

# Image of Christ for Japanese Reflections on Shusaku Endo's Novels

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*Emi Mase-Hasegawa was born in 1970 in Japan to Christian parents. At the age of twelve, she spent time abroad in the U.S.A. and since then has felt increasingly uneasy about being a Christian. Engulfed by self-criticism, she encountered the novels of Shusaku Endo. Like Endo, her commitment to Western Christianity has been a major issue throughout her life. Through her study of Endo's novels, she explores his challenge of inculturating Christianity in a given context, transcending the traditional Western framework of Christianity. Now she is finishing her doctorate thesis at the University of Lund, Sweden, entitled "The Spirit of Christ Inculturated - Theology Implicit in the Literary Works of Shusaku Endo." She is a researcher at the NCC Study Center for Japanese Religions in Kyoto, Japan. She is married to a Buddhist and has a three-year-old son.*

## INTRODUCTION

My paper aims at raising the problem of the relationship between religions and culture, and my main concern is from the perspective of transplanting religions from one culture to another. The word "adaptation" or "accommodation" (mostly in Catholicism) or "indigenization" (mostly in Protestantism) described the missionary approach to culture. Much research has been devoted to the question of Christianity and culture in Japan. Japanese words for this relationship vary, expressing such meanings as "acceptance", "reception", or 'perception'.<sup>1</sup> Frequently, the term "indigenization" is translated as *dochaku* which literally means "to take root in the soil". This concept often appears in modern missiological thought, but presupposes a static or stable "indigenous" culture.<sup>2</sup> Later, this concept was replaced by words such as "inculturation"<sup>3</sup>, which leaves room for a Christian encounter with a changing culture. This

1 Japanese translations are: *tekio* (適応) adaptation, *juyo* (受容) reception, *bunka nai kaika* (文化内開化) inculturation, and *bunmyakuka* (文脈化) contextualization. However, I have not encountered any Japanese essays or thesis analyzing the terms.

2 Takeda 1967.

was particularly relevant after the impact of modernization on the indigenous culture and religion. There is, however, a new concept currently used to express the relation between Christianity and culture: “Contextualization”. This implies an understanding of Christianity in “context”, a word which widens and transcends the concept of culture.<sup>4</sup>

This question of terminology is a very sensitive issue. I prefer the term “inculturation” for two reasons. First, the term inculturation focuses on culture, and translated as *bunka-nai-kaika* which literally means “blooming in culture”. The focus is on the cultural feature in which the gospel took form. Second, while “accommodation”, “adaptation”, and “indigenization” emphasize the “givers” perspective, “inculturation” emphasizes the perspective of the “receiver”. Obviously, the Japanese people and culture are “receivers” of Christian teachings. However, “receive” should not be understood as a passive attitude but as an active part of the missionary process. It is a creative reception, a dynamic reinterpretation of the transmitted faith. Therefore, I believe that the term “inculturation”, although, narrower than “contextualization”, carries a wider meaning and dimension than “adaptation”, “accommodation”, or “indigenization”. “Inculturation” implies reinterpretation, and it presupposes active participation by persons within the culture itself. In this sense, I interpret Endo’s life and his literary works as a significant model of Christian inculturation in Japan.<sup>5</sup>

