INTRODUCTION

This chapter may be seen as a brief survey of my M.Phil dissertation aimed at discussing the various findings I came across during the course of my research work during that period. I believe it is important for me to state here that it was these findings that spurred me on to study the portrayals of Christ—especially those that may seem to be in conflict with the representation of Christ in the Gospels—in other literatures and cultures in the twentieth century.

My M.Phil dissertation titled, "Kazantzakis' The Last Temptation of Christ" and the Representation of Christ in Contemporary Malayalam Literature" looks at the depiction of Christ in select Malayalam texts juxtaposed against one of the most controversial of all time works featuring Christ as a character—The Last Temptation of Christ written by the Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis. One of the Malayalam works taken for study was The Sixth Holy Wound of Christ, loosely based on The Last Temptation of Christ. This play was embroiled in a lot of controversy, with the advocates of Christianity even taking to the streets to get the play banned. There were lengthy debates for and against the play, fought on the pages of literary magazines and journals. The matter reached the Kerala High Court, which eventually ruled in favour of banning the play.

The M.Phil dissertation as such is divided into three chapters, excluding the Introduction and Conclusion. The Preface raises questions like how does a religious
community respond to a non-conventional representation of something that its religious consciousness is deeply rooted in? In the conflict arising from the community's reluctance to disallow the existence of such non-conventional representations, is it possible to brand one position as right and the other as wrong? Should there be an attempt to restrict either communitarian sentiments or freedom of artistic expression? Or is it possible for these two entities to co-exist? The Preface, by raising such questions, sets the tone for an inspection of the character of Christ from different literary points of view, enclosed within the point of view of a believer. It in a sense, highlights the major reasons for my taking up such a project—to examine the differing ways in which Christ is picturised in literary texts and works of art, to understand why such works become problematic from a believer’s point of view and to find out why these kinds of portrayals are at times condemned as being blasphemous in nature. This examination is done mainly by looking at the differences between the mystified Christ in the Bible and the de-mystified Christ in literary works, both from the viewpoint of a believer and also from the viewpoint of a research student.

The Introduction gives a summarized description of the history of Christianity in Kerala. This is based on materials collected from P.J.Thomas' Malayala Sahityavum Kristhianikalum3, Scaria Zachariah's The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper 15994, Paremakkal Governador's Varthamanapustakam5, and Susan Vishwanathan's The Christians of Kerala.6 Through this description, the chapter attempts to emphasize that there already existed in Kerala a strong Christian tradition much before the arrival of Western traders and missionaries, starting with the Portuguese, led by Vasco da Gama in
1498. It was the Portuguese who brought Roman Catholicism to Kerala. Later on, with the advent of the East Indian Company in the 18th century, Protestant missionaries established themselves in a big way all over Kerala.

The Portuguese were contemptuous of the practices and rites of the native Christians, simply because these did not conform to their own Catholic ways of religious thinking. They convened the Synod of Diamper in 1599, which called for the abolishing of the rituals of the native Christians. They also converted several native Christians to Roman Catholicism. So this may be said to be one of the earliest of splits that occurred among the native Christians of Kerala due to foreign intervention. But there were others like the 'Puthencoors' who took the 'Coonan Kurisu' oath in 1653 to remain outside the Catholic fold. Although it is true that the British missionaries, coming much after the Portuguese, played a substantial role in initiating literacy, their reluctance, like the Portuguese, to accept the practices of the Puthencoor Christians, led to several schismatic divisions among these, between some of whom litigations continue even to this day.

Through the entry of foreign brands of Christianity and via literacy came westernization too:

And this influence affected not just the Hindus and Muslims, but also the native Christians. If Western Christianity smothered the nativised literary and educational tradition, it also helped a lot in spreading literacy through its educational modes and served to give linguistic and literary access to people belonging to the lower strata of life. If the introduction of several schools, colleges and hospitals by the missionaries improved the social life of the colonised, their reluctance to accept or even tolerate the ideological religious particularities of the native Christian Church in Kerala, paved the way for the split of the Kerala Christians into various fragments.⁷
The play *The Sixth Holy Wound of Christ* which caused a lot of controversy in Kerala is cloned from *The Last Temptation of Christ* and hence a direct result of the influence of westernization.

