"Be careful, avoid constructing the face of our God
from what you have learned of the God of the Christians."*

—Kazantzakis, letter to Fr. Emmanuel Papastephanou

It has been observed that the modern Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis "uses the word 'God' more frequently, perhaps, than any other twenti-

eth-century writer” (Dombrowski 1997:4).¹ Even a superficial acquaintance with Kazantzakis’s oeuvre makes it plain that what Laurence Hemming has said of Heidegger applies equally well to Kazantzakis—viz., that he “‘reeks of God,’ and rarely in reading him is it possible to pass more than a few pages without a mention of God, the gods or the divine” (2009:175). But just as commentators have struggled to make sense of Heidegger’s relation to religion, so with Kazantzakis a bewildering array of interpretations has arisen, many incompatible with one another. The problem, however, is not only the wide range of sometimes conflicting readings of Kazantzakis’s views on God and religion; even more problematic and puzzling is that, on the one hand, Kazantzakis talks incessantly and devoutly about God, and yet on the other hand he is often considered by both scholars and the reading public as a thoroughly non-religious, or even anti-religious, writer—and so he is variously categorized as a religious skeptic, an atheist, a non-theist of some sort, an anti-Christian, or at best a Christian of a highly unorthodox variety. My aim in this paper is, firstly, to make some sense of this multitude of readings, offering along the way indications as to where many of them fall short; and secondly, to propose an alternative reading that has been surprisingly overlooked in the large secondary literature, one that follows clues such as the opening quote above in aligning Kazantzakis’s thought with philosophical currents in Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism rather than exclusively with the Abrahamic and especially Christian traditions.

Kazantzakis as atheist

It has been quite common, though perhaps less so nowadays, to read Kazantzakis as an *atheist*. The writer’s second wife, Helen Kazantzakis (née Samiou), has given a degree of credence to this view by referring to her husband and herself as “atheists” (1968:433).² A similar reading has been advocated by another woman who was close to the novelist, Katerina Angelaki-Rooke, a godchild of Kazantzakis, with whom she exchanged letters as she grew up. In the introduction to a collection of Kazantzakis’s letters that she helped translate (with Philip Ramp), published as *The Suffering God: Selected Letters to Galatea and to Papastephanou*, she states: “If by spirituality we mean hoping for divine supervision over creation, reward, and the preservation of the personality after death, then Kazantzakis was not spiritual.

But if we mean the thirst for an absolute answer to the ever-unanswered questions, then he was" (1979:17). She goes on to describe the (a)theological content of Kazantzakis's most overtly philosophical work, *Salvatores Dei: Askitiki* (*The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises*, first published in 1927) in the following terms: "There is a God in *The Saviors* but there is no hope; there is a believer but no object of belief...Kazantzakis made his God from *atheistic elements*" (18; emphasis in the original). A little later she reiterates, in somewhat paradoxical language: "He [i.e., Kazantzakis's God] is made in the image of man and is identical to man. Kazantzakis' God does not believe in God." For this reason, explains Anghelaki-Rooke, "when Kazantzakis says [in *The Saviors*], 'Our duty is to transubstantiate matter into spirit,' this transubstantiation has no relation to any return of man to God but signifies man's victory over a non-God." In short, according to Anghelaki-Rooke, "*The Saviors* is not theology but a form of anthropology" (19).³

Andreas Poulakidas also reads Kazantzakis's *Spiritual Exercises* as the expression of an essentially atheistic worldview. Addressing the infamous ending of the book, where Kazantzakis discloses (what he calls) "this great, sublime, and terrifying secret: that even this One does not exist!" Poulakidas writes: "Ultimately, he [Kazantzakis] has no theology. If, in essence, the One does not exist, then one certainly cannot speak of God, since there is no God, or nature, or man to be a God and to be saved. There is only the unlimited and deathly silent Abyss" (1975:217). In like fashion, Charles Glicksberg describes Kazantzakis as an atheist who propounded a 'Dionysian' (i.e., joyous and affirmative) form of nihilism. According to Glicksberg, "Kazantzakis is a fitting example of the secular saint. A religious atheist, he never gave up the quest for the innermost secret of life even after he became convinced that there was no ultimate meaning to be found" (1975:276).⁴ More recently, but again in a similar vein, Dimitris Tsiovas characterizes Kazantzakis as "a writer of extremes vacillating between intellect and instinct: at the same time a reclusive writer and a man of action, Cretan patriot and cosmopolitan traveller, *god-driven intellectual and atheist*" (2009:84; emphasis mine). Finally, Australian-based philosopher, Damon Young, in a short piece entitled "Faith Without God," presents Kazantzakis as an atheist whose ultimate value is freedom. Again referencing the ending of Kazantzakis's *Saviors of God*, Young explains that, for Kazantzakis, "what we are struggling for is the realisation that no God,

nor 'spirit of Man,' grounds our brief mortal lives," and he goes on to add that "In his [Kazantzakis's] quest for the freedom of a *godless*, hopeless and yet brave cosmos, Kazantzakis retained his faith in one thing only: freedom itself... Kazantzakis's faith was a faith in freedom itself" (Young 2006:69).

The atheistic interpretation of Kazantzakis has also been promulgated and perpetuated by a quite different and often hostile group: the Christian community, and specifically its evangelical and fundamentalist wings, both within the Orthodox Church and beyond. Opposition to Kazantzakis's work within ecclesiastical and theological circles began very early on in his career. In May 1930, Kazantzakis and Demetrios Glinos (the editor of *Anayennisi* [*Renaissance*], the Athenian periodical in which *Askitiki* was originally published) were summoned to appear in court "for sneering at religion."⁵ In the latter years of Kazantzakis's career, as his novels were attracting a wider audience and critical acclaim, sections of the church and media in Greece (and elsewhere, including the United States) reacted harshly, seeking to vilify him as an atheist, communist, immoralist, and decadent (see Antonakes 1996:26-27). In January 1954, the Vatican placed *The Last Temptation* on the Index of Forbidden Books, and in June of the same year the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece followed suit, contending that Kazantzakis's novels undermine the teachings and scriptures of the church, and therefore advocating that his books be banned.⁶ Even after Kazantzakis's death in 1957, the conflict and controversy continued. Most famously, upon Kazantzakis's death, the Archbishop of Athens (Theokletos) caved in to conservative demands by not allowing Kazantzakis's body to lie in state in any church in Athens. (The body was thereupon transferred to Crete, with the Archbishop of Crete giving permission for an abbreviated Orthodox funeral.) Later, the well-known iconographer Photios Kontoglou, in articles published in 1978 in a Boston newspaper, described Kazantzakis's work as containing "irreligion" and "blasphemies" (see Antonakes 1996:23). One cannot also fail to mention Martin Scorsese's film adaptation of *The Last Temptation*, released in 1988 amid zealous protests from church groups who were scandalized by Kazantzakis's account of the life of Christ. Such responses, no matter how rooted they might be in irresponsible ignorance and prejudice, have served to create and reinforce an image of Kazantzakis as an anti-Christian writer who wishes to do away with traditional faith, and perhaps also any religious belief at all.

