

Zurab Vacheishvili (Tbilisi)

FOR COGNITION OF GOD IN *ASCETICISM* BY
N. KAZANDZAKIS

The Byzantine civilization has left a considerable cultural heritage in the history of mankind and its tradition has been succeeded by Orthodox Christian culture.

The Byzantine cultural heritage has had a great impact on every new epoch, trend and individual author. Present-day readers have inherited it modified – either enriched with or lacking certain nuances.

With regard to above, the present paper attempts to analyze the work *Asceticism* by a contemporary Greek author, N. Kazandzakis.

This work, which was written in 1923 and published in 1927, provoked much indignation in the Greek society and especially among certain circles of the Greek Orthodox Church. Such a disposition had a considerable influence on the critics of *Asceticism*, and of N. Kazandzakis' other works as well. Almost none of the critics made an effort to search for the Byzantine traditions in the work. Most scientists found *Asceticism* contrary to Christian traditions. Some of them considered Kazandzakis a Buddhist,¹ some a follower of Plotine,² and others thought he championed Nitsshe's and Berxon's ideas.³ Altogether they considered him a nihilist.

In this paper we shall try to compare the ideas in *Asceticism* with theology in the Apophatical tradition and thus determine how much of an influence this tradition had on N. Kazandzakis's thoughts.

"We come from a dark abyss and vanish in a dark abyss. The lit space between them is called Life",⁴ – says N. Kazandzakis at the beginning of *Asceti-*

¹ N. Βρετάκος, «Νικός Καζαντζάκης, η αγωνία του και το έργο του» Αθήνα.

² Γ. Σταματίου, «Ο Καζαντζάκης και οι αρχαίοι» Αθήνα 1983.

³ Π. Πρεβελάκης, «Καζαντζάκης, ο ποιητής και το ποίημα της Οδύσσειας» Αθήνα 1958.

⁴ N. Καζαντζάκης, «Ασκητική», Αθήνα 1985, 9.

cism. In our opinion, he tries to determine the apophatic character of his own theology.

At the very beginning he distinguishes two human lifestyles: 1. The upward slope, which leads to unification, life and immortality, and 2. The downward slope – which leads to devastation, matter and death.

Before perceiving God, an ascetic should undergo a certain catharsis. In this aspect N. Kazandzakis reminds us of Christian apologists, For example, V. Loski, in his work *The Essays on Mystic Theology in Eastern Church*, presents Dionysus the Areopagite's⁵ way of perceiving God, that in some way brings him closer to Plotine's theories. Both authors present two stages which a person must pass through before he starts to perceive God.

At the first stage it is necessary to get rid of all material things and sins. At the second stage one must become free from intellect and all intellectual things, because it is impossible for one to comprehend the being that exists above all. Here it must be noted that in contrast to Dionysus the Areopagite, Plotine's God is not absolutely imperceptible.⁶

Gregory of Nazianzus believes people who want to perceive God must be like Moses and first of all must be sanctified like Moses. Those who try to do this without sanctification will be cursed in the same way as the people who dared to step on Mount Sinai.⁷

In *Asceticism*, N.Kazandzaki presents four stages of perceiving God. Before perceiving God an ascetic has to perform three duties, which to us is the way passed by Moses, leading to the Promised Land, symbolizing the perception of God.

Duty one: a human must look deep in to himself and must be able to grasp the wisdom of the world, because all these things are formed within the brain, i.e. the brain gives birth to every earthly and material things. An ascetic should set aside his thoughts and overcome the bounds created by it.

This stage resembles the period of Moses' life, when he lived in wealth in the palace of the Pharaoh's daughter (Ex. 2. 7-11). To Gregory of Nyssa, the Pharaoh's daughter symbolizes the earthly and futile wisdom. Whoever wants to raise to Moses' inward eminence as regards perception of God, must be

⁵ As V. Loski refers to Pseudo Dionysus the Areopagite as to Dionysus the Arepagite (see Вл. Лоский, «Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви», В кн.: «Мистическое богословие», Киев 1991), we shall also keep to his tradition.

⁶ See: Вл. Лоский, «Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви», В кн.: «Мистическое богословие», Киев 1991, 112-113.