The first chapter titled 'The Kazantzakian Christ' is a study of the Christ character found in Nikos Kazantzakis’ *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The chapter looks at the differences between the Christ story as found in the Bible and as sketched by Kazantzakis. The Kazantzakian Christ is forced by the claw like grip of God's spirit to leave behind the life of an ordinary man in order to become the Messiah. But the protagonist tries his best to resist this force:

> What did you say? ... The kingdom of heaven? ... I don't care about the kingdom of heaven. I like the earth. I want to marry, I tell you I want Magdalene, even if she is a prostitute. It is my fault that she became one, my fault and I shall save her. Her! Not the earth, not the kingdom of this world ... it is Magdalene I want to save. That's enough for me ... I want you to detest me, to go and find someone else: I want to be rid of you ... and I shall make crosses all my life, so that the Messiahs you choose can be crucified. [KZ.28]

But he finally gives in and goes to the monastery in the desert. On his return he chooses his disciples, among whom Judas overshadows all the rest. Although Jesus is quite soft spoken earlier on, his preachings become more forceful and radical later. But this Jesus is frightened of his own powers. The Kazantzakian Christ is purely a man. And one major way through which the author attempts to negate the divinity of Christ is by leaving out several of the miracles, which Jesus had performed as per the Bible. Only the raising of Lazarus, which is not described directly, but reported, and the healing of the paralysed
daughter of a Roman centurion, is mentioned in detail. But it is Jesus more than anyone else, who is unnerved by his abilities to perform miracles:

Throughout the novel, Jesus is nothing less than the 'universal' human being in whose embodiment lie the passions, fears, and desires of any youth. He feels attracted to women, loneliness frightens him and temptations forever surround him, tearing his flesh and spirit. If initially he attempts to renounce his flesh in order to attain complete divinity, later he is apprehensive whether he is the real Messiah after all. Even the raising of Lazarus does not completely convince him. He is disgusted to see Lazarus' corpse walking: "I wanted to run away but was too ashamed. I just stayed there and trembled"[KZ.395]. Kazantzakis brings in this miracle in order to subvert the divinity of Christ from within the divine aura of the miracle of raising a dead man. By making his Christ feel ashamed of the corpse walking, Kazantzakis may have succeeded in his attempt of subversion. But we must note that Kazantzakis does not show a Christ who fails in his effort to raise Lazarus. He could very well have depicted this to prove Christ's humanness. Instead he portrays Christ as being frightened of his divine power. Here too, Kazantzakis fails to completely subvert Christ's divinity, which would have been in keeping tune with his attempt to humanise Christ.8

The Kazantzakian Christ forces Judas to betray him because he feels that unless someone does so, he cannot die as the Messiah so as to wash away the sins of the world. The last temptation comes to him when he is crucified, in the form of a little green angel who takes him away from the cross to Magdalene and they engage in carnal pleasures. And Jesus feels that he had been wrong about salvation after all:

I went astray because I sought a way outside the flesh; I wanted to go by way of the clouds, great thoughts and death. Woman, precious fellow-worker of God, forgive me. I bow and worship you, mother of God. [KZ.450]

But his disciples feel vexed and cheated when they discover that their rabbi has been living a comfortable domestic life, while they had to suffer a lot of hostilities trying to
spread his Word. They are stunned when they realise that he did not suffer or die on the cross, but instead found solace in the arms of women, and in the pleasures of family life: "One by one they shouted. 'Coward! Traitor! Deserter!'—and vanished"[KZ.495]

