

We Have Never Seen His Face

BY BRETT R. DEWEY

Shusaku Endo's "Silence," one of the twentieth century's finest novels, is a meditation on the face of Jesus. How we depict his face reveals both whom we follow and who we are as his disciples. Endo challenges us to see "one who 'suffers with us' and who allows for our weakness."

Have you ever noticed how often we use "face" in colloquial metaphors to depict a deepening awareness of situations, closeness of relationships, or self-knowledge? When we need a reality check, we *face* the facts. To confess a wrong, we *face* the music. Sometimes a person gets in our *face* during a tense confrontation, and if pushed too far, we *face-off* with the fellow. Yet the face represents not just the increased awareness that comes with disharmony and conflict, but also with intimacy. When more personal communication is required, we speak *face-to-face*. If all goes well, we may end up seeing *eye-to-eye*, or if it goes really well, (in Irving Berlin's famous words) dancing *cheek-to-cheek*.

In everyday language, the face stands for truth, accountability, and a deeper (antagonistic or intimate) relationship. This is understandable; all five of the body's senses reside on the face: eyesight, smell, taste, hearing, and the gentle touch of lips, cheeks, or Eskimo noses. The face is a grand central station to life's passage; on our faces develop tracks and lines like a map of where we have been and a promise of where we are going.

No wonder then that one of the twentieth century's finest novels is, at heart, a reflection on a face. Shusaku Endo (1923-1996), the famed Japanese writer and Catholic Christian, in *Silence* meditates on the face of God-with-us, Jesus Christ. For Endo, our depictions of Christ's face in art and literature reveal both whom we follow and who we are as his disciples. How we picture Christ matters. Thus he reproaches western Christianity for failing to depict in Christ's face the terrible suffering and sorrow that are so much a part of God's incarnation into the fullness of human experience.

Many of us remember those Sunday school images of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus that attempt to portray the Savior as attractive, heroic, and pristine. Western forms of faith based on these images, charges Endo, promoted a triumphal missionary strategy and underpinned Western cultural hegemony. The church sought to imitate that Sunday school Jesus by being attractive, powerful, and heroic to the point of trying to save native peoples from their “undeveloped” cultures. The problem was that these people were transferred into a new culture not of kingdom freedom, but of western dominance. And the result was anything but a pristine church. To help us picture Jesus in a new way, Endo movingly traces “one who ‘suffers with us’ and who allows for our weakness.”

BEHIND THE STORY

Shusaku Endo left his native Japan in 1950 to study French literature at the University at Lyon, particularly the novels of François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos, which portray the radical demands of faithful Christian discipleship amidst the deepening secularization of France. After two years he contracted tuberculosis and had to return to Japan.

As a Christian in Buddhist-dominated Japan (he was baptized in the Catholic Church at the age of ten), Endo was an outsider. He anticipated that immersion in the culture-Catholicism in France would be a sort of spiritual homecoming. This hope was never realized. From the start of his studies, he was keenly aware of being everywhere a stranger. He suffered in Japan on account of his faith and in France due to racial prejudice and the overwhelming humiliation of being Japanese in post-war Europe. While tuberculosis ravaged his body, a sort of cultural-religious schizophrenia tormented Endo even more. His faith betrayed him in Japan while his racial features upset his French Catholic brethren. These pivotal years became the inspiration for *Silence* and his realization of the power of the face.

THE MISSION

Silence tells the story of a fictional seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary, Sebastian Rodrigues. The inexperienced Portuguese cleric accepts a mission to Japan at a time when Japanese Christian communities suffer savage persecution. The trip begins with missionary zeal for the unconverted as well as for “hidden Christians,” the underground practitioners of the faith who fear the cruelty of local authorities. But the young missionary also has a secret motive for traveling to Japan: to investigate whether reports of a former missionary’s apostasy, or denial of the faith, are true.