It is worthwhile, however, to place the atheistic perception of Kazantzakis, as endorsed by theological groups as well as secular scholars, alongside Kazantzakis's own view of his works (which is not to say, of course, that his view necessarily is the correct or the best one). In a letter to his friend, Ioannis Konstantarakis, dated 6 June 1954, Kazantzakis stated:

My most recent work, The Poor Man of God, Saint Francis, written last year, will begin to be printed in Eleftheria. Please follow it to see with what religious emotion it is written. And the priests accuse me of being an atheist! (2012b:766)

It is also pertinent to highlight, as others have done, that the response from religious groups, including the Orthodox Church, has never been uniform and in particular has never been entirely negative or condemnatory. The reception, rather, has always been mixed. Demetrios Constantelos points out that “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” (1996:50). Constantelos also draws attention to the fact that Kazantzakis was never excommunicated by the Orthodox Church, although it is difficult to see what ‘excommunication’ would amount to in the case of someone, like Kazantzakis, who held no official position in the church and did not participate in its liturgical and theological life. In any case, many in the Orthodox Church, including prominent bishops and theologians, have identified close correspondences between Kazantzakis's writings and the spiritual and doctrinal heritage of Orthodoxy, even if they do not think of Kazantzakis as ‘Orthodox’ or even ‘Christian’ in any formal or traditional sense.⁷ What this suggests is that at least something in Kazantzakis's works deeply resonates with a profoundly religious sensibility. To label or even dismiss Kazantzakis as an ‘atheist’ is to therefore run the risk of missing what is perhaps the central focus of his vision.⁸

Kazantzakis as ‘post-Christian’

In order to bring to the fore the religious dimension of Kazantzakis's work, while continuing to situate it within a broadly secular or at least

non-Christian framework, scholars have discarded the limiting interpretative category of 'atheism' and have turned instead to a range of more fruitful and theologically-informed perspectives. One of the most prominent voices in this discussion has been Peter Bien, translator of many of Kazantzakis's novels and a leading commentator on these works. Introducing a recent special journal issue dedicated to Kazantzakis, drawn from a 2007 symposium celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Kazantzakis's death, Bien sought to answer the question that was put to the symposiasts: why read Kazantzakis in the twenty-first century? (2010:1-6). Bien's answer is that Kazantzakis remains relevant because the philosophical and religious problems he struggled with continue to bedevil us today, and because we stand to learn much from the way he responded to these problems. Bien states that, "in the *Odyssey*, *Zorba*, *Christ Recrucified*, *The Last Temptation*, and *Saint Francis* (but not, I would venture, in *Kapetan Mihalis*), he [i.e., Kazantzakis] examines a central problem of current and future times: how to deal with failure, how to live as though immortal in a Darwinian modern world with no afterlife, and how to give eternal significance to a life that lacks any realistically eternal dimension" (2010:4). As the emphasis here on contingency and transience makes clear, Kazantzakis is committed, in Bien's view, to a naturalistic view of reality, according to which all that exists is the natural world and its inhabitants, so that supernatural entities such as gods and ghosts are eliminated as non-existent. This is the position, as one of its leading philosophical proponents (David Armstrong) formulates it, "that nothing but Nature, the single, all-embracing spatio-temporal system, exists" (1978:138). Bien thus describes Kazantzakis as a 'romantic naturalist,' and he explains that, "By naturalist here, I mean a person who believes that being and nature are identical, hence that everything supernatural—including any teleological explanation of the ultimate purpose of being—must be rejected" (2007:xi).

Note, however, the qualifier *romantic*: this connotes (according to Bien) a "yearning for transcendence" and a "refusal to accept limitation," as against the classical ideals of restraint and rationality (2007:xi). One might say, then, that it is Kazantzakis's romanticism that infuses his naturalism with the distinct religiosity that marks nearly every page of his books. The conception of God that results is one that Bien calls 'post-Christian': although indebted in significant ways to the Christian tradition within which

Kazantzakis was raised and educated, the supernatural superstructure of the Abrahamic faiths is replaced with a naturalist outlook informed by the evolutionary theory of Darwin and the philosophical vitalism of Bergson. The Bergsonian influence is particularly (and rightly) emphasized by Bien, who notes that Kazantzakis's thinking about God was largely modeled on his former teacher's concept of the *'élan vital'*—a pure energy or life-directing principle, forever surging upward toward novel expressions of creativity, postulated by Bergson as that which fundamentally accounts for the evolution of all living species. Led by the religious overtones of Bergson's account of the vital impetus and the evolutionary path it creates, Kazantzakis does not hesitate to divinize these biological drives and processes. For Kazantzakis, as Bien explains, God just is Creative Evolution: "Seen monistically, *god is the entire evolutionary process*: the primordial essence that first wills its own congealment into life and then wills the unmaking of that creative action" (1989:38, emphasis in the original).

Bien interprets Kazantzakis's *Odyssey* and his major novels as incarnating in poetic and narrative form this Bergsonian view of God. Speaking of the *Odyssey*, for example, Bien holds that, "The epic attempts to portray the entire cosmic situation as the life force's evolutionary journey through matter in a creative process that unmakes itself, transubstantiating matter into spirit" (1989:193). Odysseas's view, in the epic, is that "god is not encountered at the end of life's journey but is with us at all stages of that journey—indeed is the journey" (Bien 1989:199). In line with this, the *Odyssey* presents us with the idea that "the absolute is not the concluding abyss but the entire cycle bringing us repeatedly from one dark abyss to another across the luminous interval called life; it is, as always, the *élan vital'*" (Bien 1989:199). Even in earlier works, such as the plays *Comedy*, *Christ*, and *Nicephorus Phocas*, Bien detects a pattern that was to become standard in Kazantzakis's later work: the use of Christian concepts and symbols for the sake of 'meta-Christian' purposes. *Nicephorus Phocas* is therefore read as "a meta-Christian spectacle of how a God inherent in matter thrusts matter into the struggle to undo itself and thereby to produce Spirit" (2007:403; see also Bien 2007:411-420). Most importantly, belief in an afterlife is rejected, and death is viewed not in a Christian manner (as the gateway to eternity), but in meta-Christian or Bergsonian terms as "the overcoming of matter...the ultimate act willed by matter itself in its upward *élan* toward self-overcoming" (Bien 2007:418).

Kazantzakis's religious and philosophical development was by no means straightforward, progressing from childhood piety to the renunciation of faith (under the influence of scientific theory), the critique of science also, and the discovery of Bergson, even a brief reversion to traditional faith (including a stay on Mt Athos in 1914), before making (by 1922) a complete turnabout and subscribing to a form of communism (see Bien 2007: 394-397). Eventually, the outlook Kazantzakis was to adopt incorporated aspects of all these philosophies and ideologies, and what remained constant was the innovative way he folded Christian concepts within a naturalist and Bergsonian framework. This, at least, is Bien's influential reading, which sees Kazantzakis as not entirely anti-Christian nor wholly Christian, but 'meta-Christian,' someone who seeks to reconfigure traditional Christian concepts in creative and possibly heterodox ways.

Bien is correct to point to the ways in which Kazantzakis goes beyond the Christian faith, but it is questionable whether he is correct to impute the belief in naturalism to Kazantzakis. Other commentators, as will be seen in the following section, agree with Bien that Kazantzakis is not an outright atheist or a standard theist, but they prefer to read him as a 'panentheist,' panentheism (literally, 'all is in God') being the view that God is immanent within all creation, while at the same time transcending the physical world. Bien seems to allow for this reading, as when he writes of Kazantzakis: "I would say that at no time in his mature life was he without some form of theistic (more accurately, panentheistic) belief: faith in an infinite force inherent in matter—that is, belief in transcendence-within-immanence" (2007:397). Bien, however, is careful to locate transcendence *within* immanence: the infinite or transcendent emerges from, and is dependent upon, the finite and physical world. The reading I wish to propose reverses this schema, rendering the transcendent fundamental and all else derivative. But this will have to wait for the final section of this paper, and in the meantime I will turn to recent developments of the panentheist reading of Kazantzakis.⁹

Kazantzakis as process theist

One of the leading varieties of panentheism in contemporary philosophy of religion is "process theism," and the process view has recently become a prominent interpretive lens for gaining a richer appreciation of Ka-

zantzakis's ideas on God. The principal proponents of process philosophy and theology have been Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000), though forerunners include thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin and Henri Bergson, who were greatly influenced by evolutionary theory. In outline, process philosophy upholds a Heraclitean metaphysics, where process or becoming is more ultimate than permanence or being. Thus, the categories of change, creativity, and temporality assume foundational status in process metaphysics, and being is seen as only an abstraction of becoming. On this view, the basic units of the world or the most concrete real entities are not substances or enduring individuals, but 'processes' or momentary events that Whitehead called "actual entities... drops of experience, complex and interdependent" (1978:18).