Suddenly Jesus realises that he has been duped by yet another temptation and that his guardian angel was no one else but the devil. He feels glad that he has not succumbed to this last temptation and dies with the cry: "It is accomplished!" [KZ.496]

We thus see the Kazantzakian Christ overcoming the last temptation on the cross before eventually dying. So in a way, by not yielding to temptations, this Christ is also like the Christ found in the Gospels. But the problem a believer has with respect to the Kazantzakian Christ is that here, carnal/sexual thoughts and feelings are important aspects of Christ's temptations. I concluded this chapter by stating that it is important to see the Kazantzakian Christ as someone whom the author wanted to identify with:

The whole text maybe seen, as a reflection of the author's self, an attempt by Kazantzakis to find for himself, a Saviour, a god whom he can identify with. We may look at the 'Kazantzakian' Christ, his confusions, his doubts and his various struggles as embodying the confusions of modern man. The human beings of the twentieth century find it difficult to accept anything, even religion, as a given notion. We cannot believe in anything unless we are rationally sure! The 'Kazantzakian' Christ must thus be viewed as a product of the twentieth century. He does not accept religion, faith, divinity, or belief as given concepts. He constantly questions them. His temptations and visions are ample proofs for this. He even goes to the extent of questioning his own conferred divine status. Therefore this Christ may be understood as a representative of the modern man who cannot believe and accept anything that does not satisfy his rationality.9

But Kazantzakis' attempts to portray a Christ in the manner he understood him created a controversy. The Last Temptation of Christ was denounced by the religiously oriented.
Kazantzakis was excommunicated from the Greek Orthodox Church and his novel found for itself a place in the Roman Catholic Index of Forbidden Books.  

The second chapter of my dissertation looks at the controversy created by a stage performance called The Sixth Holy Wound of Christ based very much, though not entirely on The Last Temptation of Christ. This chapter, as its title 'Artistic Freedom of Expression versus Communitarian Sentiments', clearly indicates, looks at the complexities that arise when an artist's freedom to express himself or herself comes into conflict with the religious feelings of a community. And to gain an in-depth understanding of these complexities, the responses of several individuals supporting either of these concepts were studied, so as to comprehend the artist's freedom of expression and the reverberations this freedom created as far as one community was concerned.

The play was ultimately banned by the Kerala High Court. And the chapter studies the court proceedings that recommended this ban. In this chapter I also look at another play, The Celestial Tree at Calvary by Kainikara Padmanabhapillai, mainly to argue that it is not a work of art in its totality, but instead the subverted portrayals of certain character/s who are considered to be of prime importance to the consciousness of a community, that often become a thorny issue.

The plot of the banned play is based on The Last Temptation of Christ, except that here it ends with the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. Though the text of the play, which I
had obtained from the Kerala Sahitya Academy ends with this betrayal scene, the analysis of the responses of literary personalities and theologians seemed to show that the play ends with the crucifixion of Christ. This may be true because though the play was staged first in 1986, the text that I got hold of was published in 1988. So the text may have been different from the play itself. Anyway, there is no last temptation as such here. In an interview to a Malayalam journal, the playwright P.M.Antony maintains that his work only has a 'distant conformity' to Kazantzakis' text, as he was more concerned with the freedom struggle of the people of Israel:

As far as I am concerned, it is the people of Israel who are important. The Christ in this expressive context created quite a few doubts. Why did Christ's message of love fail in Israel? And why does it fail even today? Is it possible to liberate an oppressed people through the concept of universal love? These are some of the questions that I search for with regard to Christ. This is different from Kazantzakis' exposition. That is why I said that this play has only a 'distant conformity' with Kazantzakis' text...