Christovao Ferreira, Rodrigues’s mentor who encouraged his passion to spread the Gospel, is rumored to have apostatized under the cruelty of “the pit.” In this diabolical public torture, the victim hangs upside down in a trench filled with excrement, while a small incision behind each ear and on the forehead allows the blood to drain slowly from the person’s body.

Endo’s story here is based on historical fact. A priest named Christo-

vao Ferreira was tortured and recanted his faith in 1632; before this, no priest had ever apostatized. The history is worth noting.¹

Francis Xavier first preached the Gospel in Japan in 1549, and within thirty years Christians numbered nearly 200,000. Japanese authorities, fearing the impact of western cultural assumptions embedded in the mission movement, became suspicious toward the Christian missionaries, who until then had enjoyed privileged rank in society and dined with the country's magistrates. By the mid 1600s, all foreign missionaries were ordered to leave Japan, and believers were brutally tortured. The rulers' cultural fortress mentality matched by an offensive to rid the land of Christianity began to take its toll on the Christian population. At first, public tortures only served to fasten the resolve of the Japanese Christians, until an even more wicked form of torture was invented. The native Christian community numbered 300,000 at its peak, but with the advent of "the pit," public martyrdoms turned to public renunciations. When Ferreira apostatized under torture in 1632, as the leader of the mission in Japan, the repercussions for the hidden Christians were devastating.

Here Endo inserts the fictional character, Rodrigues. His journey of imperialistic missions and personal intrigue turns into a face-to-face encounter with the divine.

THE COWARD

The antithesis of Rodrigues's missionary zeal is the cowardice of Kichijiro, a Japanese man who helps authorities locate pockets of hidden Christians. A dubious, sake-soaked, nervous wreck of a man, Kichijiro repeatedly denies being a Christian; but as the narrative unfolds we discover his secret: he is an apostate. His family was delivered to the magistrates and ordered to practice a ritual of renunciation—to reject Christianity by treading on an image of Christ, called a *fumie*. Kichijiro was the only one in his family to apostatize, as the rest embraced the horrors of being burned alive because they dared not step on the face of Christ.

This unlikely pair—missionary and apostate—travel the countryside ministering to hidden Christians and fleeing from political authorities and their samurai henchmen. Kichijiro confronts Rodrigues with the question at the heart of the novel, "Why has Deus Sama [God] imposed this suffering on us?" (p. 55). Rodrigues begins to understand that though he only meant to bring the gospel of life to Japan, he has brought death too. All the while, he asks, why does God remain silent to the suffering of the faithful?

Kichijiro eventually betrays Rodrigues for three hundred pieces of silver. Like Judas, he profits from his disloyalty, but then anguishes over his treachery. The coward returns to Rodrigues—now in prison—to confess his weakness, whimpering that had he been born during the comfortable period of the mission movement, he would have been a good Christian. Had Kichijiro been a believer during the comfortable heyday of Japanese

Christianity, his weakness would not have been exposed. Endo invites readers to examine their faithfulness. We must consider whether we, like Kichijiro, would turn apostate in difficult times.

After bidding the coward good-bye, the incarcerated priest has visions of the face of Christ, a face on which he has often meditated. He takes so-

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lace in Christ’s features, which appear regal and stately. To Rodrigues, Christ has an unblemished face of perfection; he is a paragon of beauty.

THE DILEMMA

Sharing the jail with Rodrigues are Christian peasants who spend their nights and days in song.

Even as they are led to “the pit,” words of hope spring from their mouths:

We’re on our way, we’re on our way,
 we’re on our way to the temple of Paradise,
 to the temple of Paradise...
 to the great Temple....

Even as their present life is being dashed by the rigor of magisterial inquisition, the peasants model a future of worship and peace amidst their pain. This awes Rodrigues, but does not inspire him. He expects more than passive relenting to persecution; he hopes for God’s intervention. Yet in the divine quiet, a spiritual hollowness grows in him.

