

Endo's Ethics: Stuck in the Middle with Who?

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Abstract

As Pacific Rim literature becomes a larger part of the curriculum in institutions of higher education, teachers are searching for toeholds into what may well be strange and even off-putting aesthetic devices employed in non-Western cultures. Writers like Shusaku Endo, with one foot in the Western world and one foot in the East, may serve as a bridge for us and our students. Situated against the seemingly odd aesthetic choices he makes in his *Life of Christ*, this exploration of Endo's moral manifestations in his popular novel *Silence* will show him to be an excellent introduction to the study of contemporary Japanese literature in translation. The ethical complications Endo explores are both frightening and familiar for Western readers, and his take on Christianity as it is currently practiced in Japan may be enlightening for us all.

Article

Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo's death in 1996 brought to an end a long career of writing that toyed with paradoxes, that put opposing forces in juxtaposition with one another and that sought reconciliation. One of his most persistent themes, popularized by authors such as Rushdie and Ishiguro, was to address the cultural clash between East and West. A stranger in his own land, a Roman Catholic writer in a country historically hostile to Christianity, Endo was compared throughout his career to writers like Georges Bernanos, Flannery O'Connor, and Graham Greene. His concern with the clash of cultures was the product and manifestation of an alien religion forced upon him in his youth: "I became a Catholic against my will" (Ribiero 88). He

sought to reconcile this Western faith with the legacy of the East, and in doing so saw both East and West bend and sometimes break.

All of Endo's work can be seen as an insertion point for Westerners, a way in to the metatext of Pacific Rim literature. Glimpses of this are possible in such seemingly "Western" works as Endo's *A Life of Jesus*. This historical fiction, placing itself smack in the middle of that most Western of traditions created by the synoptic gospels and upheld by the likes of á Kempis, Mauriac, and others, uses the discourse of East and West to explore something more personal, the moral choices and ethical stance of one ultimately alien human. Endo claims at the outset of the book that Japanese religious thought "has little tolerance for any kind of transcendent being who judges humans harshly then punishes them" (1). This certainly does not coincide with the Western god brought to Japan by the Portuguese missionaries. Indeed, Endo goes so far as to downplay, or even deny, one of the most crucial components of Christology. Instead of the insertion of the resurrection trope, certainly something we expect in this life, Endo completes his work with the recognition that the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus is not a concern for the Eastern Christian. In fact, he implies, it is a stumbling block to the study of the life of an ethical man. For him, then, Jesus does not rise from the dead. The example of Christ's life is enough. In short, he finds common ground with exemplars of the Western Historical Jesus movement, such as Duke University's Jesus Seminar. Nevertheless, the novelist's faith in Christ remains firm, unimpeded, as it were, by such inconveniences as this central tenet of Western Christian faith. In this example, Endo creates a flash point, as his work mediates between the realities of faith in East and West.

The same holds true for all of Endo's work; he is interested in the interstices of religious and cultural contradiction. A redeemer who does not rise, an all-powerful god who is weak, an Easterner in the West, as in his piece *The Samurai*, or a Westerner in the East, as in his last novel,

Deep River, or his most famous work, *Silence* - all of these are the Hegelian thesis / antithesis pairs from which he seeks to create a synthesis. It is this 1969 novel, *Silence*, treating the first insertions of West into East, the period in which Portuguese Jesuit missionaries attempted to bring Christianity to Japan, that will serve us here as an exercise in paradoxical moral choices, a window from East to West and West to East.

The title, "Silence," is meaningful on many different levels. It is at once the silence of the East when faced with the onslaught of the West, the silence of the West as it fails to fathom the East, the silence of the Samurai who seek to rid their island of Christianity, the silence of the missionaries as they hide from persecution and martyrdom, and, above all, the silence of the Western god in the face of the suffering of the innocent. This silence is broken only by the consequences of moral action: the suffering of the tortured, the screams of the dying, the casuistry of those who recant their faith, and, above all, the cry of the peasant Christians, as they ask, "Why?"

The plot of the novel is not substantial; Endo is worried less about external complications, than about inner realities. The Portuguese Jesuits Rodrigues and Garrpe are missioned to Japan to conduct a secret apostolate to bring Christianity to the Japanese. This mission had been successful in the past, but the warlords now seek to stamp out Christianity on the island, and are rounding up, torturing, and killing any Christian they can find. Tales have reached the two that one of their most admired seminary professors, Ferreira, a spiritual and intellectual giant, has apostatized. This fires the men with even more zeal, to either prove or disprove this rumor.

