



the empty bell

Deep River
by Shusaku Endo

A Book Review by Robert A. Jonas, Ed.D., ©1995
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S husaku Endo is a Japanese, Christian novelist. His most famous book, Silence, originally published in 1969, helps to prepare the reader for the loneliness implicit in this identity. In Silence, one becomes intimately, emotionally connected to the struggles of Christianity's first missionaries to Japan. In 1549, St. Francis Xavier led a group of priests who envisioned a converted Japan. 200,000 Christian converts greeted the 17th century. Then the ruling Tokugawa period families became threatened by this Western religious invasion with commercial overtones. The outcome of these tensions was the wholesale slaughter of Christians throughout Japan. Christians, especially Roman Catholic priests, were mercilessly pursued and then tortured. Many were burned and hung on wooden crosses. The Christian church has never recovered from the persecution, and so today only a small percentage of Japanese are Christian.

In Silence, Endo explored the complicated psychological and spiritual struggle of Christians forced to trample on the fumie, the image of Christ. Many chose martyrdom rather than apostasy. Christians who faced this choice wanted to know God's will. Yet, many who listened prayerfully for Divine guidance, found only God's silence. Some interpreted the silence as God's indifference. Others saw in it an invitation to discover a God of Mystery, beyond their taken-for-granted concepts and doctrines. In the silence, a few, like the apostate priest Rodrigues, are startled to hear Christ speak. The Jesus Christ who survives Endo's Silence is one who has disappeared into the sufferings of the contemporary, faithful poor.

Endo, perhaps the most famous of Japanese Christian novelists, continues the core theme of Silence in his Deep River¹: the Christian God is a God of Mystery who will not be boxed in by familiar doctrinal concepts, nor will God be tied down to the 2,000 year old revelations of Christian Scripture. In fact, this Christian God is not owned by the Christians! Christ is quietly present in the sufferings of our contemporary world, and even within non-Christian cultures such as India.

In Deep River, we are introduced to several Japanese characters who are identified as "cases." One soon realizes that the use of this sociological term is Endo's open declaration that this novel is about the Japanese culture, the social types which arise there, and their continuing struggle to define a particularly Asian Christian spirituality. And, of course, they are also human archetypes, with whom we can all identify. Isobe is a middle-class manager whose wife, Keiko, dies of cancer. Endo tells us that Isobe, like many husbands in Japan, has no spiritual life and takes his wife for granted. Isobe knows nothing of his wife's passion, or his own. On her deathbed she implores him to look for her in a future incarnation. This surprising instruction shakes up Isobe's somnambulant, materialistic worldview and finally drives him to the banks of the Ganges in search of his wife in another form. The way in which he doesn't find her becomes an epiphany.

1 translated by Van C. Gessel. New York: New Directions, 1994

In like manner, all the subsequent characters are introduced with critical vignettes which ultimately connect them to the India trip. The Ganges, spiritual home to Hindus, lends its intense, sacred atmosphere to Endo's Japanese "cases," and each one attains spiritual insight. In another case, we meet Mitsuko, who was once a well-healed Japanese student of French literature in a Catholic university where "few of the students had received Christian baptism." She is captivated by Julien Green's novel, *Moira*, and echoes its dramatic themes in her vicious pursuit and seduction of fellow student Otsu. Otsu is a shy Christian, completely out of his depth in Mitsuko's cruel, anti-religious circles. After a brief affair, they fly apart into their separate worlds--she into a superficial marriage that is destined for divorce and he into a seminary in France. She visits him there, loses touch with him and finally tracks him down again in India. At the Ganges, her struggle with her own cynicism and her hatred toward men, becomes the very ground in which a new spiritual life arises.

