STR 11.2 (Fall 2020): 29–46

The Christ of the Mudswamp: Christology in Japanese Perspective

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In this article, I examine Christology in Japanese perspective through the lens of Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo 遠藤周作 and illustrate how Endo's Christ, who is weak and humble, is fitting to Japanese sensibility. To this end, I first present a brief summary of Endo's life and the history of Japan, and then discuss his Christology, along with his metaphor of the mudswamp, which Endo uses to explore the relation between faith and culture in Japan. The essay concludes with a brief criticism of Endo's Christology and some points of application for sharing Christ with Japanese. In the end, I argue that despite the shortcomings of Endo's Christology, Endo succeeds in conceptualizing Christ as one who can fathom the contortions and suffering of the mudswamp's inhabitants—Japanese. Christ in this context is therefore not the triumphant Christ of the West, but rather the meek and sorrowful Christ, the eternal companion of the weak and the wretched, the Christ who inhabits Japanese sensibility.

Key Words: Endo Shusaku 遠藤周作, eternal suffering companion, evangelism of Japanese, fumie 踏み絵, ill-fitting clothes, ineffectualness, Japanese Christology, Kakure Kirishitan 隠れ切支丹 (hidden Christians), maternal Christ, mudswamp

"Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. 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."[1] These were the words of Jesus through a *fumie* 踏み絵[2]—a small bronze plaque bearing the image of Christ—spoken to Sebastian Rodrigues, as he was forced to step on the *fumie* by his captor, Nagasaki magistrate Inoue Masashige 井上政重.[3]

[1] Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston (New York: Taplinger, 1980), 171 (emphasis added).

[2] During the Tokugawa period 徳川時代 (1603–1868)—a period of severe persecution—*fumie* were used to identify Christians; those who could not step on the *fumie* were identified as Christians and were arrested and tortured until they apostatized or died for their faith. I'll have more to say about this in the following section, "A Brief History of Japan."

[3] In Japan, family names are listed first, followed by a person's given name.

This is the climactic scene from the Japanese novel *Silence* 沈黙.[4] *Silence* tells the story of a young Portuguese Jesuit priest, Sebastian Rodrigues, who struggles to find the meaning of faith and the presence of God in the midst of severe persecution in seventeenth-century Japan. His face worn down due to constant trampling by recanting Christians, the image of Jesus that appears on the *fumie* speaks softly to an anguished Rodrigues.

Since its publication in 1966, *Silence* has captured the hearts and minds of Japanese people—both Christians and non-Christians. The author, Endo Shusaku 遠藤周作 (1923–1996), who was a Roman Catholic, depicts Christ as meek and humble—a companion of the weak and oppressed—and adumbrates a *Christus dolor* theology, a theology of the sorrows of Christ, through his novels, which span a forty-five-year writing career (1947–1993). Yet, Endo was not alone in this sentiment. Many of his predecessors and contemporaries shared this view of Christ as a sufferer rather than a victor. Uchimura Kanzo 内村鑑三 (1861–1930), an influential Japanese writer and Christian thinker, once said of the focus of Western Christology on Christ as a victor, "Christianity in the West has become an anomaly."[5]

As a Japanese seminary student, a former Buddhist who converted to Christianity in the US, I took many theology classes. I never related what I was learning to my own cultural context until my preaching professor, the late Calvin Miller, asked me whether I had read any of Endo's works. He learned that I had never read Endo, so he recommended that I read *Silence*. As I read through *Silence*, I felt as if the book reached out and grabbed my heart—the Jesus who appeared in those pages was strangely *familiar* and *fitting* to my soul. The Jesus whom I encountered was a man of sorrow who had "nothing in his appearance that we should desire him"

[4] *Silence* was published by Shinchosha 新潮社 in 1966 and has been translated into thirteen languages. Recently, film director Martin Scorsese made a movie based on *Silence*, which had been in the works for more than twenty years. Author Kato Muneya 加藤宗哉, Endo Shusaku's long-time friend and mentee, recalls Endo meeting with Scorsese over twenty-six years ago in New York City and says that Endo was excited about Scorsese's proposal. Unfortunately, Endo died five years later and did not live to see the film, which was finally released in 2016 (see Tomoshi Kimura, "Silence: Endo Shusaku's Mentee of Thirty Years Speaks" 遠藤周作に30年寄り添った弟子に聞く『沈黙』, https://business.nikkei.com/atcl/interview/15/238739/01270022 9/?P=1).

[5] Kanzo Uchimura, "Christianity and Buddhism," in *The Japan Christian Intelligence*, vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of Kanzo Uchimura* (Tokyo: Kyobunkwan [sic], 1972), 59, quoted in Richard J. Mouw and Douglas A. Sweeney, *The Suffering and Victorious Christ: Toward a More Compassionate Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 2.

(Isa 53:2). I felt that this Jesus searched the depths of my soul and captivated my mind and that I could not look away from his sorrowful eyes.

