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Dealing with Human Weakness:

Shusaku Endo's 'Silence'

Eamon Maher

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Following on my recent presentation of the Catholic priest in some work by William Trevor, I have decided to follow up with a few articles for Spirituality dealing with what I consider to be some of the more insightful priestly portrayals that I have come across in world literature. For the first example, one must travel a long distance to find an author who has been dubbed the Japanese Graham Greene, Shusaku Endo (1923-1976). The novel we will be concentrating on is the writer's 1966 masterpiece, *Silence*.¹

Endo's journey to Catholicism is an interesting one. It was only after his parents' divorce in 1933 that he and his mother converted to Roman Catholicism, an unusual choice in Japan at that time. He studied French literature in university and then had the opportunity to live and study in Lyons for a number of years, thanks to a scholarship he received from the French government. The years in France and the exposure to French literature undoubtedly affected the career path of the budding novelist, especially as his arrival in 1950 coincided with a period of great ferment in the French literary scene in the wake of the death of Bernanos, one of the great Catholic writers, in 1948, and the emergence of the literary dominance of absurdism, existentialism and the New Novel. Endo, a postgraduate student of literature, had to be aware of such developments and, as a person coming from a very different culture, must have felt a particular kinship with a novel like Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (1942).

There is one other figure who is worthy of mention, and that is François Mauriac, the future Nobel Laureate in Literature who at that stage had temporarily abandoned the novel in favour of journalism. In France, the writer has always been a public figure, someone whose views are regularly solicited (or freely offered) on a wide range of topics ranging from politics to religion, sexuality or any of the burning issues of the day. That was not the case in Japan, a country that in the immediate wake of World War II was struggling to come to terms with the impact of the atomic bombs dropped on its cities and the decimation caused by the use of such awesome weaponry.

The story of Japan's relationship with Christianity has not always been a happy one. The Jesuit Francis Xavier arrived at Kagoshima in 1549 and fell in love with the Japanese, whom he described as 'the joy of his heart.' Christianity seemed to take a firm root initially, as the Japanese ruling class forged close ties with the Portuguese Jesuits in particular. However, relations soon soured, to such an extent that the 'padres', as

1. Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans. William Johnson (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p.71. All future references will be from this edition, with the title and page numbers in brackets.

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they were called, were ordered to leave the country or face torture and death. By the beginning of the 17th century, the period during which *Silence* is set, the persecution of priests and practicing Catholics in Japan was at its zenith. Much effort was invested by individual local leaders to get priests to apostatize, as this would send out a powerful message to any of the native population who might still be attached to christianity.

Published in Japan in 1967, *Silence* recounts the perilous journey undertaken by two Portuguese Jesuits to land in Japan with the twin purpose of providing pastoral back-up to any Catholics who might be still living there and then to try and locate their former teacher at the seminary, Christovão Ferreira, who, it is rumoured, apostatized after enduring the torture of 'the pit.' In the latter, priests and Christians apprehended by the Japanese authorities were subjected to the most horrific torture with a view to getting them to publicly recant their religious beliefs. *Silence* is narrated primarily through the letters and observations of one of the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries, Sebastião Rodrigues, who arrives in Japan full of idealistic enthusiasm and ends up being captured and brought before the virulently anti-Christian Governor of Chikugo, Inoue. The interesting thing about the latter is that he was baptized a Catholic and used to be a believer. He therefore demonstrates an insider's knowledge of the religion he is now at pains to stamp out. He has the added advantage of knowing where the fault lines might lie in his victims' make-up.

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On their way to the Japanese mainland the two missionaries had a stop-over in Macao, where they met up with Kichijiro, a drunken, despicable Japanese man whom they eventually take with them as their translator. What they fail to realize is that Kichijiro had apostatized before leaving Japan and will do so again when captured. Rodrigues remarks: 'But Christ did not die for the good and beautiful. It is easy enough to die for the good and beautiful; the hard thing is to die for the miserable and corrupt.'¹ Kichijiro clearly belongs to the 'miserable and corrupt' category. After their arrival, the realization that slowly dawns on Rodrigues is that Christianity does not really have the capacity to take root in the 'swamp' that is Japan. Even though there are many inhabitants who seem well-disposed to the Catholic faith, there is a sense in which they never fully embrace its true message or observe its main dogmas. Rodrigues experiences the real spiritual desert for the first time when he is forced to observe two local Christians, Mokichi and Ichizo, being swallowed up by the sea, unassisted by any outside assistance. This 'silence of God', his inactivity in the face of human suffering, was something that Camus explored to telling effect in *The Plague*. Rodrigues knows that the greatest sin against God is despair,

'but the silence of God was something I could not fathom' (*Silence*, 117). Betrayed to the local *samurai* by Kichijiro, who reminds one of the treacherous half-caste in Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, Rodrigues will have ample opportunity to experience firsthand the desolate 'silence of God' in his prison cell as he awaits the trials ahead. Another thing that will plague Rodrigues is the thought that he might well have more in common with the wrecked and cowardly Kichijiro than he might like to think:

And then somehow or other the mouse-like face of Kichijiro, filled with terror, rose up in my imagination. Yes, that cowardly wretch who had trampled on the *fumie* at Nagasaki, and fled. Were I an ordinary Christian, and not a priest, would I have fled in the same way? What kept me going might be my self-respect and my priestly sense of duty (*Silence*, 107).