- 3 “J. Masson coined the phrase Catholicism inculture (inculturated Catholicism) in 1962. It soon gained currency among Jesuits, in the form of “inculturation” In 1977 the Jesuit superior-general, Aruope, introduced the term to the Synod of Bishops. The Apostolic Exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae* (CT), which flowed from this synod, took it up and gave it universal currency (cf. Muller 1986:134; 1987: 178). It was soon also accepted in Protestant circles and is today one of the most widely used concepts in missiological circles.” Bosch 1991: 447.
- 4 The debate and clarification of the latter concept is in particularly represented by American missiologists. Bevans 2000.
- 5 Regarding my usage of the term “inculturation”, cf. Kuschel: “The inculturation of Christianity is understood as a process of the acceptance and transformation of the various cultures of peoples and nations which cannot be concluded in history—as a counter-concept to the way in which, over the centuries, missions have made Christianity with an exclusively Western stamp a foreign body within non-Western cultures. The accommodation, indigenization and contextualization of the gospel are parallel concepts. This kind of inculturation is deliberately focused on the development of new types of Christianity. An authentically African, Asian, Latin American Christianity is called for in which the Christian message is expressed and lived anew in the language of the particular cultures. This kind of inculturation is indispensable, and the intercultural, contextual theology which has meanwhile come into being in Asia, Latin America and Africa is of the utmost significance for the capacity of Christianity to survive spiritually in the third millennium.” Kuschel 1997/99: 21.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Japan is a small island in East Asia with a population of 123 million. Its indigenous faith is Shinto, while Buddhism arrived via China in 538. Christianity was first introduced in the century following Francis Xavier's arrival in 1549, and the Roman Catholic Church grew after his arrival.<sup>6</sup> However, Christianity was banned at the beginning of the period known as the national isolation – from 1639–1853. In 1858, Christian missionaries were again allowed to enter the country, this being the second introduction of Christianity. A further period of Christian mission followed after Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945.

Although Christianity has more than 230 years of history in Japan, it nonetheless still carries the Western dogmatic accent. The Christian population in Japan comprises less than 1 %, making it a very minor religion indeed,<sup>7</sup> and indicating that Christianity is considered an alien religion, not yet rooted in the country. This situation is a personal concern for many Japanese Christians.

For me, as well as for Endo, Christianity was a religion received from my parents, and the Christian “God” and Jesus Christ were already present within me from a very early age. However, being a Christian in Japan is not an easy task when one becomes self-critical about one's identity as an ‘authentic’ Christian. In this paper, I would like to present the disputed questions of being a Christian in the Japanese context, and try to show how I received Christianity through the Image of Christ, reflecting on theology implicit in the work of Shusaku Endo (1923–1996), a Japanese Roman Catholic novelist). His method I interpret as a self-critical hermeneutical strategy challenging Western dogmatic Christianity.

### A CHALLENGE TO THE WEST: *SILENCE*

The novel, *Silence* by Endo Shusaku, though written in fictional form, is a narrative based on real history, on the harshest period of persecution in Japan. During the persecution Christian churches were destroyed, foreign missionaries expelled, and Japanese Christians ruthlessly tortured and killed. From this time on Christians went into

6 Indeed, the 16th century is often characterized as a Christian century by Western scholars: cf. Boxer 1951/1993, Phillips 1981, Kitagawa 1987 and other Western scholars. However, Christianity was still a minor religion even at that time. Thus, I would prefer to speak of a “emerging Christianity”. Inappropriate use of the term “Christian Century” is also noted by Prof. Takenaka Masao.

7 The survey in the Christian Almanac 2002 states that the Christian population in Japan is 1,097,730 (Believers: 1,086,685 and Clergy: 11,045). This is 0.8649% of the total Japanese population. Quoted in Kirisuto-kyo shinbun (Christianity), 2001.10.6

hiding, hence the term *Kakure-Kirishitan* (Hidden Christians). During the time of national isolation, Japanese officials controlled people by forcing them to walk on the *fumie* (a brass image of Christ's face) annually, as a visible sign of unbelief or of renunciation of faith; thus the *Kakure Kirishitans* declared themselves openly Buddhist, and denied Christ every year, or whenever they were questioned by the authorities. They did whatever they could in order to escape suspicion. They were deprived of religious freedom for two and a half centuries.<sup>8</sup>

In the book Sebastian Rodrigues is a Portuguese missionary and stowaway who enters Japan during its isolationist policy. He is soon captured and suffers many trials. He is told that as long as he stays a Christian, other Japanese *Kirishitans* will be killed instead of him. He then realizes that if Christ were here, (in Japan at this time of persecution)..., certainly Christ would have apostatized to help other Japanese. Finally Rodrigues steps on to the *fumie*, the icon of Jesus Christ, and abandons his faith with pain. At that moment he hears the voice of Christ saying:

You may trample. You may trample.  
I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot.  
You may trample.  
It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world.  
It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross.<sup>9</sup>

Hearing the voice of Christ through the *fumie*, Rodrigues understands the real meaning of love. In this last section of the novel, I understand that Endo questions the historical Christendom that cherished the martyrdom of Christ. Endo does not oppose martyrdom out loud, but he implicitly criticizes the Western

8 *Kakure Kirishitan* (Hidden Christians) are nowadays known as the descendants of communities who maintained the Christian faith in Japan during the time of persecution, which lasted from about 1614 -1873, and who then chose not to rejoin the Catholic church. A few descendants of *Kakure Kirishitans* still exists only in Nagasaki prefecture, the southern islands of Japan, in Sotome, Ikutsuki, and Goto.

9 Endo, 1966. Restated in my own words. W. Johnston translated "*fumu ga ii*" 「踏むがいい」 as "Trample!" Even though I appreciate the English translation, by William Johnston, I am opposed to this part of the translation "Trample!" in an imperative form. In the original Japanese text, it is "*fumu ga ii*" 「踏むがいい」 and it shows a more passive aspect of Jesus, emphasizing his weakness. It should rather be translated in a more motherly form as "You may trample". This is important, and shows Endo's Christology involves the feminine aspect of Jesus. Some English readers were misled and made comments such as "Rodrigues tramples because Christ commands him to. His betrayal is thus an act of submission and obedience to Christ, a real act of love as well." Thus Startzman, 1984: 62 also Cohen, 1993: 111. See also Gessel 1993: 72, who prefers to translate "Trample!" as benevolent words of permission: "(it is) alright to trample".

theological ideological concept of God, and Martyrdom “for” God. God does not demand human sacrifice, because God is Love. This must be the core of Christian teaching.

This, then, is the personal challenge that I received from the novel: it is not only the formality of stepping on an icon, but of stepping on the Western, idealistic Image of God, the creator, redeemer, ruler, almighty father, of majesty and power. The Christ on the *fumie* suffered as Rodrigues and all others. In the novel, I heard the constant cry: what does it mean to be a Christian? Endo was trying to transcend and reshape the traditional Western framework of Christianity so that it could be rooted in the Japanese culture, tradition, and way of life.

#### ENDO’S IMAGE OF CHRIST

The history of *Kakure Kirishitans* in Japan is the history of suffering. They had to live a double life of being Shinto/ Buddhists socially, and Christians personally. In such a cruel persecution of Christianity, the *Kakure Kirishitans* managed to survive in rural areas under the protection of a Shinto shrine and Buddhist temple. They were weak in faith, could not endure physical punishment and apostatized. They lacked the courage to die as martyrs, and went through this form of recantation, but after that cowardly act, they went back to their miserable hovels and begged for forgiveness. Japanese Christians today are in a sense, descendants of converts who betray God again and again.

From this historical evidence of Japanese Christians, Endo builds an image of Christ who is in solidarity with the Japanese people living in a multiple religious context. Endo writes *Silence* from the world of the sorrowful, the weak, and the cowardly with no intention to glorify them or heal them.<sup>10</sup> From this starting-point Endo began seeking a Christ for *Kakure Kirishitans*, for himself and for the Japanese Christian minority.

Endo emphasizes the struggling with Christ, trying to understand Christ, and the experiencing of the presence of Christ. The core of the Christianity that Endo presents is the Jesus Christ who offered his life through deeds of love and service to all.

10 Endo claims: “as I stood facing the valley, I thought that if the *Kirishitans* were to be divided into the weak and the strong, I would be among the former. It was from this standpoint that I decided to write the novel. I would write it from the point of view of a weakling who did not have the strength to maintain his belief against fear for his body and uncertainty of death.” Endo 1970: 103.