It's a different matter that this freedom struggle was clearly overshadowed by the Christ character, as it was the characterization of Christ that became the flashpoint for the controversy. And it is to argue that it was the unbiblical portrayal of the Christ character more than anything else that caused problems, that I juxtaposed Antony's play against Kainikara Padmanabhapillai's. The Celestial Tree of Calvary. The main feature that may be said to be unbiblical here is the character of Judith, the sister of Judas who persuades her brother to betray Christ. No one had problems with this play. Though it picturises an imaginative perspective as far as Christ's betrayal is concerned, the character of Christ remains very much the same as found in the Gospels.
As far as Antony's play is concerned, it was from the introductory note of the play's leaflets, "The Jesus who is not the Son of God! The Judas who is not a betrayer! The Barabbas who is not a criminal! The Mary of Magdalene who is not a sinner!" that problems arose. Days before the actual staging of the play, police raided the rehearsal camp and seized the leaflets that caused offence to the authorities. Though Antony appealed to the High Court and obtained permission to stage the play, further problems cropped up when the Bishop of the Trissur diocese led a mass protest rally urging the Government to ban the play. When the matter reached the Kerala High Court, the Court decided:

"... to set up a panel consisting of persons from different shades of opinion to read the script and see the performance of the drama and submit the report... on the need, desirability and justification in imposing and continuing the prohibition against the performance of the drama."  

The main aim of this panel was:

"... to view the performance of the drama and to express their reasoned opinion as to whether the performance is profane, sacrilegious or blasphemous, and depicts Jesus Christ as a charlatan easily succumbing to worldly temptations or He is depicted as a noble soul who outlives all such temptations."  

While nine of the members of the panel felt that the play should be banned, six, including a bishop disagreed with their fellow-panelists. The play was banned as the judges felt:

"... The portrayal of Jesus in the drama does not have the support of any of the Gospels. The life of Jesus is portrayed in the four Gospels of the Bible. If any one creates a story of Jesus repudiating what is given in the Gospels, that itself will outrage the religious beliefs and feelings of Christians..."

The main thrust of argument of the learned counsel for the appellant was that the ban order has impinged upon the freedom of speech and
expression guaranteed under Article 19 (a) of the Constitution. Freedom of speech guaranteed by the Constitution is subject to reasonable restriction in the interest of decency or morality. The powers conferred on the Government under the provisions of the Kerala Dramatic Performances Act 1961 are in the general interest of the public and they do not impose any unreasonable restrictions.\textsuperscript{17}

The chapter concludes by stating that the Indian Constitution decisively supports:

\begin{quote}
... the collective consciousness of a community as opposed to the concept of freedom of expression, according to which "the law imposes reasonable restriction on the exercise of the right (to freedom of expression)"\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

This is true as Article 19 of the Constitution, while detailing the fundamental rights of a citizen, states that:

19. (1) All citizens have the right—
   (a) to freedom of speech and expression;

   (2) Nothing in sub clause (a) of clause (1) shall affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the state from making any law, in so far as such law imposes reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the right conferred by the said sub clause in the interests of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence.\textsuperscript{19}

The Court obviously felt that the play had to be banned because whatever it is that its creator was trying to express, had to be restricted in the interest of decency and morality.

The third chapter 'In Search of His Christ' looks at the works of another writer, who like Kazantzakis, felt that his Christ character is a study of Christ as he understands him:
Religion was imposed on me in the name of Christ, and so I should know who this Christ is! It is a search for my own self, my personality—who I am!\textsuperscript{20}

Two short stories, \textit{Till You Face the Mirror}\textsuperscript{21} and \textit{Who Knows!}\textsuperscript{22} and one novelette. \textit{What News, Pilate?}\textsuperscript{23} by the contemporary Malayalam writer Paul Zachariah are taken for study here. While the first short story revolves around the fears and apprehensions of Christ to behold himself before a mirror, the massacre of innocent children by King Herod during the time of Christ's birth, forms the locale of the second story. Zachariah here wonders whether:

the birth of the Saviour of mankind who shed his blood in order to cleanse the sins of all humanity for all times, had to be at the cost of the most tender and most innocent of all human blood.\textsuperscript{24}