The Christian religion demands that Rodrigues love the Kichijiros of the world as much as the admirable priests who accompany him, which is a real challenge. Self-knowledge dictates that one should never consider oneself superior to another human being. Given the right set of circumstances, everyone runs the risk of being found wanting. Pride is not a trait that prospers in a missionary country where the elite are hostile to the message of Christianity and where there is hence always a danger of paying the ultimate price for professing one's beliefs.

Silence is a powerful exploration of the difficulties encountered when one's faith is put to the test in the most extreme manner possible. Doubts inevitably sink in and the idea of apostasy can seem both logical and attractive. Rodrigues appears to be holding firm initially but slowly he begins to show signs of weakness: 'Did God really exist? If not, how ludicrous was half of his life spent traversing the limitless seas to come and plant the tiny seed in this barren island!' (*Silence*, 223). Ferreira comes on the scene at this key moment and admits that he ended up denying God, not because of being suspended upside down over the pit, but because he saw the futility of his mission. According to him, 'Japan was a bottomless swamp. The sapling decayed at its roots and withered. Christianity was like this sapling: quite unperceived it had withered and died' (*Silence*, 243). Exhausted and in despair, Rodrigues winds up trampling on the image of Christ: 'Dawn broke. And far in the distance the cock crew.' (*Silence*, 271)

Had the novel ended at this point, Rodrigues' mission would have been a failure. However, in the final pages, it is revealed that the Jesuit has the impression that the Christ on whose image he trampled told him to do so. He sees himself as a fallen priest, but then Kichijiro arrives at the abode that has been assigned to him by Inoue after his apostasy

...the same Christ that was not so much silent, as suffering alongside him.

and asks him to hear his confession, which he does. By agreeing to this act of charity, an act his fellow priests would probably consider sacrilege, Rodrigues casts doubt over the renunciation of his faith. His dialogue with the silent Christ is ongoing, the same Christ that was not so much silent, as suffering alongside him. The interrogation of God in the form of a dialogue is enlightening in relation to Endo's philosophy of grace, which strikes me as being similar to Graham Greene's. Rodrigues' decision to recant has a charitable motive, that is, saving others from torture and death. Therefore it cannot be totally considered sinful. Suffering is often a gateway to healing and the ways of God are not always clear to mere mortals, as can be gauged from this exchange between the Jesuit and his divine master:

'Lord, I resented your silence.'

'I was not silent. I suffered beside you.'

'But you told Judas to go away: What thou dost do quickly. What happened to Judas?'

'I did not say that. Just as I told you to step on the plaque, so I told Judas to do what he was going to do. For Judas was in anguish as you are now.'

He has lowered his foot on the plaque, sticky with dirt and blood. His five toes had pressed upon the face of the one he loved. Yet he could not understand the tremendous onrush of joy that came over him at that moment. (*Silence*, 297)

Rodrigues gains consolation from this thought that God may have been guiding him towards apostasy, willing him to reject all that he holds most dear in order to accomplish a greater good. The novel ends with the following reflection: 'Even now I am the last priest in this land. But Our Lord was not silent. Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him' (*Silence*, 298). The theology that Endo puts forward here is quite radical, namely that sin born out of love can lead to a higher sanctity. I feel that in its attempts to come to terms with what exactly forms the basis of our belief system, by exploring the extent to which we can learn from our sins and weaknesses, *Silence* captures issues that should be of serious interest and import to anyone who is struggling with his or her faith. He also is adept at probing the psychology of the priests he depicts. Ferreira, for example, urges Rodrigues to listen to the groans of the other men in the pit. One small gesture from him will release these men from their agony. Ferreira explains why he ended up turning his back on God:

The reason I apostatized ... are you ready? Listen! I was put in here and hear the voices of those people for whom God did nothing. God did not do a single thing. I prayed with all my strength; but God did nothing. (*Silence*, 265-266)

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God does not intervene in the affairs of Man, or at least not in the spectacular fashion outlined by Ferreira. He is often present in his absence and faith demands a blind trust that often proves too taxing for most people to accept. The death of innocent children, of loved ones, the senseless murder of millions during major military conflicts, the manner in which evil people often prosper, all these are inbuilt elements of the paradox at the heart of the Gospel message. 'The first shall be last', the lowly and those in pain will be comforted, but not necessarily in this life. Rodrigues gets a glimpse of this as he listens to the guards laughing loudly outside his cell, indifferent to his fate: 'Sin, he reflected, is not what it is usually thought to be; it is not to steal or to tell lies. Sin is for one man to walk brutally over the life of another and to be quite oblivious of the wounds he has left behind. And then for the first time a real prayer rose up in his heart' (*Silence*, 144). Like Graham Greene's whiskey priest in *The Power and the Glory*, Rodrigues, imperfect vessel though he be, is the conduit through which grace can be imparted to others and *Silence* is a novel that forces us to reflect on the strange workings of grace and how one can remain attached to Catholicism long after formal practice has ceased. This was the experience of Endo himself as stated in an interview recorded in the magazine *Kumo*, in 1967:

I received baptism when I was a child... in other words, my Catholicism was a kind of ready-made suit... . There were many times when I wanted to get rid of my Catholicism, but I was finally unable to do so. It is not just that I did not throw it off, but that I was unable to throw it off. The reason for this must be that it became part of me after all.²

Rodrigues undergoes a similar epiphany and cannot stop being a priest just because he tramped on a sacred image. One can see that the attachment to Catholicism has deep roots, even in the swamp that was 17th century Japan.

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2. Cited by William Johnston, 'Translator's Preface', *Silence*, pp.12-13.

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