Endo Shusaku: A Theologian of the People

Reasons for Focusing on Endo

As my story of encountering the suffering Christ illustrates, one's cultural background has a significant impact on how one understands Christian theology—and in this context, the person and work of Christ. No single tradition or perspective can exhaust the infinite richness of Christ. As a result, we can learn from each other's perspectives to gain a more holistic view of Christ. While Endo was not a theologian,[6] I contend that his work is helpful for understanding how Japanese Christians tend to view Jesus, and how this view can enrich our Christology. As Richard Bauckham observes, a "novelist cannot speak directly of divine reality but only of his human characters' encounters with it, experiences of it and views about it."[7] If our encounters (and thereby perspectives) with divine reality is the scope of this study, Endo is an ideal subject. Endo admitted

[6] It should be noted that a number of Endo's beliefs were controversial. In fact, when *Silence* was first published, it ignited harsh criticisms and condemnations among Japanese Christians. In response, William Johnston, who translated *Silence* into English, recalls that Endo "often protested that he was writing literature, not theology." Yet, he states, "on these occasions many of his remarks showed that he was not indifferent to the theological implications of what he wrote." See William Johnston, translator's Preface to Shūsaku Endō, *Silence*, by Shusaku Endo, trans. William Johnston (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1980), xiv. After *Silence*, in a quest to inculturate Christianity in the Japanese context, Endo began to read New Testament scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1974) in order to reinvestigate the New Testament. Consequently, he adopted a demythologizing approach to Jesus (see *A Life of Jesus* [1973] and *The Birth of Christ* [1978]). Further, toward the end of his life, he came to embrace religious pluralism. Emi Mase-Hasegawa recounts how Endo asked his father, Mase Hiromasa (1938–), professor emeritus of philosophy at Keio University, to teach him about the pluralism of John Hick. Mase studied under Hick in England from 1974 to 1975. See Emi Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture: Theological Themes in Shusaku Endo's Literary Works* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 168. For criticism of Endo's pluralism, see How Chuang Chua, "Japanese Perspectives on the Death of Christ: A Study in Contextualized Christology" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2007), 263–72.

[7] Richard Bauckham, "The Cross and Human Suffering: Insights from East and West" (paper presented at Suffering and Hope in Jesus Christ: Christological Polarity and Religious Pluralism. Tokyo, Japan, 21 July 2010), 1.

that "to express what is holy is impossible for a novelist,"[8] but a novelist such as Endo can express how human beings understand the character and purpose of God. Perhaps a fitting parallel example in the Western world is C. S. Lewis. As Alister McGrath states,

> Lewis is trusted and respected by many American Christians, who treat him as their theological and spiritual mentor. Engaging both heart and mind, Lewis opened up the intellectual and imaginative depths of the Christian faith like nobody else. As Lewis himself pointed out in his broadcast talks during the Second World War, he was simply an educated layman, who spoke directly and accessibly to ordinary Christians over the heads of their clergy. Lewis proved ideally attuned to the pedagogical needs and abilities of laypeople, irrespective of their denomination, who wanted to explore their faith further.[9]

It may not be an overstatement to say that Endo is the "C. S. Lewis of Japan" in terms of opening up the imaginative depths of the Christian faith.

A Brief Summary of the Life of Endo Shusaku

Endo was born in Tokyo in 1923. He spent his early childhood in the city of Dalian in China, since his father's job took his family to Manchuria under the Japanese occupation. When Endo was ten years old his parents divorced, and he returned to Japan with his mother and his older brother. They lived with his mother's sister in Kobe. Feeling shame following her divorce, Endo's mother began to seek consolation in Catholicism, which was her sister's faith, and eventually became a Catholic. At the age of eleven Endo was baptized without fully understanding its significance. In college, Endo majored in French literature and after graduation studied in Lyon, France, from 1950 to 1953. He was one of the first students from Japan to study abroad after World War II. After his studies in France, he began his career as a novelist. He published over one hundred fifty books during his career, and his works have been translated into twenty-three different languages.[10] Endo's award-winning works include *White Person, Yellow Person* 白い人黄色い人 (1955); *Silence* 沈黙 (1966); *The Samurai* 侍 (1980); and *Deep River* 深い河 (1994), gaining him the reputation of being

[8] Endo, *A Life of Jesus*, trans. Richard A. Schuchert (New York: Paulist, 1978), 2.

[9] Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 369–70.

[10] See Appendix in Mae-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 216–22.

"one of the twentieth century's finest writers."[11]

Despite his success as a novelist, his life was filled with trials and disappointments. He despised his father for divorcing his mother. He was a mediocre student and initially failed the entrance exam to enter university. Once he entered, his mother could not afford his tuition, so he had to move and live with his father in Tokyo, making him feel that he had betrayed his beloved mother—especially since his step-mother was the reason for his parents' divorce. He encountered racial discrimination while studying in France. He fell in love with a French woman but could not marry her since he was arranged to marry a woman in Japan. He also experienced a series of illnesses during his lifetime. *Silence* was written after a three-year-long illness that he barely survived which required three separate surgeries. He died in 1996 after experiencing breathing difficulties from pneumonia.

