

SHUSAKU ENDO AND THE QUEST FOR AN ASIAN, CONTEMPLATIVE CHRISTIANITY

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When Michael Griffith asked me to speak about Endo, my first reaction was to refuse, because Endo has written prolifically, and I haven't read all his books, so I don't consider myself an authority on him. However, I knew the man quite well, and I translated his book *Silence*, so I thought I would limit myself to talking about two of his books, namely *Silence*, which was one of the first, and *Deep River*, which was the last.

These two books reveal the search that Endo was on. *Silence* argues that Christianity doesn't fit Japan. However, it's necessary in Endo to distinguish between faith and culture. Culturally, Christianity doesn't fit in Japan, but Endo had a deep faith; he was always talking about Jesus Christ. He wrote two lives of Christ. He wrote *Deep River* thirty years later. This was a different Endo and a different Japan. This time Endo speaks less about Japan and more about Asia. He's thinking about an Asian Christianity, and it's much more positive, as though Endo had finally found something. He depicts Otsu, the priest, as really a Christ figure. In fact many of Endo's characters are Christ figures, but the Christ that he focuses on is the suffering servant of Isaiah.

But let me get back to my translation of *Silence*. I don't consider myself a translator, but I had been in Japan for ten or fifteen years, and had reached a level of skill in Japanese that enabled me to more or less talk to people and understand them. But you can get stuck at that level, and I wanted to make progress, so I thought, let's translate a book. I heard that this Catholic writer had written a book and it was about martyrs, so I thought, that's it. I met Endo, and he agreed. But I hadn't read the book, and when I started I found I was in controversy, because many people thought it was anti-Christian. My provincial called for me and said, 'What's all this about?' I told him I had agreed to translate it so I had better. He said, 'Okay, but it's not my responsibility, it's yours.'

Actually, the people who said it was anti-Christian were wrong. *Silence* is a deeply Christian book; this silence of God, this dark night of the soul is found in the mystics. But still, when you look at it superficially it's a book about failure. There's this missionary who comes to Japan to teach Christianity, and it's a hopeless situation. Japan, Endo says, is a swamp that

turns everything into itself, and the idea of being converted to Christianity is a hopeless task. There was a glorious time when there were Christian martyrs in Japan, but Endo says, 'Well, they didn't really understand the place anyhow.' This made some people very angry. Looked at more deeply, there is fidelity to Christ, and the priest is an apostate who gives up the priesthood for the love of the people.

People said it was a good translation, and I think it was good. I really resonated with that priest Rodriguez. A friend of mine said, '*Silence* is like a Rorschach's blot: everybody interprets it in their own way.' As I was translating it, I got more and more depressed. But looking back on it now, I see it as the silence of God that the mystics have. When the priest tramples on the crucifix, Jesus cries out, 'Trample on me, trample, for this that I came.' The fidelity to Christ is there, but always in this complicated way.

To understand Endo, it is necessary to see that his writing comes out of his personal struggle and experience. (That's a criticism that is made of Endo, that all his characters are just versions of himself. Something similar was said about George Bernard Shaw, that he has his ideas, and he is using the characters... I don't think it's quite true.) When he was quite young and living in Manchuria, his parents were divorced. This had a big impact on Endo, and he writes about it - about the deep loneliness he felt. Then he was deeply attached to his mother, and he often said that a Japanese Christianity would have the dimension of the mother, like Kannon in Pure Land Buddhism - but whether that was a Christianity for Japan or for Endo is not clear. In *Deep River*, this priest Otsu is writing a letter, saying that he's had difficulties,

but I have not lost my faith. Since my youth, thanks to my mother the one thing I was able to believe in was a mother's warmth. The warmth of her hand as it held mine, the warmth of her body when she cradled me, the warmth of her love, the warmth that kept her from abandoning me, even though I was so much more dumbly sincere than my brothers and sisters. My mother told me all about the person you call my onion [a word the character uses in the book instead of God], and she taught me that this onion was a vastly more powerful accumulation of this warmth. I lost my mother when I got older, and I realised then that what lay at the source of my mother's warmth was a portion of the love of my onion. Ultimately what I have sought is nothing more than the love of that onion - not any of the other innumerable doctrines mouthed by the various churches. This of course was another reason why I have been regarded as a heretic.

In other words, God is love itself, and this he gets from his mother. Otsu is a very anti-institutional kind of person, but with a deep love of Christ and God. In the first edition of *Silence*, Endo had a postscript: he said, 'It looks as though my ideas in this novel are closer to Protestantism than to

Catholicism'. There was a tremendous uproar from the Protestants, and this postscript never appeared again.