As he listens to the sounds of the peasants being tortured outside, the cleric debates with a Japanese official who tries to convince him to apostatize, to step on the *fumie* (picture of Christ). “It’s only a formality,” the official soothes the priest. “What do formalities matter?... Only go through with the exterior form of trampling” (p. 171). For the inquisitor, what really matters is the external. All he hopes for is an outward sign of apostasy, and he tries to convince Rodrigues by suggesting that he simply spiritualize his faith—by acting in conformity to his captors, but retaining the proper “heart” or inner understanding. But Rodrigues discerns this is the very hub of temptation; action and intent must not be separated.

In a final attempt to convince the captured priest to turn traitor, his former mentor Ferreira is brought to him. Any lingering questions Rodrigues has about Ferreira’s fate are answered when the elder priest, too, advocates for apostasy. When confronted with why he apostatized, Ferreira readily admits that as peasant Christians hung in “the pit” he realized he must do something for them because God did nothing. If he recanted his

faith, the Japanese officials would release the peasants. "God did not do a single thing," Ferreira recounts, "I prayed with all my strength; but God did nothing" (p. 168). Having lost faith in God, Ferreira did the only thing he could do for the tortured peasants: he disavowed his faith by stepping on the *fumie* so that the peasants might be released from their demise.

The Japanese inquisitor and Ferreira do their best to convince Rodrigues to trample the *fumie*. Like Ferreira before him, Rodrigues hears the groans of Christians dangling precariously in "the pit". At first he thinks the groans are snores carried through the night air. But when he discovers that this "snoring" is the moaning of torture, he wonders again why God remains silent. He lifts his foot and places it down on the face of Christ.

Does Ferreira convince Rodrigues? Does the inquisitor? Why does Rodrigues place his foot on the Galilean's nose?

In the most shocking twist of the story, Jesus appears in the jail cell. The haunting silence of God is broken in a broken Jew. As Rodrigues hears the moans of the peasants, he sees a vision of Christ's face:

Yet the face was different from that on which the priest had gazed so often in Portugal, in Rome, in Goa and in Macao. It was not Christ whose face was filled with majesty and glory; neither was it a face made beautiful by endurance to pain; nor was it a face with strength of a will that has repelled temptation. The face of the man who then lay at his feet [in the *fumie*] was sunken and utterly exhausted.... The sorrow it had gazed up at him [Rodrigues] as the eyes spoke appealingly: 'Trample! Trample! It is to be trampled on by you that I am here' (pp. 175-176).

Obedience to Christ's invitation leads Rodrigues to stomp on the *fumie*.

THE FACE

Rodrigues' attention to Jesus' face, which begins as rumination on the paragon of beauty and perfection, is transformed when Christ's handsome countenance shifts to a pulped visage. His face appears in the *fumie* not in ideal beauty, but as haggard and troubled. We have burdened him with our travails and bludgeoned his face with our sins, Jesus tells Rodrigues.

If we really believe that Jesus "was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5a), then Endo is asking us to turn our imagination away from a pristine Jesus and to see in the Savior's face his exhausted, sunken features.

We should not be misled by the phrase, "Trample! Trample!" The original Japanese is in the permissive rather than the imperative mood, so that a better translation would be "You may trample. I allow you to trample."² The free offering of God is preserved in this rendering, so that we can say with Flannery O'Connor "there is nothing in our faith that implies a foregone optimism for man [who is] so free that with his last breath he can say

No.”³ The invitation to trod offers redemption as a free gift of the Father’s love. This redemption does not betoken the personal achievement of the believer, or even of Christ himself, for the Son abandons his own notions of self-sufficiency in obedience to the will of the Father.

Images of Christ that deny his suffering deny who he is. By depicting him as only robust and regal, they fundamentally disavow his sacrifice. They also tempt us to view redemption as our pious response to divine command, rather than acceptance of God’s free gift, which only requires acknowledging that the sins that bruise Christ’s face are our own, regardless of any merits we may claim. Finally, Endo is suggesting, our true vocation as followers of Christ is to suffer with God and the peasantry rather than to stand over the world in positions of power, authority, and control.