Three Stages of Endo's Literary Focus: The Quest for a Jesus of Japanese Sensibility

Throughout his life, Endo struggled to reconcile his Catholic faith with his identity as a Japanese—he saw them as being in a "dialectical juxtaposition"[12] in which no ultimate reconciliation seemed obtainable. Endo describes his Catholic faith as "ill-fitting clothes"[13] that his mother made him wear. They were baggy and did not fit his Japanese body. Yet, he could not "discard this western suit."[14] Somehow, these ill-fitting clothes had become his strength through his growing-up years. Endo's literary works dwell on this seemingly irresolvable conflict between his faith and his nationality, and it was a theme that Endo returned to throughout his life.[15] In his explorations of a "religion that is both Christian and Japanese,"[16] Endo employs human frailty as a recurring motif

[11] Jewel S. Brooker, "In memoriam: Shusaku Endo," *Christianity and Literature* 48 (1999): 141, quoted in Chua "Japanese Perspectives," 203.

[12] Van C. Gessel, *The Sting of Life: Four Contemporary Japanese Novelists* (New York: Columbia, 1989), quoted in John Netland, "From Resistance to *Kenosis*: Reconciling Cultural Difference in the Fiction of Endo Shusaku," *Christianity and Literature* 48 (1999): 178.

[13] Endo Shusaku, *Man and Spirit: I Lived Fairly Well* 遠藤周作エッセイ選集I, vol. 1 of *Selected Essays of Endo Shusaku* (Tokyo: Kobunsha, 2006), 189, quoted in Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 231.

[14] Endo, *Man and Spirit*, 189, quoted in Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 231.

[15] Chua states, "Perhaps more than anyone else—certainly more than academic theologians and philosophers—Endo has contributed to the exploration of a religious vision that seeks to be both Christian and Japanese, and this he has done so creatively through the field of literature" ("Japanese Perspectives," 204).

[16] Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 204.

(one can argue that this is his main theological focus—a God who is passible and embraces human frailty). In his fiction, protagonists often suffer illness, loneliness, and death, or live with a haunting memory of their dark past, or fall victim to moral apathy. Against the backdrop of human frailty, Endo explores how Christ the suffering servant (Isa 53) comes alongside us by embracing our suffering. Endo's fiction drew heavily on these two themes throughout his career.

His development of these themes can be traced across three separate stages. The first stage (1947–1965) focuses on conflict between culture and faith, while the second stage (1966–1980) focuses on reconciliation between them. The final stage (1981–1993) focuses on integration and harmony for humanity.[17] In this paper I will mainly focus on two novels, *Silence* and *Deep River*[18]—the former falls under the second stage, while the latter falls under the third stage.

A Brief History of Japan: Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity

Before we embark on a discussion of Endo's theology, it is necessary to briefly survey the history of Japan in order to provide context for understanding Japanese Christianity. Christianity was introduced to Japan through the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier (1506–1552) in 1549. When Xavier arrived in Japan, Japan was already a religious country—Shintoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism had already put down deep roots. Shintoism, which is Japan's indigenous faith, existed prior to 300 BC, while Buddhism came to Japan from India through China and Korea around the middle of the sixth century AD. Before the arrival of Buddhism, Confucianism also came to Japan. These three religions were considered national "treasures" and they sought to coexist with one another. During the Nara (710–794), Heian (794–1192), and Kamakura (1192–1333) periods, Buddhism exercised significant influence over Japanese culture, religion, and politics, and gained prominence by synthesizing elements of

[17] Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, viii. cf. Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," xiii. Van C. Gessel sees "the trajectory of Endo's career as a movement away from the stark antitheses so prevalent in his early fiction toward greater reconciliation of his Christian and Japanese identities." In fact, Gessel sees *Silence* as a "transitional novel that moves beyond motifs of irresolvable conflict toward glimpses of reconciliation between his Christian and Japanese identifies" (see Netland, "From Resistance to *Kenosis*," 178).

[18] Mase-Hasegawa says that Endo asked his wife to bury *Silence* and *Deep River* with him in his coffin. See Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 12 n. 40.

Shintoism. This trend continues to this day. "The dynamic process of hybridizing and synthesizing religious concepts and practices, lasting over 1300 years in Japan, is of great significance for contemporary Japanese spirituality," as Emi Mase-Hasegawa argues.[19] Endo was also influenced by this syncretizing tendency, as seen especially in one of his last novels, *Deep River*, in which the theme of religious pluralism is prominent.

After the arrival of Christianity in Japan there was a period in which it flourished. Many *daimyo* (大名) (samurai warlords) were converted to Christianity and it is estimated that there were 300,000 baptized Christians in the country.[20] Nagasaki, a city on the southern island of Kyushu, was even referred to as "the Rome of the Far East."[21] Despite the rapid growth of Christianity, Christian missionaries were expelled from Japan in 1614 by the Tokugawa Shogunate and Christians began to be persecuted. In 1639 a national edict was issued, and the Tokugawa Shogunate closed the country. It remained closed until the arrival of the American commodore Matthew Perry in 1853. It is estimated that five to six thousand European and Japanese Christians were persecuted for their faith during this period.[22]

In 1873, the Meiji government finally lifted the ban on Christianity, and this led to a second wave of missionaries (Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox) coming to Japan. A third wave of missionaries came after the Second World War. Despite the efforts of missionaries and evangelists in Japan, Christians are still a small minority today—barely 1 percent of the population of 126.5 million people. A primary reason for such slow growth is the perception of Japanese that Christianity is a foreign religion.[23] How Chuang Chua says that this is not surprising given that Christianity came into the country uninvited.[24] As noted earlier, Japan already

[19] Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 34.

