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THE GOD OF SILENCE

Shusaku Endo's reading of the Passion

William T. Cavanaugh

A tree which flourishes in one kind of soil may wither if the soil is changed. As for the tree of Christianity, in a foreign country its leaves may grow thick and the buds may be rich, while in Japan the leaves wither and no bud appears. Father, have you never thought of the difference in the soil, the difference in the water?

Shusaku Endo's *Silence*

The difference in the soil, the difference in the water, are what haunt the life and writings of Shusaku Endo, the great Japanese novelist who died in 1996. Endo was seared by the terrible homelessness of being a Christian in Japan, and most commentary on his work focuses on the awkward encounter of Christianity and Japanese culture. However, Endo is misunderstood if this struggle is limited to a Japanese context. What Endo was *really* after, I think, was nothing less than a glimpse of a homeless God.

Endo's work can be read as a profound exploration of the twisted logic of the Incarnation—the journey of God from heaven to be emptied into earthly flesh and the assumption of weakness by omnipotence. Endo's personal struggle as a Christian in Japan was the setting for his investigation of the paradox central to the lives of all Christians: the paradox of a crucified God. Thus Endo weaves together the spiritual anguish of his characters with an embattled and paradoxically orthodox theology. Here I want to examine Endo's theological search in his novel *Silence* and invite other Christian voices—including that of John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis splendor*—into the novel's strange moral universe.

Lean and spare, the prose of *Silence* captures the most harrowing anguish with a stark restraint. Suffering, sacrifice, and God's own silence lie at the heart of the novel. A deep moral ambiguity suffuses the story and opens a wound that endures long after the reader puts the book down. Moreover, I think Endo would argue that this wound is not one created by the writer, but belongs to the one who returned to his disciples after the Resurrection, asking his disciples to probe his unhealed wounds. It is this God who refuses to close the wound. He has chosen not to eliminate suffering, but to suffer with humanity. It is this Jesus who haunts Father Sebastian Rodrigues, the main character of *Silence*.

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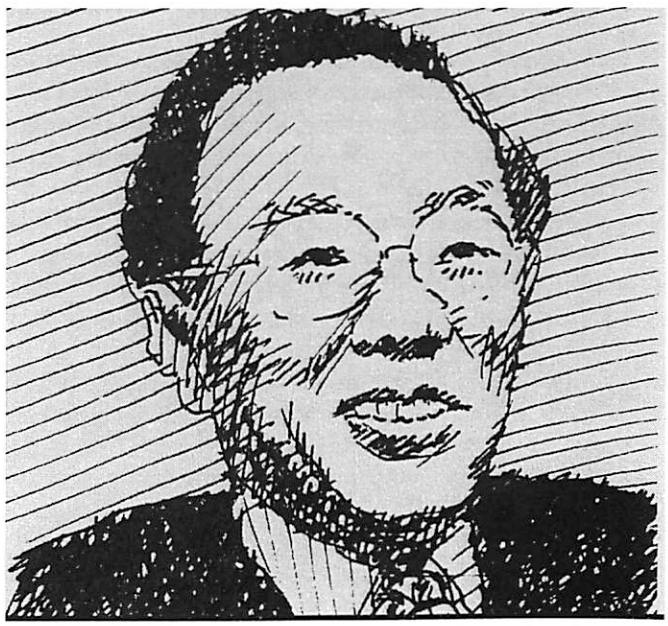
Rodrigues is a Portuguese Jesuit. He risks his life by going to Japan at a time when the small Japanese Christian minority is being fiercely persecuted. Rodrigues is motivated by a missionary concern for peasant Christians who have persevered in their faith in a clandestine church without priests. But he has a more personal motivation as well. His Jesuit mentor, the great provincial Cristovao Ferreira, the man who imbued Rodrigues with a fiery passion to spread the gospel in the face of every danger, has apostatized under torture. Rodrigues goes to Japan to face probable martyrdom, in part to discover the truth about Ferreira, and in part to offer himself as atonement for the unspeakable affront of apostasy.