When this metaphysics is taken in a theological direction, a way of thinking about God results that diverges significantly from traditional or classical theistic conceptions. Process theists, in particular, highlight the one-sided, 'monopolar' nature of classical theism, where God is *in all respects* creator, active, infinite, eternal, necessary, independent, immutable, and impassible, and is *in no respects* created, passive, finite, temporal, contingent, dependent, mutable, or passible. The assumption underlying this view is that these two poles or sets of metaphysical properties are mutually exclusive, or form an 'invidious contrast.' As Charles Hartshorne and William Reese explain what they call 'the doctrine of the invidious nature of categorical contrasts,' "One pole of each contrary is regarded as more excellent than the other, so that the supremely excellent being cannot be described by the other and inferior pole" (2000:2). Classical theism therefore inherits the long-standing philosophical prejudice of valuing being over becoming and assuming that perfection must be static or unchanging: any change can only be a move away from or a move towards perfection, in which case a perfect being (God) has no need to change.

Whitehead, Hartshorne, and other process theists jettison this view of God, replacing it with a 'dipolar' (or 'neoclassical') version of theism. Challenging the assumption that God can only exemplify one of the two attributes in a pair of metaphysical contraries (such as necessary-contingent, timeless-temporal), process theists defend the principle of *the non-invidiousness of metaphysical contraries* (see Hartshorne 1970:268).¹⁰ According to this principle, contrasting metaphysical pairs are not related as superior to

inferior; rather, each pole in such pairs has valuable and admirable elements as well as inferior and deficient aspects. Regarding the being-becoming contrast, for example, some forms of change or becoming are defective (e.g., when change entails a movement towards evil or immorality), but other manifestations of change can be regarded as good or superior (e.g., those which involve a loving and sensitive responsiveness to the sufferings of others). Now, if metaphysical contraries can in this way be complementary and non-invidious, and if (following Anselm) God is conceived as an absolutely perfect being (or ‘the being than which none greater can be conceived’), then it follows that God must be understood not in monopolar terms but as dipolar, exemplifying the most admirable forms of both pairs of metaphysical contrasts. In other words, all expressions of excellence must be ascribed to God, including those found on either side of a non-invidious contrast. This is why the classical (e.g., the Aristotelian and Thomistic) notion of God as an ‘unmoved mover,’ where God lacks the capacity to change, to participate in the evolving universe he has created, and to be affected by the joys and sorrows of his creatures, strikes process theists as a religiously impoverished understanding of God, for it overlooks what is best and most valuable in temporality and contingency. In contrast to classical theism, therefore, Hartshorne (1997:6, 39) holds that “God is the most and best moved mover,” and Whitehead (1978:351) depicts God as “the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands.”

Darren Middleton and Daniel Dombrowski have led the charge in reading Kazantzakis along these process lines. Both emphasize, to begin with, that Kazantzakis is not an atheist or unbeliever, at least in any straightforward sense. In his 1997 book, *Kazantzakis and God*, Dombrowski contends that “Kazantzakis’s antipathy to the traditional view of God in the Abrahamic religions often leads him to give the impression that he does not believe in God, but I will show that a more defensible view is that Kazantzakis *does* believe in God, but what he means by ‘God’ is something that is very often heterodox from the traditional point of view” (1997:2). Middleton’s 2007 study of Kazantzakis, *Broken Hallelujah*, takes a similar stance, portraying Kazantzakis as a “believing skeptic,” someone who early on lost his faith in Christianity and embarked for the remainder of his life on a deep religious quest (2007:1-4). Given Kazantzakis’s skepticism, Middleton acknowledges that “It would be stretching the point either to label

Kazantzakis Christian or to think of him as a theologian” (2007:6). Even if Kazantzakis cannot be categorized as a Christian (in a narrow or traditional sense), Middleton argues that Kazantzakis should be seen as a profoundly religious writer who worked within a broadly Christian context and even accepted some sort of belief in God, which Middleton aligns with ‘panentheism’: “In time Kazantzakis spoke, and frequently, of a transhistorical referent of experience, some presence matching the word ‘God,’ yet he pictured it panentheistically and not theistically. Such panentheism...describes God as the circumambient reality including all things” (2007:2).¹¹ Echoing the title of his book, Middleton goes on to express his central thesis as follows: “while Kazantzakis may not be claimed for Christianity, because he was a believing skeptic throughout his life, he nonetheless thrummed to its major themes and personalities. In short, Kazantzakis sang broken hallelujahs” (2007:3).¹²

Kazantzakis’s broken hallelujahs, according to Middleton and Dombrowski, sound distinctly panentheist, delivered in the key of process theology. The traditional theist view, as noted earlier, has been that God is impassible and immutable, this resting upon the Platonist assumption that perfection entails changelessness. Influenced by Bergson’s evolutionary philosophy, however, Kazantzakis rejected this traditional view, affirming instead a dynamic, struggling, fiery, and passionate God. Relying primarily on the *Spiritual Exercises*, Dombrowski is careful to point out that Kazantzakis’s conception of God is not just another monopolar version of theism, where God is this time a purely immanent God of becoming (rather than a God of pure being) (see Dombrowski 1997:70-72). Despite this being a common reading of Kazantzakis,¹³ Dombrowski argues that Kazantzakis also accepted an unchanging, eternal, and transcendent aspect of God—thus making him a genuinely dipolar theist.

Nevertheless, it is their shared belief in divine mutability and passibility that distinguishes Kazantzakis and process theists from their classical counterparts. The notion of an evolving and suffering God is, as Middleton states (2007:62), “part of a once-lost-but-recently-reclaimed aspect of the Christian tradition,” and Kazantzakis and process theologians sought to re-discover and renew it:

Where Kazantzakis speaks of God as part of the evolutionary process, actively involved within our world and affected by its events, sometimes to

the point of needing and agitating us to help God advance in time, process theologians emphasize how God stirs the creative advance with initial vocational aims designed to optimize fulfillment for subjective becoming.
(Middleton 2007:92)

Kazantzakis expresses this point provocatively when saying that we are called to be 'the saviors of God' by transubstantiating matter into spirit. But this theme Middleton also finds in process theology. For example, in the philosophy of Lewis Ford just as much as in the novels of Kazantzakis, "we work with God to develop the creative advance and contribute to the richness of the divine experience. God saves us, then, and we save God" (Middleton 2007:87). This soteriological vision is thus underwritten by a relational view of reality, where salvation is "a dialogical endeavor" involving "the positive interplay between our freedom and divine agency" (90). Indeed, for Middleton, the idea that we can contribute to and enrich the divine life and even 'save' God is one that "unites the distinctive writings of Kazantzakis and Whitehead" (75) and "can serve to call us to a faith that is adventurous and risky" (77).¹⁴

There is much to be said for the process interpretation of Kazantzakis, and there are undoubtedly close correspondences between Kazantzakis's view of God and that of process theologians. However, the process reading is limited in certain respects, the first of which has to do with the fact that Kazantzakis was not acquainted with the works of Whitehead and Hartshorne. Attributing the process view to Kazantzakis might therefore seem anachronistic, in which case the process reading is more of a creative appropriation of Kazantzakis than a faithful interpretation. Dombrowski responds to this charge by noting that, even if Kazantzakis was not aware of Whitehead and Hartshorne, "he was very much familiar with another process theist, Bergson. And dipolar, process theism is as old as Plato" (1997:72). Both Middleton and Dombrowski further point to precedents in Christian theology, with Dombrowski noting "certain oddities in the Christian tradition itself" (e.g., the traditional Christian belief that God is immutable and yet knows and loves the world) as also possibly leading Kazantzakis towards the process view (Dombrowski 1997:74; Middleton 2007:62-66).

These are contentious matters of historical influence, and there is not the space to investigate them here. But even if Dombrowski is correct in

identifying Kazantzakis's sources of influence, these sources (including the writings of Plato and Bergson) offer only a rudimentary version of dipolar theism, far removed from the systematic detail one finds in later process thinkers. Kazantzakis's inspiration, therefore, largely remains a mystery.

A more significant limitation in the process reading is the emphasis it places on dipolarity in Kazantzakis's thinking. In the final section of the paper I will argue that Kazantzakis's most fundamental commitment was to a form of monism that overcomes any such dualism.