[20] Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 46. Chua states that although the exact figures are difficult to determine, C. R. Boxer argues that by the turn of the seventeenth century there was "a Christian community of about 750,000 believers, with an annual increase of five or six thousand" (C. R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549–1650* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967; repr.], 197, quoted in Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 46).

[21] Neil S. Fujita, *Japan's Encounter with Christianity: The Catholic Mission in Premodern Japan*, 3rd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 9, quoted in Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 46.

[22] Paul H. Varley, *Japanese Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 148, quoted in Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 49.

[23] Mark R. Mullins, *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 9, quoted in Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 71.

[24] Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 71.

had religions—Shintoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, which were considered treasures of the people—and these had put down deep roots in the life, politics, and culture of the Japanese people. Christianity has thus been perceived as an intruder or outsider, just as Endo described it as "ill-fitting clothes" for the Japanese body.

The Pathetic Christ and Weak Christians: The Theology of Endo Shusaku

The Mudswamp of Japan

Every story has a setting, and the setting common to Endo's stories is the "mudswamp of Japan." Endo uses this metaphor to explore the relation between faith and culture in Japan and it frequently appears in his novels.[25] The meaning of the mudswamp evolved for him over time from cultural to ethical issues, and ultimately to a place for grace.[26] It is one of the key concepts for grasping Endo's thinking about faith and culture.

Endo recalls an old pond behind his childhood house. He once saw a snake twisting across the dark surface of the water on a bright summer day. He writes, "When I think of human beings, I tend to crouch down in a vaguely dark and damp place, something which does not let light in, like a swamp."[27] Endo thereby sees a swamp as a metaphorical "site of human consciousness" and "appropriates this swamp metaphor as a complex and evolving space where religion, ethics, and cultural difference meet."[28]

In *Silence*, Endo's use of this metaphor is especially noteworthy; in the mudswamp of Japan nothing can take root and grow and whatever enters into it is absorbed into its stagnant environment. The apostate priest Ferreira says to Father Rodrigues, "This country [Japan] is a swamp … a more terrible swamp than you can imagine. Whenever you plant a sapling in this swamp the roots begin to rot; the leaves grow yellow and wither."[29] Japan is a country where "the tree of Hellenized Christianity cannot simply be pulled out of Europe and planted in the swamp of Japan that

[25] It appears first time in *Yellow Person* (1955), written over ten years before *Silence*. See Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 218.

[26] John T. Netland, "From Cultural Alterity to the Habitations of Grace: The Evolving Moral Topography of Endo's Mudswamp Trope," *Christianity and Literature* 59 (2009): 27.

[27] Takao Hagiwara, "Return to Japan: The Case of Endo Shusaku," *Comparative Literature Studies* 37 (2000): 120, quoted in Netland, "From Cultural Alterity," 27.

[28] Netland, "From Cultural Alterity," 27.

[29] Endo, *Silence*, 147.

has a completely different cultural tradition."[30]

Along with this concept—the unresolvable differences in cultural traditions between the West and Japan—the metaphor of the mudswamp also symbolize a "moral ennui."[31] The magistrate Inoue tells the apostate Rodrigues, "*Father*, you were not defeated by me. … You were defeated by this swamp of Japan."[32] Inoue's words can be taken as a confession to Rodrigues—Inoue represents the cultural and political ethos of Japan, while the swamp of Japan represents the moral apathy and human passivity of the Japanese. If taken this way, what Inoue meant to say was that the fundamental cause of the withering of the sapling of Christianity was the moral apathy and passivity of the Japanese people.[33]

Returning to the imagery of the old pond behind Endo's childhood house, there was a snake twisting across the dark surface of the water. It was a bright summer day. Yet, the water was dark, and no light penetrated through the water. Moreover, the snake moved boldly, as if he were a watchman of the old pond. This eerie imagery provides a glimpse into the Japanese consciousness. There is a darkness in the Japanese consciousness that, as Inoue says, "can't be helped."[34]

However, it is in this swamp that Endo's theology develops and where his image of Christ is conceived. Christ is the light trying to penetrate through the dark water. Yet, the dark water does not let the light in—and there is a watchman swimming across the water's surface. Moreover, even

[30] Johnston, translator's preface, xvi.

[31] Netland, "From Cultural Alterity," 28. Philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji (1889–1960) argued that human cultures can be classified into three predominant climate zones: the desert (North Africa, the Middle East and central Asia), a meadow (Europe and the Mediterranean basin), and a monsoon (Asia). While the desert and meadow climates can find similarities between each culture, the monsoon climate (Japan) is unable to associate with them due to the vast cultural differences. Watsuji also argues that the monsoon climate—being wet and humid—oppresses the inhabitants and, as a result, they become passive, reserved, and even fatigued. Netland sees Watsuji's theory as connected to Endo's swamp. The inhabitants of the swamp—the Japanese—are weary and passive. They accept whatever comes their way without questioning it, thus evincing a moral apathy and a dark consciousness (Netland, "From Cultural Alterity," 30–32).

[32] Endo, *Silence*, 187 (emphasis added).

[33] Inoue is not a fictional character, but a historical figure. He received baptism when Christianity first came to Japan. However, when the Tokugawa Shogunate began to persecute Christians, he abandoned his faith and sided with Tokugawa. He became known for devising effective ways to induce apostasy, including tortures that would result in a painful and slow death if the victim did not recant.