Ferreira's apostasy is a historical fact. Francis Xavier had brought Christianity to Japan in 1549. In a mere thirty years a community of 150,000 Christians was flourishing. However, the unification of Japan under a central governing power in the late sixteenth century was accompanied by an increasing suspicion toward foreigners. Persecution erupted periodically, culminating in an edict of expulsion for all foreign missionaries in 1614. In the following years priests and ordinary Christians were ruthlessly suppressed. At first, Christians were publicly executed, but the blood of such martyrs, to paraphrase Tertullian, proved to be the seed of the church's persistence. At its height, the Japanese Christian community numbered 300,000. Eventually, however, the magistrates



hit upon a sinister torture designed to change the public spectacle from one of a heroic acceptance of death to an ignominious public renunciation of faith. The torture, called the *ana-tsurushi*, consisted of hanging the victim upside down in a pit. A small incision made on the victim's forehead allowed blood to drain, thus intensifying the agony. Still, no missionary apostatized until 1632. But when Cristovao Ferreira, leader of the mission in Japan, did so under torture, the blow to the remaining Christians was devastating.

In *Silence*, Endo's fictional Ferreira serves as a goad to Rodrigues's pride. It is Rodrigues's pride, hidden behind his self-abnegating journey toward martyrdom, that sets up the climactic scene in the novel. As he sets his face toward Japan, Rodrigues writes in dread-filled yet fascinated tones of the perils that await him. Rodrigues is haunted, and feels himself pulled toward Japan, by a vivid vision of the face of Christ. Endo compels us to admire the Jesuit's willingness to face up to any torture for the sake of the gospel, and we have no doubt that he has the strength to die for Christ. But the novelist subtly lets Rodrigues overplay his courage until it touches on pride. In the end, the Jesuit risks violating the church's stern admonition that a Catholic must never seek martyrdom.

The antithesis of Rodrigues is Kichijiro, the Japanese who serves as his guide. Kichijiro is a cringing, lying, cowardly drunkard, a thoroughly untrustworthy character who sports the expression of a beaten dog, yet with a hint of cunning. Though Kichijiro denies being a Christian, gradually we learn his secret: he, too, is an apostate. His entire family had been brought before the magistrates and given the customary chance to apostatize by treading on an image of Christ's face called a *fumie*. Kichijiro was the only one to submit. He later watched his brothers and sisters being burned at the stake. Rodrigues regards him with a mixture of annoyance, contempt, and pity.

What is remarkable about the novel is the way in which, as Rodrigues and Kichijiro move through the countryside eluding capture, Endo begins to blur the sharp moral line which separates them. Rodrigues's presence, much like that of Graham Greene's whisky priest, brings terrible suffering and death to the faithful who harbor him. As Kichijiro, Rodrigues, and the reader look to God for some relief from the unrelenting suffering, Endo allows the Jesuit to articulate the theological problem which gives the novel its name. Rodrigues writes:

> Everything our Lord does is for our good. And yet, even as I write these words I feel the oppressive weight in my heart of the last stammering words of Kichijiro on the morning of his departure: "Why has Deus Sama imposed this suffering on us?"... I suppose I should simply cast from my mind these meaningless words of the coward; yet why does his plaintive voice pierce my breast with all the pain of a sharp needle? Why has our Lord imposed this torture and this persecution on poor Japanese peasants? No, Kichijiro was trying to express something different, something even more sickening. The silence of God.

Rodrigues watches as two Christian peasants are tied to stakes and left for the ocean's waves to bring a slow, merciless death. The martyrdom he has read about in his native Portugal is a glorious thing, a triumphant ascension to paradise accompanied by the sound of angels blowing their trumpets. But the martyrdom he witnesses in Japan is a miserable and squalid affair. And while the voices of the peasants cry out in anguish, "God remains with folded arms, silent."

Rodrigues's growing doubts stand against the backdrop of the enduring faith of the peasants. However, rather than soothe his doubts, Rodrigues finds the simple faith of the peasants a further irritant. The more the peasants suffer for their faith, the more Rodrigues seems to recoil from the whole missionary enterprise. Against his will, he begins to struggle with the idea that faith is a mere escape from reality; worse, he is haunted by the dim awareness that the suffering of the peasants is increased because of his own presence. And much worse still, their faith now appears as a cruel burden laid on them by a God who refuses to speak.

More than half of *Silence* takes place in prison. Rodrigues is betrayed by Kichijiro for a few silver pieces, but then Kichijiro visits him in jail and confesses his weakness and apostasy. If only he had died before the persecution began, Kichijiro whimpers, he would have gone to heaven as a good Christian. Why has God made him weak, then set him in such an awful time of persecution? Rodrigues finds it im-

possible even to identify the strength and beauty of evil in the filthy and foul-smelling Kichijiro. Suppressing disgust, he gives Kichijiro absolution, then hurriedly retreats to his bed. There he recalls how Christ sought out even the most unattractive and despised of people, those whom no one else could love. Rodrigues again sees the face of Christ, and he is filled with shame.