Love is the core of this world we live in, and through our long history this is all the onion has imparted to us. The thing we are most lacking in our modern world is love. Love is the thing no-one believes in any more. Love is the thing everyone mockingly laughs at. That is why someone like me wants to follow my onion with dumb sincerity.

This is when he is living beside the Ganges, and helping the poor and sick, carrying the dead bodies and so on.

The second thing that made a big impact on Endo was that he was baptised as a Catholic in his teens. He greatly admired the priest who baptised him and who later performed his wedding ceremony. This priest later left the priesthood to get married, at the time when priests didn't leave, in the 1950s. This was a very big shock to Endo, so he has this idea of the apostate priest which is almost like an obsession. *Silence* is really the story of that priest.

But what mostly concerns us here is Endo's quest for a Christianity that would suit Japan, and in his later works, that would suit Asia. There is a long history of Christian authors in Japan with a similar focus. But by the time he wrote *Deep River*, thirty years later, it was a different Japan. Even thirty years ago Japan had a long tradition of isolation, *sakoku*. Over the past ten years especially, Japan has been inundated with immigrants. Many of these are from Catholic countries - the Philippines and Latin America - so now, when you come to Catholic Christianity in Japan, there are more foreigners than Japanese. This has created problems, because, following Endo's line, the Christian churches in Japan were trying to enculturate, to become Japanese, but now more than half of the Christians in Japan are not Japanese and are not interested in enculturating. So now it's more meaningful to speak of the search for an Asian Christianity; that's very necessary and must go on.

It's this Asian Christianity that Endo is searching for in *Deep River*. What are its characteristics? Otsu, the hero of the novel, keeps protesting that his ideas seem to be pantheistic. He'd studied in France, where they were very rational and didn't understand this. But I can't help feeling that this is a caricature of French Catholicism. Although he uses the word pantheism it's really contemplation. It's the sense of God's presence in all things. Here's Otsu speaking about when he was in France:

I've been here three years. For three years I've lived here, and I've tired of the way people here think. The way of thinking that they've kneaded with their own hands

and fashioned to meet the workings of their own hearts. They're ponderous to an Asian like me. I can't blend in with them, and so every day is hell for me. When I try to tell some of my French classmates or teachers how I feel, they admonish me and say that the truth knows no distinctions between Europe and Asia. They say it's all because of my neurosis or my complex or whatever. My views about the onion, too. I can't make the clear distinction that these people make between good and evil. I think that evil lurks within good and that good things can lie hidden within evil as well. That's the very reason that God can wield his magic. He made ...[?] my sins and turned me toward salvation. But my way of thinking is considered heretical within the Church. I've been reprimanded. 'You don't make distinctions between anything', they say. 'You don't discriminate clearly. That's not how God is. That's not what your onion is like', they tell me.

Endo was a well educated person, but I wonder whether he understood the contemplative tradition of Christianity: the sense of the presence of God in all things, in oneself. Maybe here Endo is telling us that this Asian and mystical dimension of Christianity has been overlooked and has to be refound. 'Then again', he writes to this Mitsuko, the woman with whom he had an affair and then became friends with in a very beautiful way,

there is something heretical in my nature. You once joked in Lyons that I was lucky I didn't get myself excommunicated. After nearly five years living in a foreign country, I can't help being struck by the clarity of logic of the way Europeans think, but it seems to me as an Asian that there is something they have lost sight of with their excess of clarity and their overabundance of logic, and I just can't go along with it.

This is true, but it seems to me that Endo should have been able to find more mysticism in France. This is a caricature of the French way of thinking. 'Their lucid logic and their way of explaining everything in such clearcut terms sometimes even causes me pain. It's because my Japanese sensibilities have made me feel out of harmony with European Christianity.' That was there in Endo from the beginning, this notion that European Christianity didn't fit. He wrote earlier, in one of his essays,

For a long time I was attracted to a meaningless nihilism. And when I finally came to realise the fearfulness of such a void, I was struck once again with the grandeur of the Catholic faith. This problem of the reconciliation of my Catholicism with my Japanese blood has taught me one thing. That is that the Japanese must absorb Christianity without the support of a Christian tradition or history or legacy or sensibility. Even this attempt is the occasion of much resistance and anguish and pain. Still it is impossible to counter it by closing one's eyes to the difficulties. No doubt this is the peculiar cross that God has given to the Japanese.