The novelette \textit{What News Pilate?} is told from the viewpoint of Pilate as well as his scrivener, Ruth. While Pilate feels that Christ brought his crucifixion upon himself despite Pilate's attempts to save him, Ruth wonders why Christ never gave importance to his female followers, and through her, Zachariah seems to be criticizing the patriarchy-centred Church:

Though in interviews and conversation, the author denies that he was consciously presenting a feminist point of view, Zachariah's women characters negate this by questioning the prejudiced nature of the man they admire and respect the most.\textsuperscript{25}

In the novelette, Christ is an object of sexual attraction:

In a de-mystified portrayal of Christ, it is the depiction of Christ's sexuality that worries the Church, because although the Church does talk about the humanness of Christ, he is more God and less man in the picture painted by the Church, taught by it, and learnt and absorbed by the
followers. So the depictions of his inclinations towards women would infuriate the Christian religious leaders as well as other ordinary believers. Zachariah only talks about a woman being sexually attracted towards Christ. Although he says that 'I am not sure whether Christ was sexually attracted towards women,' in the novel he does not mention anything about Christ reciprocating these feelings. In fact, Christ's biased nature towards his disciples, privileging them over his women followers may be read as his deliberate attempt to stay away from the coils of female sexuality.

Zachariah's works did not generate much controversy as Antony's did. Though his Christ is also human and not divine, the sexuality of Christ is not given much importance, at least not explicitly. The concept of resurrection is also trivialized here. The chapter concludes by assuming:

Perhaps in a patriarchal literary microcosm, embedded in a macrocosmic patriarchal society, no one would probably have protested strongly against the patriarchal set up of the Church. Issues such as this are implicitly present within the Church itself. A controversy, as the one witnessed with respect to The Sixth Holy Wound of Christ may have helped in creating a feminist awareness in the Church especially with regard to Christianity. However things are to a certain extent made easier for the Church, by Zachariah himself, who emphasizes only female sexuality in his work, while conveniently avoiding the aspect of Christ's sexuality, an issue which would have perhaps initiated serious repercussions.

The Conclusion looks at why believers find it difficult to accept Christ when he is presented in literary works as embodying purely human characteristics and not divinity. In all the works chosen for study in the M.Phil dissertation, the Son of God figure of Christ that is found in the Bible is negated by highlighting essentially human traits like sexuality, temptations, doubt, rebellion, fear, etc. The divinity of Christ is decentralized by exclusively streamlining Christ's human persona. All this is completely antithetical to the Christ found in the Bible, whom believers view as God. It is
inconceivable for a believer to think of Christ as being sexually inclined towards women. This may be because sexuality and other aspects associated with it have always been viewed in Christianity as sin.

But the question that arises is, "Should works of art that concentrate on the presentation of an unbiblical Christ be banned?"

The dissertation concludes by stating that if the intentions of those who favour banning works of art are to prevent such works from affecting the faith of believers, then their attempts are really ludicrous, as there is no point in trying to protect the mild, namesake faith of someone who maybe easily influenced by differing portrayals of Christ.

Freedom of expression is important because only then will we have differing points of view. And even if one does not encourage or approve views that may be blasphemous to oneself, it is important to see that one does not silence views that do not conform to one's own beliefs and ways of thinking. At the same time it is important to add here that freedom of expression should not be invoked solely to endorse and promote one's own personal ideologies and creeds without having a foresight of the implications of this freedom. But then can we really dictate terms to a writer with regard to what s/he should or should not write? Do writers have a responsibility to the world at large? Is it really possible to have a co-existence as far as freedom of expression and communitarian sentiments are concerned? Or are we being too idealistic by demanding such a co-existence? My M.Phil dissertation raises these questions.
The PhD thesis is an attempt to look at some such questions as also examine the cultural backgrounds of similar works produced in twentieth century Europe and America, where Christ figures as a central character. The Christ character in the works taken for study here are examined by looking at how unbiblical these are with respect to the story of Christ as depicted in the Bible. An attempt is also made to examine how these nonconformist portrayals of Christ from various literatures were received in their respective cultures. Did unbiblical characterizations of Christ create controversies in communities that are predominantly Christian? Were there attempts to stifle voices that dared to differ from the recognized Gospel version of Christ? What were the creators of these non-conventional representations of Christ aiming at through such portrayals? Were they like Kazantzakis, trying to create a Christ whom they could identify with? Or were they like Zachariah trying to come to terms with Christ so as to explore their own identities?