[34] Endo, *Silence*, 188.

if the light penetrates through the water, this swamp of Japan rots every living thing; nothing can take root and grow and whatever enters into it is absorbed into its stagnant habitat. The Christ who comes to this swamp must thereby be the Christ of Japanese sensibility. As Endo suggests, it is not Christ the victor who penetrates through the water, but the pathetic and weak Christ who penetrates the heart of the Japanese consciousness. And this Christ is a "bent nail"; he is absorbed into the swamp by becoming "one with the contortions of" the Japanese mind in order "to suffer along" with them.[35]

The Person of Christ: Christ for the Weak and Downtrodden

> Won't you listen to me, father! I've kept deceiving you. Since you rebuked me I began to hate you and all the Christians. Yes, it is true that I trod on the holy image. Mokichi and Ichizo were strong. I can't be strong like them. … But I have my cause to plead! On who has trod on the sacred image has his way too. Do you think I trampled on it *willingly*? My feet ached with the *pain*. God asks me to imitate the strong, even though he made me *weak*. Isn't this unreasonable?[36]

Endo's image of Jesus is closely tied to the questions he raises regarding the lives of weak Christians. Endo asks, "When we think about the apostatized Christians, we come to this ultimate question. Where did these Christians seek redemption? How did they find solace for their disgrace and restore a sense of self-worth for their cowardness?"[37] The words above are those of Kichijiro, one of the *Kakure Kirishitan* 隠れ切支丹 (hidden Christians)[38]—a character from Endo's novel *Silence*—who

[35] Endo, *Deep River*, trans. Van Gessel (New York: A New Direction, 1994), 103.

[36] Endo, *Silence*, 113–14 (emphasis added).

[37] Shusaku Endo, *Birthplace of Christians*,キリシタンの里 (Tokyo: Chuokoron-Shinsha, 1974), 106. Translation mine.

[38] Kichijiro represents the *Kakure Kirishitans* (hidden Christians). *Kakure Kirishitans* are "the descendants of communities who maintained the Christian faith in Japan during the time of persecution (1614–1873)" (Mae-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 50). As their name connotes, they maintained their faith not by enduring persecution, but rather by "doing whatever they could in order to escape suspicion" (Mae-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 50). This included publicly forsaking their faith, declaring themselves to be Buddhists, and subsequently leading a double life of "being Shinto/Buddhist socially and Christians personally" (Mae-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 50). Endo sees them as a

apostatized because of his weak faith and fear of persecution. Yet, he could not forsake his faith and subsequently leads a life of deception. He secretly comes to Rodrigues, the Jesuit priest, again and again for absolution. Rodrigues, with disgust, asks, "Could it be possible that Christ loved and searched after this dirtiest of men? In evil there remained that strength and beauty of evil; but this Kichijiro was not even worthy to be called evil. He was thin and dirty like the tattered rags he wore."[39]

Endo's fascination with weak Christians began with his own journey of faith. He often confessed that he was a timid and unfaithful Christian who received baptism not out of his own will but because of his mother's strong desire. He confessed that he compromised his faith in order to gain the acceptance of others. Endo therefore sees himself in these weak Christians—he himself is Kichijiro. His faith is the faith of the weak, not of the strong who were courageously martyred for their faith. Rodrigues's question, "Could it be possible that Christ loved and searched after this dirtiest of men?" addresses Endo's own question of Christ's love for him—does Christ love those who are weak in faith and forgive them even when they betray him out of their weakness?

Endo's quest to understand Christ as one who embraces weak Christians gained additional momentum when he encountered *fumie* during a trip to Nagasaki. Endo saw dark footprints on the *fumie*—marks left by constant trampling. He wanted to understand those who left their footprints and the pain they felt as they trampled.[40] Moreover, he wanted to know the Christ on the *fumie*. The image of Christ that appeared on the fumie was worn out—"he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him" (Isa 53:2).

This solidarity of Christ with the weak and the downtrodden is therefore the focal point of Endo's Christology.[41] Related to this, one of

key to understanding the religious mindset of the Japanese people. During their long period of persecution they had no contact with missionaries and as a result developed their own culturally-shaped, and in many ways unorthodox, version of Christian faith. Endo says, "Its depravity mirrors the peculiarity of the religious mindset of the Japanese people" (*Birthplace*, 103, translation mine).

[39] Endo, *Silence*, 115.

[40] Endo states that when he thinks about them, he feels their shame and regret—they know their own weakness and hate their own existence because of their weakness. As a novelist, he said, "I could not be indifferent to their sorrow and pain. … I did not want to silence them, but wanted to bring them out of the silence to hear their voice" (*Birthplace of Christians*, 30, translation mine).