## JESUS RE-MYTHOLOGIZED

Following the publication of *Silence*<sup>11</sup> in 1966, Endo's approach takes a new turn in that he begins to re-mythologize Jesus as a powerless man in a worldly sense but powerful in sacred terms.

Jesus was presented as one of the marginalized. He was crucified as weak, suffered, and died in all his agony. After his miserable death, disciples realized the fact that through Jesus' life he showed them that God relates to each person positively and firmly and stands by their side. When the disciples realized this fact, Jesus began to live within them, and this is the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus as Christ. It is the paradox that Jesus' apparent weakness is in fact his true strength, and that this so-called 'weak' Jesus appeals to the Japanese, because they can sense – and indeed experience – the strength that lies behind it. The resurrection of Jesus as a glorified king is not the central issue of Jesus' divinity. Resurrection is not a historical "fact" but a spiritual "truth".

## CHRIST AT PRESENT: *DEEP RIVER*

*Deep River* was published three years before Endo Shusaku's death in 1996. In the novel, Endo focuses on the globalization of religions, basing himself in the Japanese present religious situation where a diversity of religions co-exist in the culture, and people do not hesitate to synthesize different religions.<sup>12</sup> They go to shrines, temples, and churches, and worship in all of them without hesitation. They see no difficulty or inconvenience in belonging to two or more religions.<sup>13</sup> Most of the Japanese people respect an individual religiosity and regard religions as dynamic entities that should be transformed with people and culture. This attitude toward a diversity of religious life is sustained in harmony with a plural value orientation. The harmony of diversity has played an important role in the Japanese religio-cultural situation and religious pluralism in

11 Gessel (1979:408) makes a division between before 1960 and after 1963. I agree with him that Endo's writings mature after his hospitalization in 1963 leading him to write *Silence* (1966). However, I regard 1966 as the opening of the second stage in his literature.

12 Ref. Bragt in Cornill (ed.) 2002: 7-19.

13 Dale states: "Japanese religiosity is characterized by a syncretistic view of all religion. Most Japanese are both Buddhist and Shinto at the same time. According to the Yearbook of Religions compiled by the Ministry of Education for 1993 (numbers under one hundred thousand deleted): Shinto—116,900,000; Buddhist—89,900,000; Christian—1,500,000; other—11,300,000; total—219,700,000. The surprise comes when this total is put alongside the total population of Japan—about 125,000,000! One of the reasons for this syncretistic phenomenon is that many strata of religious traditions exist. As new strata were added, they did not replace the old, but were simply an addition. So today there is still the primitive strata of Shintoism, plus the strata of Buddhism, plus the strata of Confucian ethics, plus the Christian influence, etc." Dale, 1996:3 and 34

Japan is not a theory but is exercised daily by people respecting adherents of other religions. People hardly quarrel over religion in Japan. But in such a religio-cultural context, what does it mean to be a Christian whose religion requires the commitment to the “One” ultimate truth?

Here I shall confine myself to one issue, that of the Image of Christ presented by Endo through the protagonist Ootsu.<sup>14</sup> Ootsu is a Japanese-born Christian who is teased by a beautiful woman at university and has to choose between his faith and her. After choosing the woman rather than Jesus, he is snubbed by her. At a loss, he visits a chapel and hears the voice of Jesus saying, “Come. I was rejected as you have been, but I will never abandon you.”<sup>15</sup> Ootsu returns to Jesus and decides to become a priest. He goes abroad to study in France, but is criticized and rejected by his superiors at the seminary and the novitiate because, unconsciously and in common with other Japanese Christians, he inherits a poly-/pantheistic religious sensibility, and he could not help coming into conflict with traditional Western dogmatic theology. Ootsu is condemned by the Church. Here, Endo explicitly protests: Is there a true faith of Christianity? Is the European brand of Christianity the absolute religion? And if so, will Japanese whose religious sensibility is opposed to western Christianity never be able to become qualified Christians?

