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Defenders of the Faith

The Greek Orthodox Church is incensed
by a novel that touches on the sexuality of
Jesus Christ

BY ANTHEE CARASSAVA/ATHENS

At first, they called him anti-Christ. Then they pelted him with eggs. And then they set his book ablaze. Mimis Androulakis, say hardline defenders of Greece's Christian Orthodox faith, is a blasphemer. The blasphemy in this case is M to the Power of N, Androulakis' new novel featuring a philandering Jesus who is sexually attracted to his mother and frolics with Mary Magdalene. The controversial passage about Christ is just two pages long in this book that examines misogyny and its influence on key writers, scientists and historical figures. But religious and secular authorities attacked the novel and its author, a 48-year-old ex-communist radio talk-show host. In northern Greece a district court ordered a two-month halt on the book's distribution. Greece's Holy Synod denounced M to the Power of N as "the most vile, filthy, unscientific attack against the Son of God in the 2,000 years of Christianity."

The publicity quickly drove Androulakis' novel, which was released in November 1999, to the top of the country's best-seller list while the denunciations transformed the author into a martyr of free speech. "Pathetic," sighs Patroclos Stavrou, the adopted son of Nikos Kazantzakis, the Greek author of The Last Temptation, who in the 1950s was persecuted for his equally controversial portrayal of Christ. "The church should have resisted the temptation [to condemn Androulakis]."

When The Last Temptation of Christ, Martin Scorsese's film of the Kazantzakis book, was released in Greece in 1988 thousands of religious

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zealots ransacked six cinemas in Athens, torching movie projectors and rolls of Scorsese's movie. Some Christians hint at similar action should an Athens court this month fail to punish Androulakis and ban his book. "God only knows what they will do," frets Constantinos Dernitsiotis, the prosecutor who led the 1988 legal crusade to ban Scorsese's film--and lost.

Like *The Last Temptation*, Androulakis' book takes a decidedly unorthodox approach to the character of Christ. The book takes the form of a series of late-night Internet chats between Androulakis and a string of women whose names begin with M. Androulakis and his correspondents discuss various male historical figures and their attitudes toward women. Taking part in the discussion is a theologian called Magdalene who answers questions by women curious about Jesus' manly qualities. In the passage that vexes critics most, a woman named Mollie asks: "Tell me, when your sister Martha was cooking fish in the kitchen and you knelt before him, did you just wipe his feet with your long hair and balm them with oil, or did you also put your head between his legs?" Magdalene replies, "Take it as you wish." To which Mollie says, "He was cute, and young, just right for a ripe whore. They say you locked him in for a week, taking him day and night, his delicate hands trembling, he was breathing deeply, falling asleep upon you. Is that how it happened? Talk! Did you feel him harden under your toga? Was he a real man?"

Under Greek law, blasphemy is punishable by up to two years' imprisonment and defaming religious leaders is a breach of the nation's constitution. Androulakis' critics, who include Yiorgos Markoulatos and Andreas Lyras, directors of the Greek Movement of Salvation (ELKIS), a popular group of religious zealots and ultra-nationalists who oppose Greece's drive to modernity, are attempting to prosecute him on both grounds. The key, say ELKIS lawyers, will be convincing the court of Androulakis' malice against Jesus Christ.

The Roman Catholic Church, which indexed *The Last Temptation* among its forbidden books in 1954, billed Androulakis' tale a "blasphemy." And many readers found it crass and crude. "My stomach ached for four days," says Marios Pyladakis, a professor of Byzantine studies who lodged a slander suit against Androulakis in January after reading *M to the Power of N*.

But the author, who calls himself a "God-fearing atheist," insists that his work is an attempt to portray Christ in a positive light. "I simply wanted to show Jesus as an exception to 2,000 years of misogynous

that touches on the sexuality of Jesus Christ



practices, preachings and writings."

With elections due in April, the book has rekindled debate over the need to finally separate church and state in Greece. The controversy comes at a time when the Orthodox Church's powerful Archbishop, Christodoulos, is increasingly accused of meddling in political affairs. Last month, in a sermon attended by the Greek President and the country's political leaders, Christodoulos targeted Androulakis, demanding "resistance to iconoclasts and the sons of darkness who defile, threaten and terrorize the faithful." Days later, Christodoulos released a reprint of his popular book, *Against the Devil*. Fortunately, free speech allowed for its publication. **END**

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