⁷ Gregorius Nazianzenus, De theologia (orat.28), 3: PG, t.34 col.29.

called first the son of Pharaoh's barren daughter; i.e. he must first grasp the earthly wisdom, and then renounce and overcome it.⁸

Duty two: In order to overcome the bounds of the mind, a human must listen to his heart, because heart gives the hope of freedom and is the essence of life. When Moses saw an enslaved Jew, he supported his countryman; that provoked the Egyptians (Ex. 2. 13-15). To Gregory of Nyssa, the Jewish people, contrary to the Egyptians, symbolize true wisdom, justice and virtue.⁹

Duty three: After following his heart a man should set himself free from the hope created by his heart. Jewish people brought reproach upon Moses for the murder of an Egyptian. Moses, scared and hopeless, took shelter in the Midiam Desert (Ex. 2, 13-15). By escaping to the desert he gained freedom.

N. Kazandzakis's ascetic, after performing his third duty, says: "I have no hopes, no fears, I am free from my mind and my heart. I stand higher. I am free. This is what I have wanted. I wish for nothing more. I have been searching for freedom".¹⁰

However, that is not enough on the way to the perception of God.

Step one: Self.

At level one N. Kazandzakis's ascetic has to cognize his own "self", his helplessness and imperfection. "I am not good, I am not chaste, I am not calm",¹¹ "I am afraid of speaking. I have artificial wings on, I cry, sing and weep so as to drown the sharp scream in my heart".¹²

And just then, for the first time, an ascetic hears God's voice: "I, the scream, I am your Lord! I am not the shelter, neither home or hope. I am not Father, neither Son or Spirit. I am your Commander-in-chief",¹³ and the voice calls upon the ascetic to struggle in order to rescue himself, without any hesitation and questions.

In our opinion, Moses' liberating mission started from the moment of his escape from Egypt, when he found shelter in the Midiam Desert (Ex. 2. 15).

The desert symbolizes a place for a man to be sanctified. There, a human, in solitude, deepens in his own personality and becomes stronger for the future struggles. In the Midiam desert Moses got married and had children. This fact makes us think that it was Moses' effort to come to perfection.¹⁴ It was

⁸ Gregore de Nyssa, *La vie de Moïse*, Ed. J. Daniélou, Sources Chrétiennes, N1, Paris 1968, 2,10-13.

⁹ *ib.* 2,14.

¹⁰ N. Καζαντζάκης, «*Ασκητική*», Αθήνα 1985, 27.

¹¹ *ib.* 30.

¹² *ib.* 30.

¹³ *ib.* 31.

¹⁴ According to "the Old Testament" a man could not be considered a consummated person unless he is married and has children.

there that, for the first time, the Lord appeared before him as a burning blackberry bush and invoked him to struggle for the rescue of his nation (Ex. 3. 2-17). According to Gregory of Nyssa's explanation, Moses' obedience to the Lord's command by taking off his shoes in front of the burning blackberry bush, symbolizes liberation from the material, earthly world i.e. liberation from "Self".¹⁵

Step two: The nation.

An ascetic should realize that he is not alone. He is a part of a unit. His nation is his own body, past, present and future.

Giving the definition of an ascetic's compulsory service to the nation, N. Kazandzakis says: "Your primary duty is to feel inwardly all your ancestors. Your second duty is to discover their ambitions and succeed in their pursuits. The third duty – leave your son a will to excel you".¹⁶

Moses felt sorrow for his ancestors' sufferings and enslavement. Although he could have run from the danger, he went back to Egypt and tried to liberate his people from the yoke of the Egyptians and lead them to the Promised Land (Ex. 3.20).

Step three: The mankind.

After obtaining the national consciousness, an ascetic must realize the mankind's anguish and must struggle for their rescue. "Now get rid of national feeling too". "Hosts of humans – white, yellow and black – rush at you and scream inside you".¹⁷ "Observe people and pity them".¹⁸ An ascetic should realize that he is "one small letter, one syllable, one word in Odyssey".¹⁹ He must attach importance to travel; compete with people, gods, animals. Slowly and patiently he must lay the foundation of the highest essence – Itaka in his consciousness".²⁰ "On their way, numerous people are lost – they are born and die fruitless".²¹ "They are the manure for the future seeds; ashes, blood and brain make the ground fertile".²²

Israel's way through the desert is not only the process of a nation's liberation leading to the Promised Land. In the desert Israel is sanctified and prepares to accept their Savior in future.

¹⁵ Gregore de Nysse, "La vie de Moïse", Ed. J. Daniélou, Sources Chrétiennes, N1, Paris 1968, 2, 22.

¹⁶ N. Καζαντζάκης, «Ασκητική», Αθήνα 1985, 40.

¹⁷ ib. 41.

¹⁸ ib. 42.

¹⁹ ib. 45.

²⁰ ib. 46.

²¹ ib. 43.