Kazantzakis as postmodern

Another increasingly prominent way of reading Kazantzakis's language about God is by way of postmodern philosophy and theology. The theoretical basis of postmodernism was first worked out in France in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly in the writings of Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, and Luce Irigaray, before being transplanted to other parts of the world. Considered negatively, postmodern philosophy stands in opposition to modern philosophy as inaugurated by Locke and Descartes in the seventeenth century and culminating in the work of Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and the French *philosophes* in the eighteenth century. A central tenet of modern philosophy is 'metaphysical realism,' the view that there is an objective world or mind-independent reality, and that there are facts regarding the nature of the world that hold true irrespective of the beliefs and investigative techniques of human beings. Against this, postmodern philosophers often subscribe to 'anti-realism,' the view that there is no objective, mind-independent reality, and what passes as 'reality' is nothing but a social or conceptual construct. Further, if there is no objective reality, there can be no (objective) truth corresponding to that reality. Or, as postmoderns like to say, the truth is that there is no (capitalized, absolute) Truth. Even the very distinction between truth and falsity is questioned, and indeed all binary oppositions that initially appear fixed are revealed to be permeable and unstable. As a result, the logic of identity (evident in the Hegelian dialectic where two terms in an opposition—e.g., being/nonbeing, speech/writing—are synthesized to produce a new, higher unity) is replaced with a logic of difference, where diversity and heterogeneity are celebrated.

In line with the emphasis on difference, the modern (e.g., Cartesian) notion of a universal and timeless subject that has a permanent identity or essence gives way to the idea of historically embedded, malleable, and fragmented subjectivities.

This, of course, is only a very minimal sketch of some central ideas found in postmodern philosophy, but they have often been applied to religious concerns, giving rise to a variety of postmodern theologies. Following Merold Westphal's useful typology, postmodern theology or philosophy of religion tends to be expressed in one, or a combination, of the following forms: negative theology, Nietzschean 'death of God' theology, and phenomenological approaches (see Westphal 1998:583-586). Firstly, then, one of the wellsprings of postmodern theology has been the negative or apophatic tradition, which insists on the radical transcendence, incomprehensibility, and ineffability of God. Amongst postmodern thinkers, apophaticism functions as a way to overcome idolatrous ways of talking about God that are inscribed or restricted by the categories of philosophy (such as 'presence,' 'cause,' 'being,' etc.). A second stream in postmodern religious thought has been the 'death of God' movement that arose in American theology in the 1960s. Taking their lead from Nietzsche's famous parable of the madman (in *The Gay Science* §125), theologians such as Gabriel Vahanian, Paul van Buren, William Hamilton, and Thomas J. J. Altizer advocated a radically new, 'post-Christian' theology that sought to overturn or secularize traditional Christian doctrine. More recently, Mark C. Taylor blended this Nietzschean motif with deconstruction, which he introduced in his landmark work *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* as "the 'hermeneutic' of the death of God" (1984:6). In Taylor's deconstructive a/theology, the traditional polarity between belief and unbelief is destabilized so as to allow for previously neglected dimensions of the divine to appear within the space of undecidability signified by the slash in 'a/theology,' and in this way to finally transcend the nihilism that the death of God inevitably brings. A third major influence on postmodern philosophy of religion has been the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, and particularly its appropriation by a group of theologically-motivated French phenomenologists, including Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry, and Jean-Luc Marion.

As this indicates, postmodernism need not be atheistic or inimical to religion: if modernism involved a process of secularization, postmodernity

is marked by a return to God or an awakening of a new experience of the divine—hence the adoption of such terms as ‘post-secular’ and ‘anatheism’ (see Kearney 2010).¹⁵ It might be tempting, therefore, to read such a postmodern reclamation of God back into Kazantzakis, viewing him as moving beyond both the premodern religious naïveté of our ancient and medieval forebears and the suspicion and skepticism of the disillusioned modern world, in this way creating the space for new images of God to be constructed. Recent commentators, in fact, have advocated such a postmodern reading of Kazantzakis, restricting themselves to the first and second forms of postmodern theology outlined above. I will return to apophaticism in the next section; also, I will not touch upon phenomenological approaches, given that neither classical phenomenology nor the recent ‘theological turn’ in phenomenology have made an impact on Kazantzakis scholarship (despite the interesting possibilities phenomenological readings might afford). Instead, I will concentrate on the second (Nietzschean) strand, particularly as it has been developed under the impetus of Derridean deconstruction.

A number of calls have recently been made to read Kazantzakis as a precursor of postmodern trends and sensibilities. Dimitris Tziovas, for example, has argued that Kazantzakis’s work is best interpreted not through the lens of ‘being,’ where this is understood as “an eternal essence or a structure to be recovered and as a truth or god to be discovered,” but by way of the postmodern notion of ‘becoming,’ which is “associated with struggle, freedom and an open-ended process, representing the constant quest and the transcendence of limits” (2009:84). Tziovas therefore proposes a new way of reading Kazantzakis’s novels, one that passes “from the ontology of being to the contingency of becoming,” so as “to see his novels as open and dynamic texts rather than closed and static ones” (87). This openness manifests itself in the way in which Kazantzakis handles the antitheses that loom large in his work (e.g., spirit-matter, freedom-death, Zorba-Boss). In Tziovas’s view, Kazantzakis does not seek a final reconciliation of these dualities in an eventual synthesis, but rather allows them to remain in perpetual tension, thus giving his works their open-ended nature. But this is openness of a specifically postmodern sort, entailing ceaseless flux and becoming, and ruling out (the modernist ideals of) teleology, unity, and certainty:

Becoming in Kazantzakis should not be seen in terms of development, evolution or maturity, but as an inconclusive process of re-inventions,

transgressions, retellings and even contradictions. At one time it might have been treated as a struggle, a creative progress, or the hope of ultimately reaching a higher spiritual goal. Now becoming is seen as lacking a goal and the emphasis is on open-endedness, relativity and ambiguity. (Tziovas 2009:88)

Not only determinate endings, but also seemingly fixed meanings and truths are challenged and destabilized by Kazantzakis, as highlighted in the following passage quoted by Tziovas from the 'fictional autobiography,' *Report to Greco*:

I swaggered as I wrote. Was I not God, doing as I pleased, transubstantiating reality, fashioning it as I should have liked it to be—as it should have been? I was joining truth and falsehood indissolubly together. No, there were no longer any such things as truth and falsehood; everything was a soft dough which I kneaded and rolled freely, according to the dictates of whim, without securing permission from anyone. Evidently there is an uncertainty which is more certain than certitude itself.¹⁶ (Quoted in Tziovas 2009:90)

As Tziovas comments: "In postmodern fashion, Kazantzakis questions the ontological solidity of reality (being) and perceives it as a subjective creation (becoming). Following Nietzsche he declares: "The world is my own creation. Everything, both visible and invisible, is a deceptive dream" (2009:90).¹⁷ The boundaries between fact and fiction therefore dissolve, and truth becomes, as in the words of Nietzsche, "a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms...truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are" (1954:46-47). Operating with such a conception of truth, Kazantzakis narrates worlds that are never straightforwardly factual (even in his so-called 'autobiography'), nor simply false, but are instead fluid and indeterminate—and it is this open-endedness, according to Tziovas, that might account for the continuing appeal of Kazantzakis's works in our postmodern era.¹⁸

Connections between Kazantzakis's works and postmodern philosophy have also been made by Galanopoulos (2010:7-37)¹⁹ and Middleton (2007:ch. 6 and conclusion), the latter describing Kazantzakis as a posthumous or untimely writer who, like Nietzsche, "foresaw much of what we now recognize as the postmodern turn, not in literary forms of course, but in philosophy and religion. Both thinkers attended to life's evanescence,

intuition's strength, language's polysemy, storytelling's persistence, and interpretation's malleability" (Middleton 2007:102). Without wishing to downplay these points of 'philosophical consanguinity,' as Middleton calls them, there are significant limitations to the postmodern reading, and here I can only indicate some of these.