Endo then challenges the Western dogmatic Christianity leading Ootsu (a failure as a priest in Western Christianity) into a personal relationship with God as a Japanese Christian through social work in India, in a Hindu World.. “Then Jesus told his disciples, If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”<sup>16</sup>

#### CHRIST AS A SYMBOL OF LOVE

Ootsu stays at a Hindu Ashram, dressed as an outcast. Every day he carries on his back the poor, weakened, and dying Hindus from the street to the crematory pyres by the River Ganges. He is imitating the acts of Jesus, poor and weak, lacking response and

14 Not all but some part of Ootsu’s experiences and thoughts are modeled on Fr. Inoue Yoji (1927- ), who boarded the same ship as Endo to study abroad when they were young.

Fr. Inoue returned to Japan in 1957 (four years after Endo’s return) and became a priest in 1960. Inoue searched for an inculturation of Christianity in Japan, both as a priest in the field of theology, and in practice through meeting Japanese Christians. Inoue and Endo had the same concern, and Inoue became a lifelong friend and the spiritual support for Endo until his last moments.

15 Endo 1993/98:101 (1994:62)

16 Matthew 16-24.

understanding, who carried the cross, took the sorrows of all men on his back, and climbed the hill of Golgotha. Ootsu genuinely believes that were Jesus to be here, he would also take the dead on the street to the crematory, and imitate the act of Love. Exhausted, Ootsu worships alone at the ashram in the Hindu language. He loves Jesus and follows him by sharing others' suffering.

Endo reveals his own image of Christ in the life of Ootsu, who has failed in authoritarian Christianity, yet ended up living in India following Jesus' Way. Endo finally comes to the reflection on his religious experience that the Love of God through Jesus Christ is present in this world not only in European churches, but can be found in Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as in other religions.<sup>17</sup> The life of Jesus manifested in Ootsu demonstrates that "Love" subordinates to itself all religious systems, dogma, traditions, organized institutions, or boundaries. Ootsu is a weakling, yet strong in the universality of Christ Jesus as the center of his faith, and his work is presented as a process moving toward a pluralistic understanding of Christ. Christ is in solidarity with him, with his maternal love and as an eternal companion. Endo's *Imago Christi* matures through the transition from Christocentric to Pneumacentric, so that the Divine Spirit of Christ is disclosed within Ootsu. Endo's outstanding contribution to modern Christianity in his novels is his understanding of Christ as a symbol of Love in the social context. He points directly to social awareness and commitment. And Jesus could just as well be called 'the Onion':

Through Ootsu, Endo states:

"If the Onion came to this city, he of all people would carry the fallen on his back and take them to the cremation grounds. Just as he bore the cross on his back while he was alive....But, in the end, I've decided that my Onion doesn't live only within European Christianity. He can be found in Hinduism and in Buddhism as well. This is no longer just an idea in my head, it's a way of life I've chosen for myself."<sup>18</sup>

To find this Spirit of Love in every religions was not just an idea in his head, but was drawn from his religious experiences living in the religio-cultural context where the harmony of diversity was appreciated.

17 He states: "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." I was viciously reprimanded: "These are the notions born of your pantheistic delusions!" Endo 1993/98: 196-199. (121-123)

18 Endo 1993/98: 300- 301. (184)



Endo's challenge is comparable to John Hick's hypothesis of Religious Pluralism. Endo claims it is not necessary to hold onto the institutional church doctrines of Western theology, or even to the name of God, Jesus Christ, Kami, or Buddha. It is openly stressed by Ootsu, that "if one is unfamiliar with or gets irritated with the terms

God, Jesus, or Christ, it can be called 'x' or 'tomato' or 'onion'.<sup>19</sup> Endo explains "Onion exists everywhere... Onion is Love, a life force that enables us to live."<sup>20</sup>