[41] Mase-Hasegawa states that Endo sees humanity in Christ in his last words,

Endo's notable images of Christ is a maternal image, rather than the paternal image of God in the Old Testament and that of John the Baptist.[42] Endo argues that paternal love that is stern does not fit Japanese religiosity, but rather maternal love that embraces all things and unconditionally loves her children.[43] In fact, the hidden Christians "had sought out maternal love rather than paternal love."[44] They found comfort in statues of Maria Kannon マリア観音—statues of the Virgin Mary disguised as the Buddhist goddess of mercy. Japanese seek a "God of amae" 甘え—a God who embraces a childlike desire to cling to a mother for love and protection.[45]

In *Silence*, the Christ that appears on the *fumie* is a maternal Christ. As Rodrigues struggles with his decision to step on the *fumie* (despite their recantation, the poor peasants continue to be tortured by the officials to compel his apostasy), the Christ on the *fumie* speaks to Rodrigues: "You may trample. You may trample. I more than anyone know of the pain in

"*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*?" ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me"; Matt 27:46; Ps 22:11). Endo interprets these words as an expression of Jesus's weakness in his faith and therefore "the poor Jesus could understand people's pain and suffering more than anyone" (*Christ in Japanese Culture*, 111).

[42] Endo draws his image of God from the near-Marcionite contrast between the Old Testament and the portrayal of Jesus in the New Testament. Endo sees the God of the Old Testament and the God of John the Baptist as a "stern father-image of God" while "His [Jesus's] heart was a maternal womb to engender an image of God which more closely resembles a gentle mother, the image of God which he would disclose to the people on a mountain by the Lake of Galilee at a later time" (Endo, *A Life of Jesus*, 24–25; cf. Bauckham, "The Cross and Human Suffering," 3; Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 235).

[43] Kitamori Kazoh 北森嘉蔵 (1916–1998), a Japanese theologian and author of *The Theology of the Pain of God* (1946), questions Endo's assertion that Japanese can only accept a Christ who exhibits maternal love. Kitamori argues that the image of the father that Endo employs is the image of Japanese fathers of the Meiji period (1868–1912) and is therefore outdated. See Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 237–38.

[44] Endo, *Birthplace of Christians*, 135. Translation mine. Endo argues that the reason Pure Land Buddhism 浄土真宗 became popular among Japanese is that it is not a religion of paternal love, but rather maternal love. In his view, Japanese have a deep desire to rely on someone in time of trouble, rather than overcome obstacles with their own power. And a mother is who we come to for rescue, rather than a father. This was also the mindset Endo saw among the hidden Christians. See also Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 130–31. Mase-Hasegawa traces the root of maternal love in Japanese religiosity to *koshinto* 古神道 (the alleged basis for modern Shintoism), rather than Pure Land Buddhism.

[45] See Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 237.

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."[46] There was no rebuke or condemnation of Rodrigues's weak faith, but rather the voice of Christ speaking to his tormented soul—"you may trample. It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world."[47] Christ comes alongside Rodrigues and comforts him because his "soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Matt 26:38). Christ carries Rodrigues's cross by emptying himself, while he allows Rodrigues to choose an act "that is not sullied by self-interest but rather aimed at relieving the torments of others, even at the sacrifice of his own stature and calling."[48] It is this maternal image of Jesus that embraces all things and forgives all things. Just as a mother quiets her crying child, the maternal love of Jesus quiets our tormented souls.

The Work of Christ: Eternal Suffering Companion

In suffering, Jesus becomes a self-sacrificial and sympathetic companion of all who suffer. His mission is not a mission of miraculous deliverance, but rather a mission to "take upon himself the pain of all mankind in order to become the eternal companion of all"[49] and thus "demonstrate the reality of the God of love."[50] In addition, "The cross, where Jesus experienced the absolute silence of God, became an emblem of identification in all human suffering."[51] As a self-sacrificial and sympathetic companion, Jesus absorbs our suffering.

The picture of Jesus who suffers along with us is a beautiful image that Endo employs throughout his career as a novelist. In addition to its appearance in *Silence*, it is also prominent in *Deep River*, another of Endo's

[46] Endo, *Silence*, 171. I am using Mase-Hasegawa's translation (see Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 98). After Endo's passing, a close friend realized that the published English translation had translated "trample" as an imperative ("Trample!"), rather than a statement of permission ("You may trample."). Van C. Gessel, who translated six of Endo's works and is an expert on Endo's theology, also argues that it should have been translated as a statement of permission, rather than an imperative (Gessel, "Hearing God in Silence: The Fiction of Endo Shusaku," *Christianity and Literature* 48 [1999]: 160). Endo's wife even asked at one point that the translation be revised. I believe Mase-Hasegawa and Gessel make a compelling case, which further reflects Christ's maternal character in this scene—offering permission rather than issuing a command. Scorsese, the director of the movie *Silence*, also interprets it as a statement of permission.

[47] Endo, *Silence*, 171.

[48] Gessel, "Hearing God in Silence," 161.

[49] Endo, *A Life of Jesus*, 86.

[50] Endo, *A Life of Jesus*, 125.