As noted earlier, the Nietzschean strand of postmodern theology takes the death of God as paving the way for a secular or humanistic brand of Christianity, which Middleton ties to Lloyd Geering's proposal of 'Christianity without God' (to borrow the title of one of Geering's books). What Geering is specifically proposing is a Christianity released from commitment to realist forms of theism, which take God to be an ontologically independent, supernatural, and objectively existing entity. In their place, Geering defends 'theological non-realism,' where 'God' functions as a symbol of our most important moral and spiritual values. According to Middleton, "a similar humanistic Christianity permeates Kazantzakis's life and career," a view he suggests is supported by Kazantzakis's rejection of conventional theism due to its perceived incompatibility with modern science (2007:111). At least one problem with Middleton's reading is that it conflicts with other things Middleton says about Kazantzakis—and especially Middleton's view that Kazantzakis develops a form (albeit a nascent form) of process theology. Process theism has not usually been developed in a secular, humanistic, or non-realist direction (although, admittedly, there is no theoretical obstacle in doing so). Insofar as the variety of process theology that Middleton is operating with is realist and non-secular (which it seems to be), there is an internal tension in his reading of Kazantzakis. Secondly, it is doubtful that Kazantzakis accepted the kind of secular and non-realist theism espoused by Geering. The rejection of or skepticism towards traditional (realist, supernaturalist) theism does not equate to a commitment to theological non-realism, but may instead be a preliminary step towards an unconventional and indeed non-Christian, though resolutely realist and non-naturalist, version of theism. (It is this relatively unexplored possibility I will take up in the last section of the paper.)

A more serious weakness with postmodern accounts of Kazantzakis is that many of the central ideas that postmodern thinkers want to oppose or transcend form the very nucleus of Kazantzakis's worldview. Illustrative examples, though by no means a comprehensive list, include:

(i) incredulity towards *metanarratives*, or all-inclusive, overarching ideologies or systems; (ii) the attempt to overcome *onto-theology*, this being Heidegger's term for referring to a long-standing metaphysical tradition (with Aristotle and Hegel as high points) that strives to render the whole realm of beings intelligible to human understanding, and does so by appeal to the supreme being, God;²⁰ (iii) the rejection of *knowledge* and *truth*, at least when knowledge is considered a matter of accurate representation, and truth consists in correspondence to reality or the way things really are; and (iv) suspicion towards claims of *progress*, particularly the Enlightenment belief in human progress and emancipation, and teleological schemes such as those of Hegel and Marx, which hold that history is moving towards some predetermined higher end. It is not possible to show in any detail here how these postmodern ideas or attitudes conflict with Kazantzakis's works, but it may be worth considering, in relation to each of the above, that: (i) early on, Kazantzakis sought a "theory of the cosmos and of humanity's *raison d'être*" (Kazantzakis 2012a:39), which he constructed in large part from materials by Bergson, and which guided and framed his subsequent creative work; (ii) Kazantzakis consistently upheld 'God' (albeit in his idiosyncratic understanding of the term) as the interpretative key for unlocking the secrets of reality, this contributing to the perception of Kazantzakis as a profoundly religious thinker; (iii) Kazantzakis's medium of expression is literary, not propositional, but this does not lead him to abandon all distinctions between truth and falsehood in favor of a perpetual open-endedness and undecidability, as claimed by Tziovas, but rather brings him to a metaphysical vision of a unified whole (to be elaborated in the following section); and (iv) despite coming to reject any simple or linear claims to progress (as in Marxism), Kazantzakis's fictional heroes embody the teleological principle of spiritual 'ascent,' a passionate leap upward in the struggle to transmute matter into spirit.

Kazantzakis as idealist

I do not wish to deny that points of influence or similarity can be identified between Kazantzakis's writings and each of the foregoing streams of thought (atheistic materialism, process philosophy, postmodern theology, etc.). What I wish to propose, however, is that Kazantzakis's conception of the divine (especially in his most mature and productive period: the last

ten years of his life, during which time he wrote his major novels) can also be understood as an expression (a 'mythopoesis') of the metaphysical view known as Absolute Idealism. By seeing Kazantzakis's God in idealist light, Kazantzakis's interactions with and indebtedness to Eastern religion, and especially Buddhism, become more apparent. Surprisingly, these connections between Kazantzakis's work and Eastern thought form a significant lacuna in contemporary scholarship,²¹ and part of my aim here is to take a small step towards rectifying this.

It will be helpful, to begin with, to sketch the history and metaphysics of idealism, as it has developed in both West and East. In the modern West, idealism came into prominence as a movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in German philosophy. Rejecting Kant's delimitation of metaphysics, philosophers such as Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer, and above all Hegel sought to reinvigorate metaphysics, principally through the development of systems of 'absolute idealism.' In the idealist view, the most basic or ultimate reality is 'mind' or 'spirit'—everything else, including matter and the physical world, is only an appearance or expression of mind. For the German idealists, this ultimate reality is the 'Absolute,' that which has an unconditioned existence (not conditioned by, or dependent upon, anything else), and is usually deemed to be the whole of things, conceived as unitary, spiritual, self-knowing, and rationally intelligible. An important successor of this idealist movement was the British form of idealism that held sway in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and included such philosophers as F. H. Bradley, T. H. Green, Edward Caird, J. M. E. McTaggart, and Bernard Bosanquet. Turning away from the naturalism, utilitarianism, and empiricism characteristic of British philosophy (e.g., the work of Hume), the British idealists held that physical objects and the subjective points of view of conscious individuals stand in a system of 'internal relations' called the 'Absolute.'

Although in Anglophone philosophy idealism would not survive the hostile turn taken early in the twentieth century against metaphysics, the idealist view remains a venerable part of certain streams of Buddhism and Hinduism. For example, the Indian tradition of Yogacara (Sanskrit: 'Practice of Yoga') is a leading proponent of idealism within Mahayana Buddhism. Founded in the fourth or fifth century A.D. by the Indian philosopher Asanga and his half-brother Vasubandhu, the Yogacara school

disavows realism, or the commonsense belief in an independently existing world. As Peter Harvey explains, “in the Yogācāra, the role of the mind in constructing the world is so emphasized that all concepts of an external physical reality are rejected: the perceived world is seen as ‘representation-only’ (*vijñapti-mātra*) or ‘thought-only’ (*citta-mātra*)” (1990:106).²² All that really exists is awareness or consciousness (*vijñāna*), an inconceivable and ineffable ‘emptiness’ that transcends customary dualistic divisions. For the Yogācarin, then, emptiness is not merely the lack of an intrinsic or unconditioned nature (as the Mādhyamaka school holds), but designates (to quote from Stephen Laumakis) “the original or natural state of the mind in which there is no dualistic distinction between the knower and the known or the perceiving subject and the perceived object” (2008:146). Ultimate reality, within this view, is an undifferentiated consciousness, empty of any duality.

A similar non-dual view can be found in the Advaita Vedānta tradition of Hinduism. The wider Vedānta school constitutes the most influential of the six ‘orthodox’ Hindu systems (*darsana*) of philosophy, and it is divided amongst its members on how to interpret the relation that exists between the *atman* (self) and *Brahman* (Ultimate Reality) as this is depicted in the philosophically-oriented thought of the *Upanishads*. The interpretation of this relation given by Śaṅkara (or Śaṅkarācārya [‘Śaṅkara the Teacher’], in the early eighth century; traditionally A.D. 788-820) and the school that developed in his wake centered on the notion of ‘*a-dvaita*,’ meaning (in Sanskrit) ‘non-dual’ and referring to the tradition’s monism, the belief that there are no separate things, so that reality consists in a unified whole. The Advaita school therefore rejects all duality, identifies Brahman with our true and unchanging self or *atman* (as distinct from our ‘empirical self’), and takes Brahman to be the sole reality. The role of the ‘Absolute’ in German and British idealism is here played by Brahman: a pure undifferentiated consciousness that is the ultimate foundation and goal of all existence. Only by ‘realizing’ or awakening to one’s identity with Brahman and the non-dual nature of reality can release or liberation (*mokṣa*) be achieved from the cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsāra*).