What the Jesuits see in Japan is a hard life for the peasants, both Christians and non-Christians alike. The governmental opposition to Christianity is complete: each year, every citizen is called forth, and in the sight of his or her neighbors, asked to aver that he or she is not a

Christian. This is done through the ritual of trampling on an icon, or *fumie*. Into this climate comes Rodrigues, who is quickly separated from Garrpe through the machinations of Kichijiro, a Christian who has apostatized and now attempts to be close to the missionaries. In short order, Garrpe and Rodrigues are captured. Garrpe dies trying to save a group of Christians from torture. Rodrigues' fate is the subject of the rest of the book.

He is asked to recant his faith, to trample on the *fumie*. When he does not yield to deprivation and imprisonment, the chief magistrate presents him with a moral dilemma: do not trample in order to save yourself, but trample in order to save the lives of those Christians who will be found out and eventually tortured and killed. To persuade him further, his old seminary teacher is brought to him, who has himself trampled on the *fumie*. The teacher is now, at the behest of the government, performing scholarly duties, translating Western texts, and writing an anti-Christian apologetic. He has taken a Japanese name and a Japanese wife, and has given up all hope for Christianity flourishing in such a country. He protests that he is still, in some diminished capacity, useful to those whom he originally came to serve. He tells Rodrigues, "For love Christ would have apostatized. Even if it meant giving up everything he had" (*Silence* 269).

Rodrigues eventually apostatizes, and the denouement of the book details his life as a *gaigin* in Japan, a learned outsider, a minor governmental functionary. He too takes a Japanese name and a Japanese wife, and lives out his remaining years in relative obscurity.

On a theological level, the climax of the work, the apostasy of Rodrigues, creates an interesting dilemma. It is only when he is faced with publicly recanting his faith in order to save others that God, who has been silent for so long, speaks. The face of Christ on the *fumie* speaks to him, and tells him to give up his faith: "Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be

trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross" (*Silence* 271).

It is not, however, the theological questions Endo raises that interest us here. Rather, the moral dilemmas that Endo places before Rodrigues, and the ethical questions he raises, are the essential points of insertion for the Western reader. Endo asks that we bracket the question of the propriety of missionary work, or, as Endo puts it, how to cultivate the seed of Christianity in the swamp of Japan. Instead, Rodrigues' options, strictly and narrowly delineated, are the meat of the novel.

The first dilemma Rodrigues faces is what to do with Kichijiro. Here is a fallen Christian, one who has apostatized, one who has gone so far as to give over the missionaries to the authorities. His function as a Judas-figure is obvious, but there is much more than pure betrayal at work here. At times Kichijiro seems to want to repent, to be freed from his sins and weakness. So he constantly tags along behind Rodrigues, going so far as to follow him into prison, begging for forgiveness, claiming that he is as God made him, weak, and asking for the sacrament of confession. Kichijiro moves always on the fringes, like a jackal stalking its prey, but Endo creates a complication that adds an acerbic twist to this character. He is aware of his own weakness and need for mercy, and yet he is as he was created to be. Should not the god who created him thus then give him the strength to either persevere in his faith or break away from it altogether? Conflicting desires create a creature who is, like the rest of us, human in his frailty and weak in his vice. He is, if I may, the Gollum to Rodrigues' Frodo, the dark other, not quite *doppelgänger*, but a shadow fixture, a view of life the way it might be with us all.

Rodrigues' resolution is as human as Kichijiro. He gets angry at times, but cannot deny the man the sacraments. He acts as a priest should, one who works merely as a channel of grace. It is not for the priest to determine the efficacy of the sacrament or the sincerity of the one who requests it. He may only provide the opportunity for the

manifestation of this outward sign instituted to give grace. In the end, Rodrigues sees the parallels between his life and the life of Kichijiro. They are both weak. As Peter Alig has it, “Through the course of Rodrigues’ arrival in Japan, eventual apostasy, and loss of identity, he comes to identify an equality between himself and Kichijiro, an equality based on the need for love in the midst of failure” (2).

The climactic moral question Rodrigues faces is to apostatize or hold on to his faith. But this question, like that of Kichijiro, is not as simple as it appears on the surface. If Rodrigues apostatizes, he is told, he will spare other Christians from torture. He has been sent to Japan as a shepherd to these peasants. He is given the opportunity to look after them by denying his faith. But is this really in their best interest? Is it in his best interest? In the selfish calculus that is historical Christian Thomistic doctrine, one must be concerned first and foremost with the salvation of one’s own soul. Does Rodrigues publicly renounce his faith, putting his soul in jeopardy, in order to spare others from torture and death? Or does he turn his back on those whom he has been sent to minister to? This dilemma cannot be unpacked easily. Can Rodrigues publicly split from the visible church? What deleterious effect will this have on the Christians he has come to nurture? Which is worth more in this triangle, his own public commitment, the lives of these particular Christians, or the existence of bands of Christians throughout the island? But that is not where Endo leaves Rodrigues. He throws another weight on the scales: these “Christians” before him are actually peasants who have already renounced their faith, and they are suffering torture anyway. Does that change the equation at all?