Endo is not afraid to put on the table many of our Western prejudices about the Japanese--that they live over-regimented, mechanical and unemotional lives; that the men are sexist, hard-hearted and often boors, unaccustomed to intimacy and empathy; that Japanese women, while noble in their self-sacrifice, are too willing to let their own creativity, spirituality and power be crushed; that Japanese women are out of touch with their own erotic needs and pleasures; and that the Japanese overall are materialistic and anti-spiritual, more interested in taking pictures of foreigners than in seeking empathic contact with those seen as "other."

And Endo doesn't stop there. He also takes on spiritual failings and stereotypes in the European Christian Church. Through the beloved, universalistic Catholic priest, Otsu, Endo expresses the view that Western Christianity is too rationalistic, compartmentalized and autocratic. He thinks it unfortunate that Westerners don't see the spiritual gifts in chaos, but rather suppress the disorderly and surprisingly creative at every turn. For Endo, the sad and humble priest, Otsu, represents a contemporary Christ-figure. Otsu is rejected by the Roman Catholic superiors who want to control him. One is reminded of Dostoevski's "Grand Inquisitor" in *The Brothers Karamazov*: the religious powers-that-be fear true freedom in faithful Christians and thus try to manipulate them by miracles, superficial mystery and authority. Otsu's "heresy" is also Jesus' heresy--bringing ever-fresh hope, forgiveness, mercy and blessings to the outcasts, especially those of other classes and faiths.

Endo also takes a straight-on look at the indigenous Japanese spirituality of Buddhism. To those of us Westerners interested in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, his critique of the contemporary religious scene in Japan sounds familiar. In Europe and the United States, the teachings and meditative practices of Japanese Buddhism are enjoying an unprecedent-

ed growth, especially among young people. But, most observers of Japanese culture agree that young people there don't give a hoot about spirituality--Shinto, Buddhist or Christian. The study of religion is one of the least popular choices for students at the Jesuit Sophia University in Tokyo. Many Japanese teachers of Buddhist meditation see the United States and Europe as the new frontier for expansion of their spiritual discipline.

Endo's vision of Christian discipleship--universalistic, non-judgemental, spontaneously merciful, color/class/religion blind, and willing to see grace moving in other faiths, may never be popular in Japan or in the West. It is a deep and demanding spirituality, calling us to dive beneath the taken-for-granted facades of our personal and religious identities. Endo's implication, that all the great world religions are entry-points into a loving, servant-God that transcends them all, may never catch on, primarily because people everywhere like to believe that their particular religious dogma and practice is right and that others must be wrong. Perhaps it is true that some Christian church institutions deserve Endo's admonishment. No one can deny that some of these institutions, like their secular counterparts, are driven by ego interests. The ego-It is always hungry for control and it will ultimately suppress all differences if left to its own devices. Ego-It is terrified of God's real freedom, and will be merciful only when it is convenient.

By contrast, Endo's Jesus operates at the margins of his religious institution, and goes directly to the suffering ones within us and among us. He does not waste time, standing aside to judge others for their sins and heresies, as some Christian leaders are accustomed to do. Is it possible that the Western Church's preoccupations with sin and sex distract us all from the central message of Jesus--to love God (Otsu's dear "Onion") with all our heart, mind and soul, and our neighbor (even our enemies, even our religious enemies) as ourselves? Obsessive concerns about others' sinfulness distract us from knowing that our original nature, God's blessed, inward image, is God's own Beloved. Judging others distracts us from simply practicing the Onion's Presence wherever we go.

Endo is a master storyteller who, quite likely, speaks out of an inner life that has come to some peace with the apparent contradictions between Christianity and other faiths and cultures. Throughout the novel, this Hebrew hymn (Isaiah 53) comes and goes:

He hath no comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him. . . . Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.

Christians believe that this holy, suffering one is Christ, and it is this particular image of Christ that unifies the whole book, as it unifies the inner life of Otsu. For Endo, the historical events which birth the great religions manifest eternal, repeating, and yet ever-

fresh archetypes of divine revelation. In Endo, the Divine is a Great Mystery, but also One who appears in human form and in nature, in surprising ways. In a sense, Otsu has become another incarnation of Christ, just as the mummy-like corpse of an old woman becomes a broken form of the goddess Chamunda.