Of the many connections that could be made between these forms of idealism and Kazantzakis’s work, I wish to focus briefly on the shared commitment to *monism*. Perhaps the greatest influence on Kazantzakis’s monism has been Bergson, though another significant but neglected source of

influence is the idealist philosophy of Hegel. Bergson's influence on this score, as in many other areas, is well documented. Middleton and Bien, for instance, point out that although Darwinian evolutionary theory may have initially undermined Kazantzakis's religious faith, it also drove Kazantzakis towards a Bergsonian and monistic outlook:

*Darwinism...set him [i.e., Kazantzakis] on the road toward a relational philosophy in which, viewing ourselves as bound up with the processes of nature and history, we realize that "there is no such thing as 'me,' 'you,' and 'he'; everything is a unity."*²³ (Middleton and Bien 1996:3)

The 'relational philosophy' spoken of here is, of course, that of Bergson. Initially at least, Bergson seems far removed from monism, as his philosophy is pervaded by various stark dualisms: there are two kinds or sources of knowledge (analysis and intuition); there are two forms of time (scientific or clock time and 'duration,' *la durée*); there are two kinds of morality and religion (those that are open, universal, and dynamic, and those that are closed, local, and static), etc.²⁴ Bergson, however, privileges one of the terms in these oppositions, taking the other as derivative and defective, and thus he can be seen as advocating a form of monism. With respect to time, for example, Bergson holds that it is somewhat falsified when it is measured objectively as a set of discrete moments or instants (as happens in 'clock time'), while its true nature can only be intuited or experienced as a continuous and essentially indivisible stream (what Bergson calls 'duration'). More generally, our intellect, guided by our needs, habitually employs the methods of analysis and abstraction to impose stability and homogeneity on the incessant motion of life and its evolution, which can be immediately accessed only by means of 'intuition'—a kind of intellectual sympathy involving direct participation in, or identification with, the other.

It was in such terms that Kazantzakis presented Bergson to the members of the Educational Society in Athens, in January 1913, after having attended Bergson's lectures in Paris in 1907-1908. In a spirited overview and defense of Bergson's philosophy, Kazantzakis explained that Bergson does not regard matter and energy dualistically, but rather holds to the monist view that matter is a congealed form of energy:

*Matter and energy are substantially one and the same; there is no dualism. Matter is simply energy's condensation, its stable equilibrium.*²⁵ (Kazantzakis 1983:280)

As is well known, Bergson's dualistic battle between the vital impulse (*élan vital*) and materiality takes on momentous significance in Kazantzakis's fiction, with its recurring depictions of the struggle between the divine call to surge upward toward life and creativity, and the forces pushing downward toward death and stagnation. In Kazantzakis's view, however, the *élan* and materiality are not separate in Bergson's system; rather, matter is only the congealed aspect of the *élan's* own substance, thus underscoring the monist tendencies within Bergson's dualist perspective.

Influenced by Bergson, monism came to be one of Kazantzakis's most deeply held convictions. Consider, for example, the summary Kazantzakis gave of his philosophy in a 'symposium' held on the eve of his departure from Alexandria in February 1927 (and recorded in his Egypt journal):

*I am a monist. I feel deeply that Matter and Spirit are one. Within me I feel only one essence. However, when I am forced to express myself as I am tonight, and formulate this essence, I am forced, naturally, to express myself with words, that is to say, with logic. Consequently, following the nature of logic, I am compelled to separate what by nature is inseparable. And since human senses are limited, out of all the infinite, probable aspects or sources, if you will, of reality, I distinguish only two: that which we call Matter and that which we call Spirit.*²⁶ (Kazantzakis 1975:78-79)

Reality is ultimately one, and it is divided into parts only by our use of language and logic, which "separate what by its nature is inseparable." The monist vision of 'an indestructible unity behind the ceaseless flux' (to borrow from the end of *The Saviors of God*; see Kazantzakis 1960:130²⁷) was to inform Kazantzakis's entire life and work, as Bien observes:

On the one hand he [i.e., Kazantzakis] laments the anticommunist atmosphere in Greece [around 1928]; on the other he scorns the communists themselves. As always in Kazantzakis's personality as well as in his works, we are forced to confront this bewildering conjunction of opposites: his "positions" are not positions but temporary shifts of emphasis—swings toward either pole of a duality explicable only in terms of his deepest allegiance, which was to Bergsonian monism. (Bien 1989:129)

Bergson, however, might not be the only philosopher Kazantzakis was drawing upon when formulating his monist worldview. Another, and relatively unacknowledged, source may well have been Hegel's idealism.²⁸

In particular, what Kazantzakis calls the 'Cretan Glance' bears much in common with Hegel's dialectical process of *Aufheben* (sublation), where antitheses are overcome by 'raising them up' into a new totality or whole, while preserving elements from each of the opposing pairs. One of the few scholars to have alluded to this, but without explicitly naming Hegel, is Kimon Friar. In his Introduction to his translation of Kazantzakis's *Odyssey*, Friar emphasizes the synthetic—or what might be called 'monistic'—outlook permeating Kazantzakis's writings: "Basic to all of Kazantzakis's vision, as to that of Yeats, has been the attempt to synthesize what seem to be contraries, antitheses, antinomies" (Friar 1958:xviii). Borrowing from Yeats, Friar portrays Kazantzakis as the 'Antithetical Man,' "for his own life and thought were formed in a double vision of tension between opposites, an explosive conflict which ascended unceasingly upward toward higher and higher spiritual reaches over an abyss of nothingness" (1958:xxv). This 'double vision' looks to Kazantzakis's birthplace of Crete as unifying the contrasting perspectives of East and West. For example, the Greek ideal of the rational self and disciplined will stands in opposition to the Oriental ideal of self-renunciation and abandonment to mysterious and impersonal powers. As Kazantzakis explains (in a letter to a young critic, quoted by Friar), he sought to transcend and 'sublate' these contrasting ideals by way of the 'Cretan Glance':

Crete, for me (and not, naturally, for all Cretans), is the synthesis which I always pursue, the synthesis of Greece and the Orient. I neither feel Europe in me nor a clear and distilled classical Greece; nor do I at all feel the anarchic chaos and the will-less perseverance of the Orient. I feel something else, a synthesis, a being that not only gazes on the abyss without disintegrating, but which, on the contrary, is filled with coherence, pride, and manliness by such a vision. This glance which confronts life and death so bravely, I call Cretan. (Quoted in Friar 1958:xix).

The structure of the Glance, however, is distinctly Hegelian. Just as the advance of Hegel's Absolute toward self-consciousness is founded on the sublation of antitheses, so Kazantzakis's Cretan vision is reached by progressively surmounting all dualisms, until one attains to the One.²⁹

The monist and idealist character of Kazantzakis's thought can also be traced to his lifelong engagement with Eastern religions, especially

Buddhism.³⁰ Kazantzakis felt a profound personal connection to the Buddha, listing him in *Report to Greco* among Christ, Lenin, and Odysseus as one of “the decisive steps in my ascent” (Kazantzakis 1973:15).³¹ Although the influence of Buddhism in Kazantzakis’s works has not gone unnoticed, what remains underexplored is the way in which the metaphysics of Buddhism (or some Buddhist schools) has marked Kazantzakis’s conception of God and ultimate reality. To highlight this, I will briefly turn to one of Kazantzakis’s most remarkable, though unjustly neglected, works: his play *Buddha*. This was published in 1956, a year before his death, but it was a project that obsessed him for many years; he began the first draft in 1922 in Vienna and gave the work its definitive shape only in 1941-1943 during the German occupation of Greece. In Kazantzakis’s eyes, at least, this play ranked highly within the formidable body of work he had completed. As he was to say shortly before he died: “*Buddha* is my swan song. It says everything. I’m glad that I have managed to utter...my final word in time, before I go” (quoted in Bien 1983:xviii). This high estimation is echoed by Peter Bien, one of the few scholars to have extensively studied the play:

*But of all Kazantzakis’s immense output, the play Buddha, I believe, is the clearest, most genuine and comprehensive exposition of his mature position, because it both isolates and amalgamates the disparate so deftly, and also because it so openly and unapologetically treats the aesthetic as the primary way to salvation.*³² (Bien 1977:270).

