

THE INFLUENCE OF DARWIN ON THE THOUGHT OF NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS

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God will not save us. We shall save God by fighting, creating, transubstantiating matter into spirit.

The Saviors of God

If we wished to recognize in Kazantzakis's religious vision just a single virtue, it would perhaps be his faith in Darwinism.

Peter Bien

When I wrote my essay "Nikos Kazantzakis's Spiritual Fathers" (*Οδός Πανός*, issue 127 [January-March 2005] pp. 24-49 and www.tsinikopoulos.org), which has already been published in English translation, I pointed out Darwin among the spiritual fathers not acknowledged by Kazantzakis. Added to Homer, Buddha, Christ, and Nietzsche, Kazantzakis mentions Bergson (or Μπερξόνα as he liked to call him). However, he does not refer to other spiritual fathers who secretly nursed him such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, existential thinkers, figures in saints' lives, the Eastern tradition, the apocryphal gospels, and chiefly theosophy (Helena Blavatsky), freemasonry, or cognitive theology. In my above-mentioned essay I indicated how extensive upon him was the influence of the last-mentioned source, plus theosophy, gnosticism, and freemasonry. Nevertheless, a subsequent review of his writings has convinced me that equally great was the influence he received from Charles Darwin (1809–1882), which is evident both in his oeuvre and his worldview.

The judgment of one of the most reliable students of his oeuvre, Peter Bien, is certainly correct - namely, that Kazantzakis's aim was to make the Church accept twentieth-century scientific interpretation and especially his own method of "how to be religious in a Darwinian world."¹

Quite aside from the question of how compatible Christianity and Darwinism may be (it is sufficient for us to recall the furious war between evolutionists and fundamentalist creationists), Kazantzakis's effort to make Christian faith compatible with Darwinian theory is evident in his entire oeuvre: poetry, plays, and novels.

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1. Peter Bien, «Η φιλοσοφική βάση των κειμένων του Νίκου Καζαντζάκη», *Φιλολόγος* issue 136 (2009), pp. 878–883.

Kazantzakis was never satisfied with traditional Christianity as an ideology or a creed; as he himself proclaimed in *Report to Greco*, his letters, and elsewhere, he was openly anticlerical. Because the cosmos, nature, and humanity evolve continually, he had in mind a post-Christianity containing Darwinism. “Everything flows; nothing remains still,” as Heraclitus declared. Nothing is static, not even God. He too is evolving, a spiritual idea, and cannot be considered complete, immobile, unchangeable, or absolute in any respect, as Christianity desires. He is a God to whom we may give the name Abyss, Mystery, Absolute Darkness, Absolute Light, Matter, Spirit, Final Hope, Final Despair, Silence. He is a power that contains everything, engenders everything.² He is an active Entity in an evolving cosmos. With these presuppositions in mind, we can better understand Kazantzakis’s oeuvre, bearing in mind that he welcomed the strong influence of Darwinism in two ways: directly and indirectly.

He received Darwin’s ideological influence directly by studying the momentous book *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London, 1859). Although not the first—Gregory Xenopoulos is considered the first—Kazantzakis was surely the greatest admirer, propagandist, and herald of Darwinian theory in the area of Greek literature. It suffices to remember that he was the first to translate Darwin’s above-mentioned book into Greek, indeed in 1915. Under the title *Περί τῆς γενέσεως τῶν εἰδῶν* the book was published by Fexis in the Cretan author’s rendition, naturally into fluent katharevousa!

It is well known how deeply a translator must study somebody’s work in order to comprehend it and render it correctly. As the Romanian philosopher E. M. Cioran correctly notes, “More thought is required for translating than for creating.” We can imagine at first the influence upon the young Kazantzakis’s intellect exercised by this progressive theory that was meeting everywhere with ardent opposition, especially from representatives of the Church. Given however that Darwinism had started to become fashionable, Kazantzakis not only did not remain unconcerned and unmoved, but found Darwinian theory to be so extremely alluring that he appropriated it as his own and spread it, placing in the mouths of his characters, and also in *The Saviors of God*, phrases and thoughts clearly Darwinian although at times conflicting. In *The Saviors of God* we read, “May mercy overwhelm you for this creature that bodied forth one morning from the monkeys, naked, defenseless, without horns or teeth, only with a spark of fire in its soft skull.”³ In *Report to Greco*, he writes this about his belief: “Human beings are not God’s privileged, pampered creatures. [. . .] And if you scratch our skin a little, scratch our soul a little, you’ll find our grandmother underneath—the monkey.”⁴ Elsewhere in the same book, a little further on, he writes, “an animal, the monkey, set out thousands of years ago to arrive, but still has not arrived. [. . .]; we monkey-humans are still in the middle of the road.” Yet, “the two-legged animals, following other roads

2. *Ασκητική* (εκδ. Καζαντζάκη, 2014), p. 65.

