

Endo Shusaku's Novels and Religious Pluralism.

A reply to Prof. Emi Mase-Hasegawa

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Seven years ago, I had a big chance to assist in Tokyo at an opera based on the well-known novel of Endo Shusaku: "Silence". I remember again the voice of the commentator reminding the audience that Endo Shusaku was then completing his journey on earth in a hospital and would remain for most of his compatriots a faithful Japanese writer who described Christianity—brought to Japan with its European traditions, its intense faith commitment and its ways of understanding—as inappropriate to Japanese sensitivity and culture.

The tensest part of the Opera came when Sebastian Rodriguez, a representative of the indomitable mission spirit of the Jesuits, was captured, forced to endure the torture of the pit and finally recanted his faith. Rodriguez felt his apostasy would save his Christian followers. From my experience of missionary life in Japan, I think that various conclusions can be drawn from Endo Shusaku's Silence novel.

First of all Endo insists on the fact that God's silence persists amid the presence of evil. God does not intervene in the cruel persecution of Christians, so the priest sees himself as responsible for the lives of those required to step on the *fumie* (Christ figure on a copper tablet).

Secondly, Endo criticized the triumphal exaltation of martyrdom as a way for Christians to achieve intimacy with the ultimate reality. He strongly emphasized God's compassionate love for the weak and forgiveness of sins (apostates) as the most important value of the Christian faith. Because religious people are always longing for the transcendent, they never achieve their goal and are always on the way.

Henceforth, from the point of view of Endo's Silence or from his Life of Christ, Rodriguez's reaction toward persecution is not understood as an act of treason to God but an act which describes Jesus Christ as the Compassionate One speaking words of mercy to

women in trouble, to a grief stricken officer, to slow hearts of disciples, to the repentant thief on Calvary, to the disciples in the way to Emmaus, and in particular to Judas who betrayed him. Jesus' way to Calvary was marked by the silence of God. There was no intervention from God but Jesus was aware of his deep link to the Father and this total trust in God accompanied him. Trust was the most important action of Jesus on the cross. Endo also found this heroic character lived anew in the 17th century Japanese martyrs.

Furthermore Endo's novel "Silence" probes the mission drama as it appears in its internal paradox between universal and particular values within the Christian church. Endo presents Jesus as the love of God extended to all humanity. This message of Christ's love has been transmitted to Japan via the excessive clarity and abundant logic of European thinking. This made Japanese people feel out of harmony with European Christianity. Here appears the main theme of his last master-piece "Deep River". Here again we are introduced to the main theological reflection of Endo's novels. Christianity has to be acculturated in Japan. Christianity must Japanize to become understandable and acceptable by Japanese. Christianity must accept dialogue with the existent religions of the country.

For instance, in "Deep River", Endo's admiration of the sites of ancient Buddhism and Hindu temples raised the question of the grace of God reaching out to the billions of their followers in Asia. Strictly speaking, Endo used the word reincarnation to explain that Christian resurrection is God's grace bestowed on humankind and not only reserved to Christians.

Therefore I would like to stress that a very sharp problem of post-modern evangelization is how inculturation should be done and what its implications are for Asia and Japan. The post-colonial resurgence of national and cultural identities has brought to the Church a renewed realization of the need to reaffirm cultural identities also within the Church herself seen as a communion of local Churches. A local Church comes about when a people respond to the gospel from within their own cultural context. Therefore, the dialogue between gospel and cultures is at the heart of evangelization. This dialogue, generally called inculturation, is the most important element of the process that ends up in making the Church truly local. That goes far beyond the assimilation, acceptance or adaptation of certain innocent elements of a non-Christian religion and culture in the evangelization process.

As for the Japanese church, inculturation means formulating Christ's teaching in Japanese terms and then expressing Christ

himself in terms of Japan's culture and history. It is not merely a case of distinguishing between what is Japanese and what is European, but rather discovering how best to present Jesus' words and deeds so that they become part of Japan's culture. There is no thought of changing a nation's culture, the concept so common in colonizing days.

As described by H. Byron Earhart, "The unity of Japanese religion is evidenced by a nexus of persistent themes that are present in most historical periods and cut across most of the religious strands. One may be dominant in one period or more prominent in one religious strand, but generally they all interacted to form the total world-view of the traditional person. Six themes whose recurrence may be taken as a sign of the unity of Japanese religion are (1) the closeness of human beings, gods, and nature; (2) the religious character of the family; (3) the significance of purification, rituals and charms; (4) the prominence of local festivals and individual cults; (5) the pervasiveness of religion in everyday life; and (6) the natural bond between religion and the nation"¹

Unlike monotheist religions such as Judaism and Christianity, Japanese religion emphasizes neither one sovereign God nor a sharp distinction between the several gods and human beings. Mortals and gods alike share in the beauty of nature. The tendency of Judaeo-Christian theology is to think of a hierarchy with God first, human beings second, and nature a poor third. In Japanese religion the three are on more or less equal terms. Mortals, gods, and nature form a triangle of harmonious interrelationships.²

As several of you know, Japanese religion is a blend of at least five major strands: folk religion, Shinto, Buddhism, religious Taoism, and Confucianism. Christianity, which entered Japan in the sixteen century, may be considered a sixth strand, but since it did not contribute to the formation of traditional Japanese religion, it was anti-Japanese and against the Japanese religious traditions.³ Christianity was considered anti-Japanese because a Japanese Christian was loyal to foreign gods and to foreign priests, rather than to native *kami* and to the local Japanese feudal lord.