In trampling the *fumie*, Rodrigues frees the peasants. He sacrifices his pride and place as an upstanding member of the clergy in order to participate in Christ’s redemptive suffering that liberates creation. By treading on the image of the Savior, he affirms the vocation of Christ. Yet this action hurts him deeply. “The priest raises his foot. In it he feels a dull, heavy pain,” the narrator recounts. “This is no mere formality. He will now trample on what he has considered the most beautiful thing in his life, on what he has believed most pure, on what is filled with the ideals and the dreams of man.... How his foot aches!” (p. 171).

THE CALL

Rodrigues discovers that God is not silent to suffering. God does not “do nothing” as Ferreira feared. Christ incarnate takes on the pain of the world in his mission to fulfill the will of the Father. Thus, in his face-to-face encounter with God, Rodrigues encounters the mystery of divine affliction. It is truly an unspeakable glory.

To participate in God’s saving work requires radical submission to Christ; the young missionary must sacrifice his pride of place. Endo does not depict his suffering as a social strategy, as an efficient way to accomplish his witness or share the Gospel. It is not good in itself, and is not the way life is supposed to be. Yet suffering with God is a matter of fidelity, even when, in a dramatic irony, Rodrigues’ accepting the stigma of apostasy becomes his route to faithfulness.

In an appendix to *Silence* we learn that Rodrigues, who later takes on a Japanese name, Okada San’emon, and marries a native woman, is known in the community as “Apostate Paul” – while Ferreira is named “Apostate Peter.” In a living, subterranean Christian community, Rodrigues is the head servant. Even Judas-like Kichijiro is brought back into the fold and serves as personal secretary to the apostate priest. Their church is a place for weakness and forgiveness; its leaders are redeemed Sauls, and Peters, and Judases. Theirs is a broken community, whose triumph consists in participating in God’s mission of sacrificial love to the world.

The great good news of the Gospel, theologian Herbert McCabe says, is this: "If you do not love you will not be alive; if you do love effectively you will be killed."⁴ Jesus is evidence that loving effectively leads to death. He "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried," the earliest confessions declare in the briefest of summary. Jesus refused to set up an earthly regime or to abuse the power that was his as Son.

We, like the young missionary Rodrigues, are called to imitate Jesus' life of sacrifice. Such suffering faithfulness must stand against misguided mission strategies that embrace Western cultural hegemony and confuse its notions of power with the good news of God's kingdom of sacrificial love. Our enduring challenge, therefore, is to join the redeemed in a community that transforms the work by offering forgiveness and accepting sacrifice.

If we envision our Savior's face only as regal and stately, then we have never seen his face. We must gaze into the face of Christ to discern the reality of his passion and the reality of what our sins have done to him. What we see surely will change how we experience God, allowing us to know his presence amidst suffering rather than to fear his absence. It will lead us to embrace radical forgiveness and solidarity with all people who find themselves stuck in the mire of their sin, loneliness, and suffering.

Shusaku Endo's *Silence* confronts believers, especially in the West, with challenging questions: What does it mean to follow Jesus? How might the Christian community forgive so that even Judas could return to fellowship? Have we seen the face of Christ?

NOTES

1 Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, translated by William Johnston (New York: Taplinger, 1980). For the historical context of the story in *Silence*, see the translator's Preface, vii-xviii (further page citations will be in the text).

2 Junko Endo, "Reflections on Shusaku Endo and *Silence*," *Christianity and Literature* 48:2 (Winter 1999), 146. Junko Endo, Shusaku Endo's widow, was shocked to learn that the English and French translations employ the imperative mood rather than the permissive mood of the original Japanese, and she is working with the publishers of *Silence* to alter future printings. Not only is "Trample!" not an imperative, according to Junko Endo, but also it likely represents a feminine voice as juxtaposed to a triumphant, patriarchal voice of Jesus.

3 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 182.

4 Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1991), 218.



BRETT R. DEWEY

is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Religion at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.