And then he talks about the 'swamp' of Japan and about finding the strain of Christianity that will fit Japan. I believe that he does find that strain in *Deep River*. What it comes down to is that for Asia there must be a contemplative Christianity. Scholasticism is valuable, but the contemplative

dimension has to be there, too. Coming back to *Deep River* and the letter he writes to Mitsuko, he says,

I continue to write and insist that I do not believe that the European brand of Christianity is absolute... I opened myself to the harshest criticism in a moral examination, when I said, "God has many different faces. I don't think God exists exclusively in the churches and chapels of Europe. I think he is also among the Jews and the Buddhists and the Hindus", in confusion I blurted. I was viciously reprimanded. "These are the notions born of your pantheistic delusions." In confusion I blurted out, "But is there nothing pantheistic within Christianity itself?" At the seminary I have been taught that the monotheism of Christianity is in direct opposition to pantheism, but as a Japanese I believe that Christianity has been able to spread as widely as it has because so many diverse elements exist within it.

So the whole question of pantheism and of contemplation, as opposed to the kind of Christianity that is dualistic and always making distinctions, is the point he makes. Bede Griffith goes into this whole question, and I think he's interesting for an understanding of Endo. He is speaking of the Hindu approach.

'All this world is Brahmin.' And that, they say, is pantheism. Everything is God. That is, taking these words literally and interpreting them in a rationalistic sense, but when we study the Upanishads deeply, we realise that they are seeking to express a mystical experience.

I agree with Bede there. Perhaps Endo was looking for a mystical Christianity. 'What they are really saying is, "I, in the deepest centre, the ground of my being, am one with that Brahmin, the source of all creation."' That is Christian mysticism itself - that in the ground of my being I am one with God. The non-dualism in Hinduism (called *advaita*) is always looked on as monistic or pantheistic, and this is what Endo is speaking about. Bede Griffith asks,

Can we have a Christian *advaita*? I think that we must say that it is possible, because for Christians God and the world are not two. The world will not add anything to God, and it does not take anything away from God. Therefore they do not exist in the same kind of way. St Thomas Aquinas is clear about this. The world is a purely relative reality. That is, I think, what Sankara is trying to say. This world, and you and I, are real, but it is a completely relative reality. The majority of educated Hindus today accept Sankara's basic philosophy, but it can be interpreted in different ways.

Perhaps this is the Christianity that Endo is looking for in Asia.

Another point he brings up is reincarnation. This is part of the religious search that occupied Endo throughout his life. I think as Catholics we oppress the religious search with a catechism that says, 'Here are the questions, here are the answers.' Jesus said to the Pharisees, 'Search the

scriptures and you will find that Moses spoke of me.' You have to search. In *Deep River*, this man's wife dies, but before she dies she gave some indication about reincarnation. It's beautifully described how he took his wife for granted, and then experienced great loneliness after she died, and so he became interested in reincarnation. Endo is trying to find some Christian way to interpret reincarnation. He seems to interpret the resurrection as meaning that Jesus, rising from the dead, comes to life in the hearts of those who love him. He writes,

'When the onion was killed', Otsu muttered, staring at the ground as though speaking only to himself, 'the disciples who remained finally understood his love and what it meant. Every one of them had stayed alive by abandoning him and running away. He continued to love them even though they had betrayed him. As a result, he was etched into each of their guilty hearts, and they were never able to forget him. The disciples set out for distant lands to tell others about the story of his life.' Otsu spoke as though he had opened up a picture book and was reading a story to the impoverished children of India. 'After that, he continued to live in the hearts of his disciples. He died, but he was restored to life in their hearts.'

That was Endo's struggle, and his books come out of that struggle. I met him in hospital a short time before he died. His wife Junko was with him, and she said afterwards that when he died, she was holding his hand, and she was filled with a very deep peace. Superficially, he was always laughing and making jokes, but underneath I think he was quite a tragic person, and I think this literature comes out of his struggle. He had this struggle with the Church, too. This is Otsu again: "I can't leave the Church", Otsu said almost tearfully, "Jesus has me in his grasp." This was his struggle all through his life, but I think that what he writes is quite modern and a challenge to all of us, in the dialogue with Asia. But as I've said, the strong point in Endo was this commitment to Jesus Christ. After I translated *Silence*, I got a letter from a contemplative nun in the US who had read the translation, and she said, 'I think that *Silence* is a book about prayer, because for me prayer is a struggle with Jesus. Mary Magdalene, Peter, Thomas had that struggle. It's this struggle and then capitulation.' So the priest in *Silence* had this struggle and then capitulated to Jesus. I told him that at the time, and he said he never forgot it.