What characterizes the play is its pronounced (metaphysical) idealism, understood in terms of the notions of reality as mind-dependent and as an essentially unified whole. These notions find expression not only in the dialogue, but even more so through the structure of the work. The play unfolds on two levels: a ‘realistic’ plot set in the central square of a Chinese village, which narrates the rise of the Yangtze River that floods the village and drowns its inhabitants; and an ‘idealistic’ part, which frames and is interweaved into the real-world action, thus revealing the latter to be nothing but the product of the imagination. As Bien points out, it is the skillful way in which Kazantzakis destabilizes the sense of reality (ours and that of the characters) that gives “the work its uniqueness and distinction” (1977:254).³³ The repeated set changes, in particular, reinforce the illusory character of (empirical) reality, as in Act I when the Magician puts on a yellow mask and:

*Silently the set crumbles, as in a dream. The scenery changes—the Yangtze encircles all like a ring. In the center is an island, and in its center a huge, dried-out tree. Underneath the tree, sitting cross-legged, is Buddha.*³⁴
(Kazantzakis 1983:42)

All plays, like any creative works, are the expression and product of the mind of the artist, but Kazantzakis (through the character of the Magician) wants to take matters further and say the same about the great Play we call 'life'—this too is created and constituted by the mind. The mind (or more precisely the intuitive and imaginative mind, as opposed to the theoretical, intellectualizing mind) is therefore imbued with the power not only to construct different worlds, but also to penetrate past the empirical world through to the ultimate reality and the underlying oneness of all. In idealist fashion, then, Kazantzakis draws a sharp contrast between appearance and reality, multiplicity and unity, in this way indicating the extent to which a radical and difficult conversion of our gaze is required if we are to overcome ignorance and illusion. Bien puts this well when discussing the monist outlook of the play:

By making the Magician call life a game and state audaciously that he can escape fate by changing the eyes with which he views the world, Kazantzakis is attempting to remind us that our normal, commonsensical conception of reality is outrageously incorrect, so incorrect that we come closer to truth with "play" instead of seriousness, "evasion" instead of confrontation. Where we go wrong in our commonsensical approach is to think that the multiplicity we see before us is real. We cannot see through this multiplicity to the One behind it; thus we think that individual beings are truly separate from one another, and we think as well that life is separate from death. (Bien 1977:257)

But if this correctly represents Kazantzakis's mature position, then Western philosophical and theological sources cannot provide the full picture on Kazantzakis's views on God. An equally important source in this respect is the East, and in particular the idealist and monist metaphysics of Buddhism. What this implies is that, by turning East, Kazantzakis managed to finally overcome the dualism and materialism he inherited from the Western (and especially Christian) tradition. Rather than seeing the non-physical or spiritual realm, inhabited by God and angelic beings, in opposition to the material world made up of land and sea, trees and plants,

animals and humans, and rather than positing an infinite ontological divide between the Creator and the creation, one that only the God-Man (Christ) could traverse, Kazantzakis's later work displays the marks of a distinctly 'non-dual' conception of reality, indebted in large part to Eastern forms of thought. There is no sharp divide, in this view, between self and other; indeed, there is a fundamental identity. What results, and what is arguably present in Kazantzakis's later fiction, is a *relational view of reality*: to be is to be in relation with others, and above all with the Other (Brahman, Buddha, Christ, etc.). In such a relational ontology, evident in the East but also not unknown in the West (for example, in German and British idealism, and more recently in process philosophy), the world is not an assemblage of persistent entities or things, but is a complex web of interconnections or relations, so that the deepest level of reality consists in a holistic connectivity. Further, this all-inclusive and harmonious whole, or 'Absolute,' is conceived in mind-like terms as a non-physical consciousness, experience, or 'idea.'

Towards the end of his trip to China in 1935, Kazantzakis was to encounter two astounding expressions of this idealist view, which looks not to the phenomena of matter and motion, but to that which transcends these phenomena as disclosing the true nature of reality. While staying in a Buddhist temple in a Chinese village, Kazantzakis noticed in the garden of the temple a marble pedestal separated from its statue of the Buddha. The pedestal was holding up literally nothing. This, in turn, reminded him of a strange concert he attended earlier, where no sounds at all were made:

The bows were raised, the flute players brought their flutes near their lips without touching them and began to move rapidly, the tips of their fingers on the holes. The bows played in the air without touching the strings, the sticks stopped quietly before touching the skin of the drum, the harpist moved his hand in the air and sometimes stopped and listened ecstatically to the immaterial sound. Nothing was heard. (Kazantzakis 1982:249)

Kazantzakis recounts that:

When the mute concert ended, I bent to the guest next to me and posed my question. And he smilingly answered me: "For trained ears the sound is superfluous. The redeemed souls have no need of the act. The true Buddha has no body." (1982:249; emphasis mine)

This signaled to Kazantzakis the way in which materiality and temporality are transcended in Buddhist culture to reach the invisible, inaudible, and eternal realm of spirit:

Invisible statues, silent music—these are, I thought, the highest flowers of the muddy root of the body. (1982:250)

For Kazantzakis, as much as for Chinese Buddhists and Indian Advaitins, reality is One and this One does not exist in any way that can be adequately captured by words and sounds, but is rather ‘nothingness’—a pure spirit we are called to return to and realize as our ownmost.

Notes

- 1 A similar observation has been made by Pandelis Prevelakis (1961:181n128).
- 2 She was referring to the incongruity of “atheists like ourselves” (i.e., herself and Nikos Kazantzakis) getting married in an Orthodox church in 1945. But in such contexts the Greek word for ‘atheist’ may connote more broadly someone who is not religious in any conventional sense, rather than someone who explicitly rejects the existence of God.
- 3 An even closer companion of Kazantzakis, Pandelis Prevelakis also refers to his friend as an atheist (1961:186-187n204).
- 4 Glucksberg, at least, acknowledges the paradoxical nature of this aspect of Kazantzakis’s thought:

Numerous contradictions also crop up in Kazantzakis’s work. He employs religious terms—faith, striving, God, perfection, spirit, transcendence—to embody his symbolic version of the quest. He finds it enormously difficult to reconcile this religious terminology with his professed atheism and his nihilistic Weltanschauung. (1975:289)
- 5 The charge, however, was eventually dropped. See Antonakes (1996:25); in this valuable study, Antonakes recounts the reception of Kazantzakis’s works in Greece, focusing on the ways in which his religious ideas were received and (mis)understood by church leaders and literary critics.
- 6 See Antonakes (1996:25-27), who reports (30) that the proposal that Kazantzakis’s books be banned was rejected in 1955 by the government of Greece. Demetrios Constantelos (1996:50-51) contests the view that the Synod condemned Kazantzakis’s works, but this does not seem justified given the evidence provided by Antonakes.
- 7 For example, Constantelos holds that, “In terms of Orthodox dogma he [Kazantzakis] is heterodox, but in terms of religious teachings—spiritual-mystical religious teachings in particular—he is Orthodox” (1996:37-38).
- 8 This is not to deny that Kazantzakis could be considered an ‘atheist’ in some sense, especially since the concept of ‘atheism’ is context-sensitive: its meaning is dependent upon the religious system or conception of deity it is seeking to oppose. No one is generically atheist. And there is no doubt that, with respect to some ideas about God, Kazantzakis was an atheist.
- 9 Much of Bien’s post-Christian reading is predicated on his interpretation of Kazantzakis’s attitudes towards death, and in particular Kazantzakis’s rejection of the afterlife. What needs to be distinguished, however, is whether Kazantzakis is denying (i) all conceptions of the afterlife or immortality, or (ii) belief in *personal* survival after death, or (iii) hope in postmortem rewards and fear of postmortem punishments. Even if Kazantzakis rejects (ii) and (iii), it is far from clear that he also rejects (i). Consider, for example, the following