#### SPIRIT OF CHRIST IN THE WORLD CULTURE

In the last scene of *Deep River*, Endo presents a dying woman confronting a Japanese (Mitsuko) who is about to depart from India. Two young nuns (a white nun and a dark nun) in gray frocks from the "Mission of Charity" are going to take her to their home to care for her until she dies. She sees Ootsu's pathetic life in these nuns, too. (In the end Ootsu receives life-threatening injuries from his altruistic interventions.) She runs toward them and in her honesty, asks why they are doing such acts. It is a realistic question that many would ask. With a look of surprise, the nun slowly replies, "Because except for this... there is nothing in this world that we can believe in".<sup>21</sup> Her words for "this" do not describe clearly what she means exactly. If the nun had said "Only Him", then she means Ootsu's Onion, Jesus Christ. But she does not signify whether "this" is personal or impersonal. Only the author implicitly confesses that "this" is the Onion, the other name for Christ, but enclosed in an infinite embracement of Love.

As for secular terms, the life of Ootsu and the acts of the nuns, to believe in and follow a powerless Jesus might seem like an immobilized act in this realistic world, but still there are Christians who follow that way in their acts of love, service and sacrifice. Love speaks through their total commitment, spiritual energy, and their embracing love for others. Endo's attempt at the incarnation of Christ as a symbol of Love claims that their spiritual strength will surely be passed on to others.

19 Endo 1993/98: 103. (1994: 63)

Also, Endo writes: "If Japanese do not prefer using the term Christ, it can be called "Onion", or "X". However, the "X" took the form as Christ for me. For others, it may appear as Buddha." Endo 1983/88: 35.

"x is certainly 'Lives, Life something that makes human beings live higher --- I myself call it Jesus." Ibid.

20 "God is not so much an existence as a force. This Onion is an entity that performs the labors of love." Endo 1993/98: 104. (1994: 64)

21 Endo 1993/98: 350. (215)

When the mission approach gave precedence to Christian baptism, converting people of other faiths, the aim was for Christian expansionism and a development of a colonial power structure. However, as I understand Endo's protest, a person's task is not to convert people of other faiths. That should be left to the Spirit. It is the same with the inculturation of Christianity. Inculturation ought not to be based on power domination but on serving others through the Spirit.

Primarily, the kernel of Christian teaching for Endo was the Spirit of God's love incarnated in Christ given to the world. In his literature, Endo presents his understanding of love.<sup>22</sup> Jesus, who was totally powerless, an abject failure, abandoned by everyone, never deserted other people. Love means to be in solidarity with others, and to serve as an eternal companion with the essence of maternal love. Jesus Christ as love incarnate is reborn in every one, in the yellow man Ootsu, in the white nun, and in the dark nun. In describing a Christ-like selfless-love, Endo presented the ideal that one can lead a religious life anonymously, abandoning status and fame. That is similar to the concept of "kenosis" found in the Bible.<sup>23</sup>

Endo's interpretation of God's boundless love is centered on the very weakness of Jesus Christ. He maintained his Image of Christ in the midst of cultural diversity and presented Christ manifested in the "Far East". In this way, the very weakness of Jesus gave power and appeal in the contemporary Japanese cultural context. It was a transformation of the Western dogmatic understanding of Christianity in order to establish roots in the context.<sup>24</sup> Jesus Christ becomes powerless in solidarity with suffering people, maternally embracing love, as an eternal companionship. The Spirit of Christ inculturated in world culture is a diaconal service of love in a given context with no ulterior motives.

I believe Endo's Image of Christ, developed in his own cultural context, opened up a much wider, deeper, and global view of theology - toward world culture.

22 Endo 1973(b) See 4.3.1.

23 Philippians 2:5-11. Ref. Eto 1998: 165.

24 I Ban, a Korean playwright writes that "*Silence*, I believe, has unleashed a new wind in Asia to blow away the Western image of Jesus" I Ban (Lee Ban) 1988:159.

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