[51] Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 243.

most popular works. In *Deep River*, Endo brings back Gaston Bonaparte—a Christ-figure—from his earlier novel *Wonderful Fool* (1959). Gaston meets a Japanese man, Tsukada, a war hero whose memory of consuming human flesh for survival torments him. This occurred in the jungles of Burma, where he ate the flesh of a fallen Japanese soldier and also gave it to his comrade, Kiguchi, who was on the verge of death from exhaustion and starvation. Tsukada quietly confesses this act to Gaston, who in turn tells the dying Tsukada his secret—that he also ingested human flesh for survival in the Andes mountains following a plane crash. "He [Gaston] came to Tsukada's room every day after that and held the dying man's hands between his own palms, talked to him and encouraged him. Kiguchi could not tell whether such comfort eased Tsukada's pain. But the figure of Gaston keeling beside his bed looked like *a bent nail*, and the bent nail struggled to *become one with the contortions* of Tsukada's mind, and to *suffer along* with Tuskada."[52]

For Endo, Jesus the eternal companion is not the Jesus of divinity, but rather the Jesus of humanity. He is meek and humble, like the myna bird in *Deep River*—arguably another Christ-figure of Endo's. The black myna bird never sings or talks, but chortles, "Ha! Ha ha!"—which is described as sounding like nervous laughter. When ailing Numada, the bird's owner, confesses his fear of death to the bird, the bird responds with its strange laughter, as if it is trying to hide its ineffectualness. The bird ultimately dies in place of Numada, but Numada recalls the bird's nervous laughter and realizes its compassion in saving him in the midst of Numada's fear and despair.[53]

Jesus, the eternal companion, is meek and humble. In fact, in Endo's perspective, he does not conquer death by his resurrection but rather resurrects as Christ the eternal companion in the hearts of his people.[54] This work of Jesus is beautifully illustrated in the cases of Rodrigues and Kichijiro in *Silence*. Rodrigues, after his recantation, was forced to live as a Japanese by taking a Japanese wife. But, he did not forsake his Christian faith. Rodrigues says, "I fell. But, Lord, you alone know that I did not renounce my faith."[55] Jesus, the eternal companion, continues to live in the heart of Rodrigues by loving him and sharing his suffering. Rodrigues states, "Our Lord was not silent. Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would

[52] Endo, *Deep River*, 102–3 (emphasis added). In conversation with one of my friends, she suggested that this scene may be based on 2 Cor 1:3–5.

[53] *Deep River* is Endo's most controversial book because of its apparent embrace of pluralism, animism, and pantheism, which do not conform to orthodox Christian faith. See my footnote 6 for more details.

[54] Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 247.

[55] Endo, *Silence*, 175.

have spoken of him."[56]

In the same way, the resurrected Jesus who lives in the heart of Kichijiro compels him to return to his faith, regardless of how many times Kichijiro betrays him. For Endo, the resurrected Jesus is ineffectual to conquer death, but he is *effectual* in calling and drawing his people to him. Once we are called, he will never let us go, no matter what we do—even in the face of betrayal. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. His fear overwhelmed his love for Jesus. But, on the day of Pentecost, Peter preached repentance and the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:14–40). The Eternal Companion is *effectual* because "his call … [is] irrevocable" (Rom 11:29).

A Brief Criticism of Endo's Christology

As beautiful as Endo's image of Christ is, there are many theological points that Endo unfortunately missed.[57] First, Endo does not consider the divinity of Christ in his Christology. Hence, his Christ is Jesus of Nazareth, but not Jesus the Christ. In fact, Endo creatively concludes that Jesus rejected the title "Christ."[58] Subsequently, Endo demythologizes Christ, following Rudolf Bultmann. Endo believed that "miracles symbolize power, and that compromises the reality of human suffering."[59]

Second, Endo's resurrected Christ does not overcome the suffering of the world, but rather becomes a companion of those who suffer. His love embraces those who suffer but cannot liberate them from suffering, unlike the Christ that delivers from opposition.[60] He is a powerless Christ who resolves to share suffering with those who suffer, rather than fighting to overcome it. Endo's Christ therefore accepts and adopts suffering as an inherent aspect of human frailty—suffering is inevitable as long as humanity exists, and humans are unable to overcome it.

Third, Endo sees suffering as the primary problem of human existence, and this experience forms the core of his theology. Thus, Christ is not the Messiah, the sin-bearer, but the eternal companion of those who suffer. Although it would be unfair to say that Endo does not see the sinfulness of humanity—this seems to contradict the portrayal of many of his characters who are sinful with no possibility of redemption—his

[56] Endo, *Silence*, 191. Kato, Endo's disciple of thirty years, says that this is a signature of Endo's literature. For Endo, God's existence is not as important as his action—God manifests his presence through people's lives, and most significantly in the suffering of his people. See Kimura, "Silence."

[57] For more details, see Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 274–83.

[58] Endo, *A Life of Jesus*, 125, quoted in Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 241.

[59] Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 240.

[60] Bauckham, "The Cross and Human Suffering," 4.

theological concept of redemption is not redemption from sin, but redemption from suffering. His understanding of Jesus's death is therefore not penal, but rather moral—Christ suffers for his people and calls them to come to him by imitating his suffering.[61]

Application

As we near the end of this paper, it is appropriate to discuss practical implications of this study in Japanese Christology for the proclamation of the gospel and ministry in Japan. In doing so, we are also considering the relationship between Christ and culture in Japan. Takeda Kiyoko (1917–2018), who studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York and was an acquaintance of Richard H. Niebuhr, formulated a typology that describes five ways Christianity has interacted with Japanese culture. She states that her "analysis is not directly comparable to the scheme of Niebuhr,"[62] yet the similarities between her typology and Niebuhr's are apparent and one can assume that "she has largely applied his paradigmatic approach to Japanese culture."[63] She identifies five categories of inculturation.