This thorny problem offers, ultimately, no easy way out. Rodrigues must do one or the other, abnegate his responsibility or abnegate his pride. Endo argues in other works, especially in his last novel, *Deep River*, that the recognition of weakness, and the concomitant denial of one’s own place in the world, is a necessary step toward wholeness. Ferreira,

Rodrigues' old seminary teacher, hints at this conclusion: "you make yourself more important than them. You are preoccupied with your own salvation. If you say that you will apostatize, those people will be taken out of the pit. They will be saved from suffering. And you refuse to do so. It's because you dread to betray the Church. You dread to be the dregs of the Church, like me" (*Silence* 268).

Sitting behind this pressing moral issue is something less spectacular, but far more grave. Rodrigues may, in the words of James E. Barcus, "be at best loving an illusion or at worst deceiving himself. . . . Trampling the face of Christ, rather than being an act of apostasy, confirms Ferreira's position that Western Christianity has no future in Japan and that the Christianity the [*fumie*] represents is merely another pagan religion" (138). Endo here removes the brackets and calls into question the project of missionary work in general. Ferreira argues with Rodrigues that "Xavier's early success, the singular motivation for later generations of Jesuits, was illusory" (Alig 7). And indeed, in the *Jesuit Relations*, reports which the Jesuit missionaries sent to Rome, and in the letters of the first missionary to Japan, Francis Xavier, are accounts which emphasize the number of people baptized, not to the strength of faith of the individuals involved.

Rodrigues wonders this himself, as earlier in the novel he notes in a letter, "Some Japanese, hearing [Xavier's] sermons, thought that our God was the sun which the people of this country have revered for many generations" (*Silence* 120). Is the imposition of a religion upon those not brought up in it a moral act? Even if it is done with the best of intentions, is intentionality the measure of the goodness of this act? Can we draw a direct connection between Xavier's forced baptisms of thousands of souls and the suffering and death of these peasants? If so, is the exchange worth it?

Endo's agenda, in the moral sphere, is to make the reader question his or her own deepest responses. Upon reflection, nothing is as it

originally seems. Apparent goods may be discovered to be flawed. Apparent evils may be ultimate goods. Endo's view, that all moral decisions are subject to greater and greater scrutiny as more information is gathered, is certainly foreign to most Westerners. At the very least, it stands against the Christian moral calculus and its primary concern with the salvation of one's own soul. Endo is able to reduce this casuistry to its barest elements; ultimately he reveals it to be lacking in humanity.

Like David Hume, the Scottish empiricist, Endo insists that moral decisions are based on fellow-feeling and the strength of emotional ties, not on any objective code of ethics that exists somewhere outside the self. It is Rodrigues' concern, finally, for the peasants he has come to minister to that gives him the strength to trample on the *fumie*. Ferreira's arguments and historical speculations may have helped him along, but in the end it is fellow-feeling that frees him. In apostatizing, he turns the Christian calculus on its head, and is, wondrously, rewarded with the recognition that this Christian god has finally broken his silence. His action is affirmed on the personal level, even as he forever severs himself from the Christian life on the communal level. And it is with this action, and the long tail of a life of relative obscurity that it occasions, that Endo leaves us his final paradoxical, tail-chasing question: which comes first, the individual or the community? He chooses to end the suffering of three particular peasants, but his action has personal and communal ramifications. In opting for one community, the peasants being tortured, Rodrigues harms another, the other Christians on the island, and perhaps, as his opponents hope, the church throughout the world.

Endo advocates a smaller, less global ethical stance. Rodrigues finally is able to shut out the demands of the church militant to focus on these specific individuals, and on his own life. He moves outside of himself, at the risk of damning his own soul. But he does not move as far as is possible; he does not do what would be best for the largest number

of people, only what would best for those with whom he has a personal relationship.

The novel's meliorist position, where the agent is forced to move outside him or herself, but is not to be concerned with what is beyond one's sphere of influence, is, I believe, where Endo ultimately ends. Whether or not this ethic is compatible with Western Christianity is not really the author's concern, although he seems to say that it is. Whether or not this is acceptable to the Eastern religious traditions seems equally tangential to his point, although the Japanese do, in the end, achieve their goal of forcing the missionary to deny his faith. Nobody, and certainly no ethical tradition, ends up completely satisfied. The triumphalists of both East and West will not condone Rodrigues' moral self-abnegation, and will see his triumph as failure. We close then, in the middle, somewhere between the individual and the world, somewhere between Christianity, Shintoism, and Buddhism, somewhere between East and West, standing on the face of Christ.

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