3. *Ασκητική*, p. 42.

4. *Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο* (εκδ. Καζαντζάκη, 2014), pp. 117, 120.

than intellectual ones, managed to become human,”⁵ which certainly is not strange since they accepted fashionable ideas.

What is truly strange at any rate is that in *The Last Temptation* he places Darwinian words in the mouth of Christ! “The human being [Jesus thinks] although he managed, after ceaseless struggle, to stand on his two hind legs, will never succeed in freeing himself from the warm, tender, tight embrace of his mother, the monkey.”⁶

But Kazantzakis’s contact with Darwin was also indirect, and chiefly so, via his great teacher, Nietzsche, the “God-murderer” as he called him, who not only accepted Darwinism but whose “Übermensch,” we must remember, was the evolved post-human who, endowed with physical power and mental genius, would become Superman, the world-sovereign.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche wrote, “You completed the distance from monkey to human; yet you still have much monkey inside you. You formerly were a monkey and now, still, a human is more monkey-like than any monkey.” Also “Our road leads upward, from the species to the super-species.”⁷

However, as I said above, Kazantzakis came in contact with Darwin also in another way. It is well known that in 1908 he studied at the feet of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who wrote the famous book *L’Évolution créatrice* (Paris, 1907). In 1912, Kazantzakis, newly converted, published an essay on Bergson in which he refers to two existing trends or movements—to the materialistic movement that leads to disintegration, and to the vital movement that leads upward to integration. Later, he repeated the same view, more or less, in *The Saviors of God*. What Kazantzakis adopted was Bergson’s vitalistic philosophy—namely, that there exists in nature an *élan vital*, an implicit vital or essential power, an ever-continuing creativity that is transformed and reshaped everlastingly. In *The Saviors of God* we read: “The moment we are born, the return begins; departure and return are simultaneous; we keep going at every moment. [. . .] But as soon as we are born there also begins our effort to create, to synthesize, to convert matter into life. [. . .] And the two movements emanate from the depths of primordial being. [. . .] Life itself is an uncontrolled indestructible Universal flow.”⁸

Kazantzakis presents this struggle in the *The Saint’s Life of Zorba*, in which the narrator says among other things that “everything—humans, animals, plants, stars—are one and the same. The identical substance engages in the identical terrible struggle: to transubstantiate matter into spirit.”⁹

One can clearly conclude from the above that although it is true that Kazantzakis adopted Darwin’s theory, he did not adopt the theory’s anti-teleological element that offers only natural selection and the struggle for existence for support (although Darwin did not exclude the existence of a Divine creator).

5. Ibid., pp. 206, 437.

6. *Ο τελευταίος πειρασμός* (εκδ. Έθνος της Κυριακής, 2014), vol. 2, p. 25.

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Έτσι μίλησεν ο Ζαρατούστρα*, tr. Aris Diktaios (Athens, 1958), p. 9.

8. Ασκητική, p. 9

9. *Βίος και πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά* (εκδ. Καζαντζάκη, 2014), p. 285.

Nor from Bergson did he adopt the quasi-teleological element of life's directional evolution. Kazantzakis read Bergson's vitalistic theory with the eyes of a "mystic without God"; Aphrodite Athanasopoulou correctly points this out as a peculiarity of kazantzakian ontology.¹⁰ The symbols used by Kazantzakis for the evolutionary journey are three: the worm that becomes a butterfly, the flying fish that leaps out of the water struggling to overcome its nature, and the worm that turns its insides into silk.¹¹

The degree to which these three are compatible with each other is another question—indeed an entire issue, we might say, because a stipulated evolution upward means a purpose and plan from someone. Who? Kazantzakis leaves it unclear, as does Darwin, who believed that human beings would become more perfect in the remote future. Kazantzakis, however, also accepted the evolution of a "meta-God," an ill-defined, relational God thanks to the vital thrust, one characterized by success in the ascent. Hence, nothing was incompatible for him. In his ideology, in which there is a deliberate integration of various, sometimes conflicting, ideologies, everything is acceptable, everything compatible. It is a "unity of opposites."

To come to the Cretan author's Christology as that is portrayed in *The Last Temptation*, according to Kazantzakis and agreeing with Darwinian principle, Christ is an incomplete individual, a utopian who has the divine spark in him and who struggles to become a "theanthropos" (as all of us are: flesh and soul), but who desires to evolve still more and to become spirit, God, because according to Darwinian principle the evolutionary nature of materiality is to advance upward toward the elimination of materiality, to transubstantiate darkness into light, and to surpass itself via death. Death is the summit of life because it makes possible the transubstantiation of transitory life into immortality, permitting a new immaterial spirit to shout "Help!" once more to materiality in order for the evolutionary process to be renewed (Peter Bien). Christ dies and is resurrected in the heart of Mary Magdalene (materiality) in order to continue the upward struggle toward immaterialization. It's a question of a "theology of struggle," as it has been named (God's Struggler).