If there is any failing in Deep River, I would identify one small slip in Endo's assumptions about Otsu's and Christ's consciousness. The reader watches as Otsu picks up a dying Hindu woman, to carry her to the blessed river to die. He prays, "You carried the cross upon your back and climbed the hill to Gogotha. I now imitate that act. . . . I now imitate that act." If Otsu is Endo's ideal of saintless, then Endo is open to criticism from both Christian contemplative and most Buddhist spiritual teachers. Having achieved a unitive consciousness with their Jesus and their Buddha, saints in both these traditions no longer imitate anyone. They are no longer trying to be something other than what they most deeply are. For most Buddhists, neither Buddha nor Buddha-Nature are considered "other," as something to be imitated. Likewise, for Christians such as St. Paul, "now not I, but Christ in me," is the operative principle. In all their actions, true Christian saints simply manifest and, in a sense, are Christ-for-others. Both traditions speak of becoming the "True Self," in which comparative self-consciousness drops away. Up until this point in the story, Endo leads his readers to believe that Otsu has gradually dropped his ego and its self-referential concerns. But if Otsu is indeed lost in Christ's own consciousness, there is no longer any sense of comparison because there is nothing and no one to compare. Who carries the woman? Not Otsu imitating Jesus, but now God in Otsu-- sacred awareness itself, bending down to bear our suffering. Endo would probably agree.

I hope that many Christians read Deep River. What if, as Endo-through-Otsu suggests, all beings everywhere are really children of God, even the "dirty" outcasts? What if all people, of whatever religion, were to practice kindness and love immediately, ignoring their ego's insistent desire to separate the good from the bad? What if Otsu's behavior and the Ganges became universal standards for spiritual practice and our relationship to nature? Wouldn't that be a fine world? We must thank Endo for looking into a spiritual mirror for all of us, East and West, and finding that God, like the Ganges, accepts all of him (and us)--the light and the dark, the brahman and the outcast, the Buddhist and the Christian, the Hindu and the atheist, the bird and the tree, the creative and the destructive, male and female, life and death. In the presence of our beloved "Onion", new, transformed life comes out of the darkness of despair and death. Love and mercy reconcile what the ego and the mind divide.

As a participant in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, I am witness to many breakthroughs in mutual appreciation and understanding--in scholarly, religious and lay contexts. Opportunities for sharing are many and growing. At the same time, it seems that the official hierarchies are dragging their feet, just as they do in Endo's novel. Too many priests and

spiritually-attuned people are consumed in “projects” from dawn to dusk, projects which, while often socially beneficial, have lost touch with the contemplative sense of Christ’s Presence. Too many seminaries have become social work schools.

The contemplative tradition in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches is, perhaps, closest to Endo’s ideal. There one finds the practice of mercy, forgiveness and love beyond words (the “apophatic” way), as in Cassian, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Simeon the New Theologian and the Carmelites, St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila. In these contemplative depths, one is more likely to notice when our words, ideas about and labels for others--even if they are “religious and therefore laudable”-- have become reduced to mere ideology, cutting us off from God’s open heart. But few modern Christians know about this tradition. Those Christian contemplatives who walk in the Western contemplative tradition must now reach out to their Eastern counterparts in spiritual friendship. There is much common ground--in fact, it is infinite. The Buddhist Mahayana archetype of the bodhisatva, and Japanese Zen Master Akizuki Ryomin’s “transindividual individual” are good Buddhist parallels for Endo’s Otsu.

As we near the 21st century, it is clear that religious wars are increasing in number, ferocity and firepower. Drawn by the light of Otsu’s “Onion,” we have an unparalleled opportunity to educate our young people in a spirituality which dives beneath hypocrisy and ego gratification, right into the River of Humanity which accepts all who come, living or dead, and carries them into the Heart of the Living God.