²² ib. 43.

Hence we may draw a parallel between the third level in N. Kazandzakis' work and the exodus of Israel from Egypt under Moses' leadership (Ex. 12.51).

Step four: The earth.

After passing, stage by stage, through "self", "the nation" and "the mankind", the ascetic must continue upward and grasp the whole earth, the world. i.e. he must become a superhuman. At level four the ascetic is endowed with vision. The ascetic hears the Lord's voice that invokes him to struggle. "Make your home with your people, feed with your hands and heart; with your blood resurrect your terrifying ancestors and set off to struggle together with your dead, living and would-be-born people."²³

At the fourth level, Moses ascended Mount Siani, isolated himself from Israel, and was enveloped in the mist of the Lord. Here, for the second time, Moses had a the vision of the Lord (Ex. 17). No human being had ever had so close a vision of God. This means – Moses was a superhuman.

N. Kazandzakis's ascetic must also act before he finally gets perceived in his god.

He must comprehend the interactions between God and human, between men, and between man and nature. Only after such comprehension one can have God's vision.

Moses came back from Sinai. Forty years of misfortune and bloodshed awaited his people before they could get to the Promised Land. When Israel came close to the Promised Land, God commanded Moses to go up the Mount Nebo and only allowed him to view the Promised Land Galilee, from afar (Deut. 34).

According to N. Kazandzakis's conception of symbols, "Galilee, with its ideal grace, harmonious mountains, blue sea and a small beautiful lake, stretches beyond Jesus' shoulders, smiles and looks like Jesus himself. It is peaceful, unpretentious and joyful like a kind man."²⁴ – i.e. Galilee can be considered a symbol of Christ, and the country which Moses viewed can be interpreted as Christ's face.

The god in *Asceticism* has two images.²⁵ In the chapters analyzed, the god is a strict, merciless commander-in-chief, who demands the soldiers to shed their blood, and to lay down their lives in order to achieve their goals. This is

²³ ib. 53.

²⁴ N. Καζαντζάκης, «Αναφορά στον Γρέκο», Αθήνα, 1985 243.

²⁵ In all his works N. Kazandzakis depicts God's two contrary features. From the one hand He is Jehovah – strict, revengeful, blood-thirsty God opposing with, Jesus – Kind philanthropic God "Who on the Easter Day was killed on the green grass so that He did not resist, only bleating innocently N. Καζαντζάκης, «Αναφορά στον Γρέκο», Αθήνα, 1985 243 .

the symbol of Jehovah, the more so as we recall the Jews lead to the Promised Land as presented in *The Report to Greco*.²⁶ In the last chapter of *Asceticism* it seems that this blood-thirsty god becomes calm and transformed.

So the god shows resemblance with Galilee, viewed by Moses. The extinguishing fire is altered into a peaceful light. The god looks like a loving insect which smiles and weeps, i.e. he becomes philanthropic.

In *Asceticism* there are two symbolic names: (η Ἄβυσσος)²⁷ abyss and (η Σιγή) silence, which N. Kazandzakis explains as follows: "Silence is everyone who after fulfilling his military service in every heroic exploit and after reaching the peak of his efforts beyond the heroic deeds, does not struggle and scream any more; he becomes fulfilled, united, integrated into the world in silence.

He has become harmonized and friendly with the abyss, like a man's sperm in a woman's womb.

Now his wife is an abyss, which refines, opens him up, eats his internal organs and alters the essence of his blood. An abyss smiles, weeps, comes out and goes down together with him, and never leaves him alone."²⁸

All these things bear much resemblance with the highest divine couple: ο Βυθός (depth) and η Σιγή (silence) in the Valentinian mythology.

Though there is a certain resemblance between Kazandzakis's god and Valentinian highest divine couple, there are also significant differences as well.

In *Asceticism* η Σιγή (silence) is male, and ο Βυθός (abyss) is female. N. Kazandzakis's god is not presented as a couple, he is one and perfect.

N. Kazandzakis's ideas have some resemblance with Apophatic theology since such terminologies as "darkness", "abyss" and "silence" are also characteristic to Apophatic theology. They are used synonymous to God, who is absolutely incomprehensible. Besides, according to *Asceticism*, a human mind is able to comprehend "only apparent representations of the phenomena, but never the essence. It can comprehend not every phenomenon, but only those that are material; and to make it more specific, not each material thing, but only links among them".²⁹

We can find the like statement in the works of Byzantine authors. For instance, according to Basil of Caesaria, a human being is not capable to com-

²⁶ v. N. Καζαντζάκης, «Αναφορά στον Γρέκο», Αθήνα 1985, 243.