Kazantzakis, the theologically obsessive Darwinian-Bergsonian-Nietzschean pantheist, is basically an extremely complex spirit who composes new theories of a relational, associational God (= nature) and stands in the forefront against contemporary philosophers who talk about a Christian meta-God, because he is not satisfied with the traditional Christian God-Father-Pantocrator. This God (or Divinity, rather) in Kazantzakis's works is uncompromising because—as was recognized by Kimon Friar, another reliable student of the Cretan's oeuvre—"God chooses only the best [. . .] only those who are strong and worthy of surviving."¹²

It's a question of Darwin's obvious choice, which calls upon human beings

10. Α. Αθανασοπούλου, «Come l'uom s'eterna. Για μια τυπολογία των ηρώων της καζαντζακικής φιλοσοφίας», *Φιλολογος*, issue 131 (2008), p. 57.

11. Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο, p. 478.

12. Kimon Friar, *Η πνευματική Οδύσσεια του Νίκου Καζαντζάκη*, μτφρ. Θωμάς Στραβέλης (Αθήνα, 1983), p. 56.

to become *Salvatores Dei*, to save the God they have inside them, the divine spark—that is, life itself—preventing it from becoming mud, earth. I believe that, after all this, we can understand what Kazantzakis wanted to say with the following words that may be found in *The Saviors of God*, words that at first sight may not be noticed: “Our duty, hearing the Cry, is to run beneath its banners, to fight alongside it, either saving ourselves or losing ourselves with it. God is in charge. . . He cannot be saved unless we save him with our struggle, and we cannot be saved if he is not saved.”

Our duty is to aid God—that is, nature—so that we may be saved via continuous evolution. Final freedom does not exist; nor does final salvation. The only thing that exists is the effort.

This is Darwinism-Bergsonism in all its magnificence, hidden beneath a philosophical-literary frosting. Peter Bien, who delved into Kazantzakis’s thought like few others, gives us the definitive orientation to reading Kazantzakis’s works: “All of Kazantzakis’s religious career will be incomprehensible to us and indeed repellent if we do not agree with him that Darwin must occupy the center of our faith concerning the essence of universal existence.”

Περίληψη

Ο Δημήτρης Τσινικόπουλος γεννήθηκε το 1948 στη Θεσσαλονίκη. Σπούδασε Νομικά στο Α.Π.Θ. και συνέχισε μεταπτυχιακές σπουδές στην Ελλάδα και στη Γερμανία. Έγραψε πάνω από 20 βιβλία, μελέτες, δοκίμια, ποίηση, διηγήματα καθώς και άρθρα και κριτικές, που δημοσιεύτηκαν σε διάφορα περιοδικά λόγου και τέχνης. Ζει στη Θεσσαλονίκη.

Ο παγκοσμίου φήμης Νίκος Καζαντζάκης, μνημονεύει στα βιβλία του τους πνευματικούς πατέρες: Όμηρο, Βούδα, Χριστό, Νίτσε, Μπερζόν, αλλά αποφεύγει να κατονομάσει κάποιους άλλους που επέδρασαν πάνω του καταλυτικά. Μία από τις βασικές επιδράσεις που δέχθηκε, ήταν ο Κάρολος Δαρβίνος, όπως τούτο καταφαίνεται από ένα πλήθος παραθέσεων και λόγων που βάζει στο στόμα των ηρώων του, δια των οποίων εκφράζονται σαφώς Δαρβινικές θέσεις. Είναι αξιοσημείωτο ότι μετέφρασε το «Περί καταγωγής των ειδών» του Δαρβίνου το 1915. Ωστόσο ήρθε σε επαφή με το έργο του Δαρβίνου και εμμέσως μέσω του Μπερζόν που έγραψε το «Η Δημιουργός εξέλιξη», και του Νίτσε. Ο «ανήφορος» του Καζαντζάκη και ο διαρκής του αγώνας η ύλη να γίνει πνεύμα, είναι Δαρβινικές έννοιες. Ο Καζαντζάκης με το έργο του προσπαθεί κατά την επιτυχή έκφραση του Peter Bien, να μας κάνει να αποδεχθούμε το πώς «να είμαστε θρήσκοι σ’ έναν Δαρβινικό κόσμο». Ο ίδιος είναι θρησκομανής Δαρβινιστής. Εμείς έχουμε χρέος, να βοηθήσουμε το Θεό, δηλ. τη φύση, για να σωθούμε με μια συνεχή εξέλιξη, με μια συνεχή προσπάθεια, γιατί δεν υπάρχει τελική σωτηρία. Αυτή είναι η θεολογία της πάλης.

Resume

Resumen