

The Last Temptation of the Book Censors

This is a book of defamation, of depravity, written by an atheistic, degenerate mind—and yet it is honored with a place in Public Libraries.

--Jack Childres, San Diego Patriotic Society, January 1963.

Public libraries often confront efforts to censor their collections. In 1963, San Diego was among scores of libraries caught up in a bitter, nationwide campaign to remove the controversial novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* from library shelves.

The critically-lauded book by Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis was published in 1951 but an English translation would not appear in America until 1960, three years after the author's death. Overshadowed, perhaps, by Kazantzakis' better known *Zorba the Greek*, the *Last Temptation* received little attention in America until 1962, when patriotic and religious groups began calling the book "blasphemous" for its fictional portrayal of Jesus Christ.

In San Diego, insurance agent Jack Childres led a drive to ban the book from local libraries. Childres was chairman of the recently formed San Diego Patriotic Society, which claimed a membership of more than 1,000 San Diegans. "The purpose of our society is to print the truth," Childres explained. "We believe this book is part of a Communist conspiracy to destroy the morals of our youth and undermine Christianity."

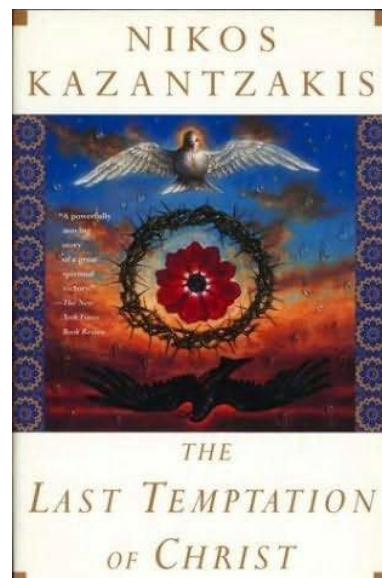
Of concern to Childres and other detractors of the novel were passages that they believed depicted Jesus as mortal and subject to temptations and desires of a "common man." They insisted that the book be removed from taxpayer supported libraries.

City Librarian Clara Breed countered that her staff selected books based on their positive values and that library collections should reflect all sides of controversial issues. The author Kazantzakis, she pointed out, had an outstanding international reputation and his book had been well-reviewed.

"We take no sides on matters concerning politics or religion," said Miss Breed, adding "there is no record of any book ever being withdrawn from this library under pressure from any group."

In January 1963, the Patriotic Society mimeographed 10,000 leaflets which detailed their concerns and "urged San Diegans to work to stamp out this book." Copies were sent to citizens, churches, librarians, and city and county officials.

The leaflet stirred a flurry of letter writing from a troubled public. A retired attorney, Ralph Allen, demanded the removal of the book from libraries and urged that Clara Breed be fired or at least "dealt with severely." "The purpose of the Public Library is to elevate people. If a few



communists and a few atheists want that book, let them buy it, but let's not make it available with tax money."

A Methodist minister also expressed alarm that the book was available in libraries. Writing to the County Board of Supervisors, Rev. Orval Butcher of the Skyline Wesleyan Church in Lemon Grove asked "that responsible authorities remove the book from public circulation on the basis that it defames the holy character of the divine son of God."

The Catholic Diocese of San Diego reacted more pragmatically. Officially, the novel was included in church's "List of Prohibited Books" for its "salacious" characterization of the life of Christ. But the Diocese declined to join the public protest, noting "as soon as a book is publicly condemned thousands want to buy it."

As letters and phone calls flooded San Diego's City Council, city manager Tom Fletcher asked the three-member Library Commission to consider the matter.

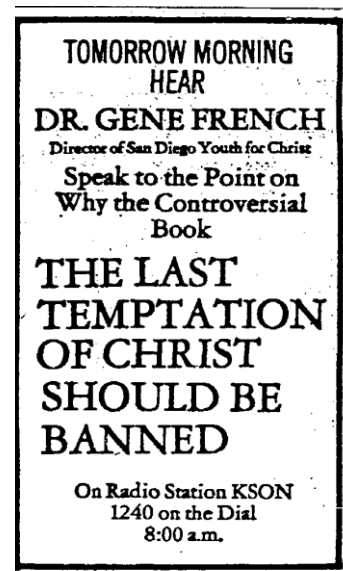
On February 15, the Commission held a public hearing in the auditorium of the Central Library on E Street. Clara Breed recalled:

Everyone was given an opportunity to speak. The censors were all there and included not only members of the John Birch Society but good citizens who thought they were defending morality, the church and the American way of life. Not one had read the book.

Local printer John Kellis spoke up to say that Kazantzakis had been excommunicated by the Greek Orthodox Church for his pro-Communist writings. Not knowing that Kazantzakis had died in 1957, Kellis added, "I don't have any information that he is but I suspect the author is a member of the Communist party."

Other speakers at the hearing believed the book had nothing to do with religious heresy or Communism. "It exalts Christ," said Sylvia Warren, the wife of a local college professor. "It shows great spiritual people have the normal temptations of human beings, and that Christ was able to conquer them."

Alvin J. Abrams, of the San Diego chapter of the ACLU, urged the Commission to uphold "American guarantees of freedom of speech, press, and especially freedom of religion," and not be party to "an obnoxious form of censorship."



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After listening to all the statements, Library Commissioner Beatrice Brenneman made a motion:

That the Library Commission reaffirms our existing book selection policy and that we stand firmly beside our wise Librarian in opposition to censorship and recommend retention of the book under discussion on the library shelves.

Seconding the motion was Commissioner Thomas O. Scripps, who added, "Give light and the people will find their own way."

City Manager Tom Fletcher supported the Commission's decision and the controversy soon died. Ironically, as the result of the attempt to ban the novel, library circulation of *The Last Temptation* soared. "If you really want to suppress a book," observed Laurence Klauber, president of the Library Commission, "don't mention it at all. If you want to increase its popularity, ask that it be removed from library shelves."



Laurence M. Klauber, chairman of the City Library Commission, and Clara Breed, City Librarian, February 1963.
San Diego Public Library

From Richard W. Crawford, *San Diego Yesterday* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013).