²⁷ Ἄβυσσος is derived from ἄβυθος, which means – bottomless, though βυθός in the old Greek it has the other meaning – "depth" (v. Γ. Μπαμπινιώτης, «Λεξικό της Νέας Ελληνικής Γλώσσας», Αθήνα 2002. 399) to us it can be a synonym to Ἄβυσσος.

²⁸ N. Καζαντζάκης, «Ασκητική», Αθήνα 1985, 96.

²⁹ N. Καζαντζάκης, «Ασκητική», Αθήνα 1985, 13.

prehend God, neither even a material thing, because we judge about things according to their properties that we discern and this way form a certain idea of the things; however, the analysis fails to fully represent the object of our perception. There is always something that escapes the analysis and becomes impossible to render through apprehension. And if perception of a material object is beyond human capabilities, apprehension of God is far less possible.³⁰

Alongside the Apophatic theology, all the authors refer to Kataphatic theology too. The Areopagite offers two theological methods – kataphatic and apophatic. The former gives some notions about the divine essence, God.

N. Kazandzakis also truly keeps to this tradition and tells us about his deity, namely his divine being, Akritas-Digenis: the warrior, the sufferer, very strong but not almighty, the warrior at the furthest frontiers, the commander-in-chief, the emperor of all the powers, visible or invisible".³¹

Akritas – protector of the Byzantine frontiers.

Digenis – having double origin.

In our opinion, these two terms imply above-mentioned Galilee – Christ. The god in N. Kazandzakis' work, who has double origin, the divine and the human natures, is Christ. This idea becomes especially clear in his work *The Last Temptation* where N. Kazandzakis says: "Christ's double origin is what I have best appreciated".³²

Other epithets applied to Christ are: "Akritas – a tireless warrior", "A sufferer at the gates of the Hell – crucified to redeem the mankind".

Our supposition is also attested by the following: Christian theology, according to the tradition, has a very practical meaning, as it is only the means that serves a single purpose – human's unification with God, i.e. transformation in God (θέωσις).

"God has humanized in order enable man become God. It is the Word, Logos that opens to us the way to the incorporation with God and if the humanized word "Christ" does not have the same essence as "Father" and if he is not true God, then man's transformation into God becomes impossible".³³

God has created a man after his own single will, but God is unable to save man unless his will links to will of man.³⁴

³⁰ Вл. Лоский, «Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви», В кн.: «Мистическое богословие», Киев 1991, 115.

³¹ Ν. Καζαντζάκης, «Ασκητική», Αθήνα 1985, 95.

³² Ν. Καζαντζάκης, "Τελευταίος Πειρασμός", Αθήνα 19, 15.

³³ Вл. Лоский, «Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви», В кн.: «Мистическое богословие», Киев 1991, 99.

³⁴ ib. 99.

This is why N. Kazandzakis's god, though he is very strong, is not almighty; so he addresses a man and calls for help so that the potential god in man be released and incorporated with the divine essence.

So, "Blessed are those who hear His call . . . and blessed are those who have released You and have incorporated with You the Lord, and who say: "You and I are One".³⁵

In the second edition of *Asceticism* the author added the last phrase: "Even the One does not exist",³⁶ which is another proof to his profound knowledge of the Byzantine theology and its influence on his works. Between kataphatic and apophatic theologies, the Areopagite gives the priority to the former as it is more perfect than Kataphatic, as according to Dionysus the Areopagite, it is the only natural way which corresponds to the incomprehensible, since all that can be perceived are existent, while God is beyond of all what is perceptible and therefore is non-existent.³⁷

Above we have attempted to present the high extent to which the Byzantine tradition has found its way in N.Kazandzakis's *Asceticism*. We really do not think that works by N.Kazandzakis are based solely on the Byzantine theology. We shall by all means admit the eclectic character of the work considered above; however, the Byzantine theology is the main source of the author's inspiration. That is why the whole system for the comprehension of deity in *Asceticism* is so close to the Byzantine theology.

We have arrived at the conclusion that the ascetic's way of development, the notion of god and the idea of god's "non-existence" as presented in *Asceticism* are formal transformations of the Byzantine theology, but as to the idea of the work, it is identical to the tradition aforesaid.

³⁵ N. Καζαντζάκης, «Ασκητική», Αθήνα 1985, 98.

³⁶ ib. 98.

³⁷ Вл. Лоский, «Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви», В кн.: «Мистическое богословие», Киев 1991, 109.