1. *Absorbed type:* Christianity is compromised by Japanese culture, and it loses its original function, identity, and uniqueness.
2. *Isolating type:* Christianity places too much emphasis on its uniqueness, and it becomes isolated from Japanese culture.
3. *Confronting type:* Christianity confronts Japanese culture and remains isolated.
4. *Grafting type:* Christianity is implanted in Japanese culture as a supplement.
5. *Apostatizing type:* Christianity is abandoned after some time.[64]

In Endo's literature "the Confronting and Grafting types" are clearly

[61] Chua, "Japanese Perspectives," 243.

[62] The five categories of Niebuhr's typology are Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture.

[63] Kiyoko Takeda, *Dochaku to Haikyô* 『土着と背教』 (Indigenization and Apostasy) (Tokyo: Shinkyo shuppan, 1967), 56–58, quoted in Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 4.

[64] Kiyoko Takeda, *Seito to Itan no Aida* 『正統と異端のあいだ』 (The Betweenness of Authodoxy [Orthodoxy] and Heresy) (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku shuppan, 1976), 56, quoted in Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 4.

illustrated.[65] However, for the purpose of mission, the Grafting type, which corresponds to Niebuhr's fifth category—Christ the transformer of culture[66]—seems to be the most relevant to our discussion. The category of Christ the transformer of culture perceives that history is not merely a series of human events. It is rather a "dynamic interaction between God and man."[67] Niebuhr observes that on this view the triune God works together to create, forgive, and redeem the world in order to bring transformation.

Takeda's Grafting type should not be understood as robustly as Niebuhr's fifth category. As Endo illustrates in the lives of the hidden Christians and the apostate Rodrigues in *Silence*, Christianity that grows in the mudswamp of Japan is not the Christianity of the West. Although Christianity is accepted, it remains a foreign vine, grafted into the existing trunk of Japanese culture—"Christianity is implanted in Japanese culture as a supplement."[68]

Space precludes all but a brief discussion of how this might play out in practice, but I would like to suggest two approaches. James Davidson Hunter proposes a "theology of faithful presence" as a new approach that Christians should take in order to be the light and salt in the world. He states, "A theology of faithful presence begins with an acknowledgement of God's faithful presence to us and that his call upon us is that we be faithfully present to him in return. This is the foundation, the logic, the paradigm."[69] Faithful presence calls us to be present to others who are inside or outside the community. This presence requires sacrificial love. Further, faithful presence calls for us to be faithful to our vocational tasks, in which we are to strive for excellence. Through these tasks, Christians honor God.

Hunter's approach seems to fit well with Japanese sensibility. In fact, it seems to overlap to some extent with the concept of Jesus as the eternal suffering companion. Jesus's eternal presence as a comforter and co-sufferer can also be taken as a kind of faithful presence that is the embodiment of God's faithfulness to Japanese. As we practice a theology of faithful presence, many Japanese will come to see Christ who is faithful to those who suffer.

[65] Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 6.

[66] Takeda states that the Grafting type corresponds to the fifth category of Niebuhr's typology (Takeda, *Seito*, 56, quoted in Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture,* 4).

[67] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 2001), 194.

[68] Takeda, *Seito*, 56, quoted in Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 4.

[69] James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 243.

Harold Netland, on the other hand, proposes focusing on the Golden Rule (Matt 7:12). Netland says that although the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20) has been a fruitful focal point of missiology, to fulfill the Great Commission, we also need Christians who live in accordance with the Golden Rule: "This, it seems to me, is a basic principle which not only should shape individual Christian behavior but which can serve as a guiding principle of a social ethic in religiously diverse societies."[70]

Netland's approach seems to fit well with Japan's religiously diverse society as well as Japanese sentiment—self-sacrifice for the purpose of social harmony 和 is one of the virtues that Japanese seek and admire. If Christianity is a grafted supplement, it is a wise missionary strategy to build on the sentiment that already exists among Japanese. In the mudswamp, a newly planted sapling will easily wither, but what already grows in the mudswamp will remain. "Pursuit of the common good in contexts of religious diversity can be a powerful witness to God's redemptive love in Christ Jesus."[71]

It is my hope that through these Christian virtues (faithful presence and the Golden Rule) Japanese will begin to see the majesty and beauty of Christ who was crucified on the cross for the sins of the world.

Conclusion

Despite the shortcomings of Endo's Christology, there is much to celebrate in his portrayal of Christ. If Christ is the Christ of the mudswamp, Japanese must be able to recognize him as such. In this sense, Endo succeeds in conceptualizing Christ as one who can *fathom* the contortions and suffering of the mudswamp's inhabitants. The inhabitants of the swamp are weary and passive. They choose to accept their fate rather than attempt to overcome it. Endo's Christ cannot save them from their misery, yet he comforts those who cannot be comforted and loves those who are unlovable. The Christ who penetrates through the darkness of the water is therefore not the triumphant Christ of the West, but rather the meek and sorrowful Christ, the eternal companion of the weak and the wretched, the Christ that inhabits Japanese sensibility.

[70] Harold Netland, "Response to Professor Inagaki" (paper presented at Suffering and Hope in Jesus Christ: Christological Polarity and Religious Pluralism. Tokyo, Japan, 23 July 2010), 7.

[71] Netland, "Response to," 8.