Until today Japanese understanding of "gods" is either the *kami* of Shinto (human beings, ancestors, animals, natural phenomena) or the

1 H. Byron Earhart, *Japanese Religion. Unity and diversity*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1982,7.

2 Cf. *ibidem*, 7.

3 Cf. *ibidem*, 121.

Buddhas and bodhisattvas of Buddhism.⁴ The question that should be asked when people stress the importance of inculturation of the Gospel in Japan is “inculturation” into what?

Japanese folk religions are deeply influenced by the early Buddhist tradition. Therefore, “I do not believe that it is the role of Christianity in Japan to do away with and to supplant or even absorb the other religions: Shinto, the Buddhist sects, [etc.]... This would not be a positive contribution to ... Japan and should thus not be aimed at with inculturation as a strategic means.”⁵ As Christians, we should abstain from attacks on Buddhism, Shinto and other religions. But through a sincere dialogue, it may be indicated to conscientize one another to one’s shortcomings. As a matter of fact, Christianity should abstain and resolutely resist from some practices of proselytism which are strong in some fundamentalist Protestant sects. It is not worthy to pull true convinced Buddhists away from their Buddhist allegiance. Christian proselytizing efforts should be directed at people who for some reason do not find the spiritual food they need in the established religions. Notwithstanding, it can happen that some of these convinced Buddhists or Shintoists experience a conversion to Christ and then want to join the Church.

But to become understandable by the Japanese, Christianity by some means has to take into account some predominant Buddhist values reflecting the common understanding of the Japanese society and its culture. This does not mean that Christianity is inferior to the eyes of local people. This will certainly enable it to express itself accordingly to the sensitivity and world-view of Japanese Christians. For example the respect for Karma, the respect for life, the Buddhist teaching of selflessness and nothingness, the spirit of meditation, the generosity in giving, the aesthetic sensitivity and the respect for nature are some of the most important values that shape our everyday living in Japan. As far as I understand them, they contain more or less some meanings close to our understanding of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Christianity has been distorted in the West and explained through the blatant individualism and attitudes of self-affirmation. However, Christianity, while insisting on maintaining and promoting faith in Christ should recognize that this task “cannot be done in abstract and timeless terms, or from the mere desire for self-assertion. It has a definable and circumscribed place amongst modern problems.”⁶

4 For further information see Inoe Nobutaka, ed., *Kami. Contemporary Papers on Japanese Religion 4*, Tokyo: Kokugakuin University, 1998.

5 Jan Van Bragt, cicm, “Inculturation of the Gospel Values in Buddhist Countries”, *The Japan Mission Journal*, vol.52/4(1998) 229.

6 J.Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, New York: Harper&Row, 1974,7.

As underlined by Endo Shusaku's *Deep River*, in Asia, besides a strong wind of inculturation in some countries, "the great religious traditions which are older than Christianity look at us and ask: What can your Christian faith and its tradition offer us that we do not yet have?"⁷ But unlike Endo Shusaku and Prof.Emi who overemphasize the need for a new world order and a process of purification through which Christianity has to pass to cease being the religion of the Holy Roman Empire, Western Culture, and Euro-American Capitalism⁸, I would like to stress with Marc R.Mullins that "the clash between Christianity and Japanese religious sensibilities was rooted in the fact that the missionary carriers of the New Religion came from a culture that gave primacy to the nuclear family and to short-term separation rites for the dead. The Japanese receivers of the New religion came from a culture that gave primacy to the ie system and to long-term liminal rites for the household dead".⁹ Therefore, it is then clear that Christianity is both a gift of faith and an imported religion that must still be rooted in Japan to the extent that it is no longer perceived as an alien or deviant phenomenon.¹⁰ Aloysius Pieris brings a good contribution to this debate. According to him Christian Church must be humble enough to be baptized in the Jordan of Asian religiosity and bold enough to be baptized on the cross of Asian poverty.

To be more precise, in the above perspective of inculturation and religious pluralism outlined in Endo Shusaku's Novels, let us say that inculturation cannot be seen any longer as "a strategic means", used to bring all Japanese individuals into the bosom of the Church. In this way we must be animated by the strong conviction that Christianity needs Japan, and Japan equally needs Christianity. Christianity needs the unique sensibilities of Japanese people for a fuller understanding of Christ's gospel; Japan needs Christianity because its people have religious needs which can be met only by Christianity.

7 J.Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, Manila: Divine Word Publ., 1974,XIV.

8 See for details, Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, Malden, Massachussts: Blackwell, 1997.

9 Mark R.Mullins, *Christianity made in Japan*, USA: University of Hawaii's Press, 1998,136.

10 Cf.Ibidem, 170.