The thesis tries to focus on these questions by highlighting the differences between the biblical Christ and the unbiblical portrayals of Christ in literature/art vis-a-vis three novels—Jose Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* from Portuguese literature, Robert Graves' *King Jesus* from Irish literature, Gore Vidal's *Live From Golgotha* from American literature, a short story—*The Man Who Died* by D.H.Lawrence from English literature, and two movies—*Jesus Christ, Superstar* and *The Last Temptation of Christ* from Hollywood. The initial three chapters explore the differences between the Christ in the Bible and the ones in fictional representations through a thematic study based on the birth and early life of Christ, his sexuality and
finally his crucifixion and martyrdom. All the works used in this thesis give maximum importance to the humanity of Christ, not his divinity. The first chapter 'A New Beginning' looks at the different notions of Christ's nativity and early life as found in two of the works taken for study that focus on this theme. The use of new historical tenets and the cultural backgrounds of the two texts that come under scrutiny in this chapter so as to understand these as products shaped by their respective cultural milieus, are also discussed here. The second chapter titled 'Sexuality' goes into the life of Christ as described in these works, focusing mainly on the one major issue that often becomes the seed of controversy as far as portrayals of Christ in art are concerned. This chapter scans sexuality in general terms and briefly probes the social evolution of this concept. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* is used in this regard as the basic text for secondary reference. The chapter also examines how the notion of sexuality is viewed by the Church and the concept of celibacy here comes to the forefront. The cultural backgrounds of some of the other texts are also discussed in this chapter, while that of the remaining lexis are discussed in subsequent chapters. The third chapter 'Martyrdom' considers how Christ attains martyrdom according to the different versions of the authors taken for study. This is one theme that is uniformly found in all the works taken for study in this thesis. The idea of martyrdom as understood and discussed in Christianity is also given thought to. The fourth chapter titled 'Reception' analyses the controversies generated by fictional representations of Christ, by using three of the works used in this thesis as case studies. The chapter reviews how these works were received within their various socio-cultural complexities, the general response to these texts and the authors' reactions to the controversies their works gave rise to. The 'Conclusion' summarizes the findings of the
previous chapters and attempts to examine and understand the reason/s behind various authors’ efforts to create a Christ who is more human than divine, so much so that the fictional Christ-characters studied here are a complete anti-thesis of the biblical Christ. Concepts like blasphemy and heresy are also discussed in this light.
NOTES

1 Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, New York, Touchstone, 1960. All textual quotations from this novel will begin with the abbreviations 'KZ'.


8 Ibid. 23-24.

9 Ibid. 44.


14 Based on Court documents. 1988(1) K.L.T. 54. T.Parameshwaran versus District Collector, Ernakulam and others, p.56.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid. 66-67.

17 Ibid. 70.

19 Ibid.


23 Translated from Paul Zachariah's *Enthundu Vishesham Peelathose?*, Kottayam, D.C. Books, 1996.


25 Ibid. 90.

26 Ibid. 95.

27 Ibid. 101


All textual quotations from this novel will begin with the abbreviations 'GJC'.


All textual quotations from this novel will begin with the abbreviations 'KJ'.


All textual quotations from this novel will begin with the abbreviations 'LFG'.


All textual quotations from this novel will begin with the abbreviations 'MD'.