- passage from *Report to Greco*: “man is not immortal, but rather serves Something or Someone that is immortal.” (Kazantzakis 1973:412). The reading I develop in the last section of the paper will seek to make sense of such passages. It is also important to note that Bergson’s philosophy is not incompatible with postmortem existence, as has been argued by G. William Barnard (2011:ch. 28).
- 10 The principle is helpfully elucidated in Dombrowski (1997:66-69).
 - 11 Middleton also describes Kazantzakis as an ‘antitheist,’ a term borrowed from literary critic James F. Lea. Middleton explains: “Antitheism is not a rejection of belief in God’s existence; rather, it is a radical attempt to wrestle with traditional ways of thinking about the divine. Resisting metaphysical or theological pretensions, antitheists enjoin us to engage ceaselessly in the practice of theological construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction” (2007:94). Middleton goes on to classify both Kazantzakis and process theologians as antitheists “because they both scrutinize our culture’s very deep theological assumptions and urge us to take increasing responsibility for our religious searching” (95).
 - 12 A little later, Middleton states that “his [Kazantzakis’s] views comport, albeit uneasily, with those opinions espoused by individuals associated with shaping and reshaping Christianity” (2007:6). Similarly, in an earlier piece, an Introduction to an edited collection, co-authored with Peter Bien, Middleton wrote: “The point we are trying to make is that Kazantzakis... was actually in tune with thinkers who, although challenging Augustinian orthodoxy, are *within the allowable bounds of Christian speculation*” (1996:15; emphasis in the original). This is repeated towards the end of the same Introduction: “Assuredly, Kazantzakis’s witness lies within the boundaries of a biblical faith still in the making” (22). I find this a somewhat strange claim, as it is not clear what “the allowable bounds” are and who is drawing them.
 - 13 Kimon Friar, for example, seems to have promoted such a reading, as Dombrowski notes (1997:65). Also, Peter Bien’s emphasis on Kazantzakis’s naturalism and the attendant denial of any transcendent realm independent of the physical world (e.g., heaven and hell) suggests that any existing deity would have to be a purely immanent one.
 - 14 Middleton discusses the connections between Kazantzakis and process thought in greater detail in his earlier work, *Novel Theology: Nikos Kazantzakis’s Encounter with Whiteheadian Process Theism* (2000).
 - 15 Kearney explains that the ‘ana’ in ‘anatheism’ “signals a movement of return to what I call a primordial wager, to an inaugural instant of reckoning at the root of belief. It marks a reopening of that space where we are free to choose between faith or nonfaith. As such, anatheism is about the *option* of retrieved belief” (2010:7; emphasis in the original).
 - 16 The quotation is from *Report to Greco* (1973:ch. 16, Return to Crete; Knossos).
 - 17 The quotation is from *Report to Greco* (1973:ch. 23, Paris; Nietzsche the Great Martyr).
 - 18 A similar view has recently been advanced by Charitini Christodoulou (2012), who conceives of ‘openness’ in terms of the process of becoming, and specifically the process of the formation of identity and meaning; focusing on *The Last Temptation*, she regards the novel and its main characters as exemplifying this sort of openness.
 - 19 See, especially, pages 22-28, where Kazantzakis’s response to nihilism is thought to parallel various themes in postmodern philosophy.
 - 20 Middleton notices this also, stating that: “Whereas postmodernism signals an age of incredulity toward metaphysics and metanarratives, Kazantzakis ultimately fails the postmodern test. In the end, he suggests that Something or Someone provokes him toward writing stories that disclose being, reality, and God” (2007:116-117).
 - 21 For example, in Middleton and Bien’s 1996 collection, *God’s Struggler: Religion in the Writings of Nikos Kazantzakis*, there is no consideration of the Buddhist influences on Kazantzakis’s work, and there is no mention at all of Hinduism. Lewis Owens (2001:269-284) draws interesting parallels between Kazantzakis and the idealism of Plotinus and Berkeley. But Owens’s emphasis is on apophaticism, rather than on idealism. Also, no connections are

- made in Owens's paper between the thought of Kazantzakis and Eastern philosophy.
- 22 Some scholars, however, dispute the idealist interpretation of Yogacara—see, for example, Dan Lusthaus (1998:66-67 §2).
 - 23 The quote is from *Report to Greco* (1973:105).
 - 24 See also the 1910 Introduction to *Matter and Memory* (first published in 1896), where Bergson wrote that *Matter and Memory* “is frankly dualistic” since it “affirms the reality of spirit and the reality of matter” (1911.vii).
 - 25 Translation taken from Bien (1989:46). It is not clear, however, that this is an accurate reading of Bergson, who is often seen instead as advocating a dualism of matter and spirit, where these are coexistent and interdependent.
 - 26 Kazantzakis proceeds to replace the dichotomy between matter and spirit with that between ‘hunger’ and ‘pathos,’ which he explains in a way that does not seem to comport well with traditional idealism: “I use the word *pathos* and not the word *spirit* because this word has assumed an ideological, immaterial distilled content that is incomprehensible and hateful to me. ‘Spirit’ contains a great deal more ‘matter’ than materialists imagine; just as ‘matter’ contains a great deal more ‘spirit’ than idealists imagine” (1975:79).
 - 27 In line with this monist vision comes an emphasis on the unity and solidarity of humanity: “We are all one, we are all an imperiled essence. If at the far end of the world a spirit degenerates, it drags down our spirit into its own degradation. If one mind at the far end of the world sinks into idiocy, our own temples overbrim with darkness” (Kazantzakis 1960:115).
 - 28 Bien (1989:50) does point to the continuity of Bergson's thought with that of Hegel, but Hegel's influence on Kazantzakis remains unexplored.
 - 29 However, as Friar points out, sublation in Kazantzakis is only ever momentary: “The Cretan Glance for Kazantzakis...was an attempted synthesis of those contraries which he believed underlie all human and natural endeavor, but a synthesis not so much of permanent as of momentary harmony, which in turn builds into a greater tension and explodes toward a higher and more inclusive synthesis in an ever upward and spiraling onrush, leaving behind it the bloodstained path of man's and nature's endeavors” (1958:xx). Perhaps, then, in saying “even this One does not exist,” Kazantzakis was alluding to (what may be called) an ‘asymptotic monism’: as soon as we reach some higher unity that overcomes a prior antithesis, this immediately collapses into (or gives rise to) another antithesis, which again needs to be sublated. On this conception, ultimate unity is never reached; it exists only as an ideal to which we can approximate but never fully attain. Bien also points to a possible monistic reading of the ending of *The Saviors of God*. He speculates, for instance, that the ending, when seen from a Buddhist frame, only means to deny separateness and to affirm the essential unity of everything. To illustrate, Bien quotes from the Zen master, Nyogen Senzaki:

So you see, the worlds of desire, of the material and of the nonmaterial are one. This sameness is absolute and infinite.

To avoid the possibility of misunderstanding, however, we speak of this sameness negatively, calling it “Nothingness” or “Nirvana.” (Quoted in Bien 1989:135; emphasis added by Bien)
 - 30 Apart from general remarks regarding idealism and monism, I will not have anything more specific to say about the connections between Kazantzakis's work and Hindu philosophy, though this is an area that deserves greater attention from scholars. Consider, for instance, Middleton's comment: “Studying at the Kazantzakis library, based at the Historical Museum of Iraklion, Crete, I discovered that Kazantzakis read and admired many books on Indian philosophy” (2007:118n9).
 - 31 Later, in the same work (1973:364), Kazantzakis places Buddha at the summit of the ascent.
 - 32 Another worthwhile study is Charalampos-Demetres Gounelas's “The Concept of Resemblance in Kazantzakis's Tragedies *Christ* and *Buddha*” (1998:313-330), which analyzes the role of ‘resemblance’ in these works, with the aim of showing that they are imbued with an idealist and monist strain of thought.

- 33 However, the technique of creating a play within a play so as to highlight the mind-dependence of reality and value is not entirely original to the *Buddha* play. As Gounelas has observed (1998), a similar strategy is evident in Kazantzakis's other works, including *Serpent and Lily* (1906, his first literary work), *Comedy: A Tragedy in One Act* (published around 1909), the play *Christ* (published in 1928), and the novel *Toda Raba* (1929), in all of which the narrative and dialogue are enacted entirely within (an individual or indeterminate) mind or consciousness.
- 34 This recurs in the following two Acts, as soon as the Magician puts on the yellow mask (see Kazantzakis 1983:104, 143).

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