At this point in the novel, the Christian reader is still in a recognizable moral universe. Ah yes, we think, this is the paradox of the cross. The Christian imperative is to love even that which is poor and despised in the world's eyes. But in the agonizing dilemma which sets up the climax of the novel, Endo turns even this paradox inside out. The dilemma is remarkably simple. Ferreira appears, in the employ of the Japanese magistrates, and reveals the reason for his apostasy. Christian peasants had been hung in the pit, and Ferreira was told that they would not be released until he denied his faith. The same choice now faces Rodrigues. Three peasants hang in the pit moaning piteously. Unless Rodrigues tramples on the *fumie*, on the face of Christ that he has loved for so long, the peasants will die a slow and terrible death.

The dilemma itself may be simple, but the questions it raises are not. Can a Christian let others suffer for his beliefs? One thinks of precedents in Christian history. For example, the martyr Perpetua refused to deny Christ, even though her infant son would thereby never know his mother. Endo hints that the peasants in the pit have already apostatized, but will not be saved unless Rodrigues follows suit. The Japanese magistrates believe that the key to choking off the Christian communities is to target the priests. Can the peasants be made to suffer for Rodrigues's faith?

The deeper issue here is suffering for the sake of Christ. Jesus makes clear in the Gospels that his followers must take up their cross. As Jesus says in Luke, "They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name."

Thanks be to God?

As perhaps only a novel can, *Silence* probes the strangeness of the Incarnation and death of Christ, the mystery of a God who does not simply wipe away the world's suffering, but chooses to share in it. This goes to the heart of Rodrigues's questions about God's silence. Why does God not speak in the face of so much human agony? How can God sit and do nothing, arms folded, while innocent and simple people not only die, but die in God's name? Endo drops hints that Rodrigues is tempted to apostatize to save the peasants, precisely because he believes God will not save them; he has lost his faith in God to save.

On the other hand, Endo suggests that Rodrigues does *indeed* hear God break the silence. Rodrigues imagines he hears the voice of Christ speaking from the *fumie*: "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." God *has* spoken to the suffering of the world in giving the Word, Jesus Christ, made incarnate to suffer the pain of humanity. Ferreira puts the argument to Rodrigues: "A priest ought to live in imitation of Christ....Certainly Christ would have apostatized for [these peasants]."

The early Christians regarded murder, adultery, and apostasy as the three most heinous crimes; many commentators considered apostasy to be the "sin against the Holy Spirit" that in Matthew 12:32 Jesus says cannot be forgiven. Could Jesus himself have apostatized, that is, denied himself, as Rodrigues imagines he is told to do?

Equally intriguing is the problem of squaring Rodrigues's apostasy with John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis splendor*. There the pope is at great pains to stem a tide of proportionalist Catholic moral theology that appears to measure the consequences of an act before determining if it is evil. In condemning proportionalism, John Paul puts forth the traditional doctrine of "intrinsic evils." Certain acts, in other words, are evil *"always and per se*...quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances." Presumably apostasy would be an intrinsically evil act. The pope includes an examination of martyrdom in his encyclical, with the implication that it is only because certain moral truths cannot be compromised—regardless of the circumstances—that Christians would be willing to go to their deaths to defend them. Otherwise martyrdom makes no sense.

In effect, *Silence* asks if there is only one kind of martyrdom. Could one sacrifice not only one's body, but one's very moral integrity for the sake of others? The novelist gently inflates Rodrigues's pride precisely to raise this question. The Jesuit seeks physical martyrdom as a prize. He wants to atone for the sin of Ferreira and share in a martyr's glorious triumph over sin and death. But Endo suggests that a deeper martyrdom may await Rodrigues—the death of his very self as a Christian and as a moral person. This suggests that the standard concept of heroic virtue is radically effaced by the logic of God's *kenosis*, by God's self-emptying to take the form of a slave, as Paul puts it in Philippians. In *Silence*, Endo provocatively pushes basic Christian logic, already paradoxical, to a more extreme conclusion. If it is true, as many Christian martyrs have affirmed, that for the Christian, the body is as nothing when compared to the eternity of the soul, then is the crucifixion of the soul a martyrdom which makes other martyrdoms pale in comparison?

Those who look for tidy endings should not read *Silence*. Endo is not interested in deciding if Rodrigues did the right thing. *Silence* is a meditation on the Incarnation, not a manual of morals. Christ comes not to solve the world's problems, but to redeem it. For Endo, the only consolation for the continuing torment of human beings is the strange drama of a homeless God who suffers with us. It is precisely in this apparent silence, in this self-emptying, that salvation unfolds. □