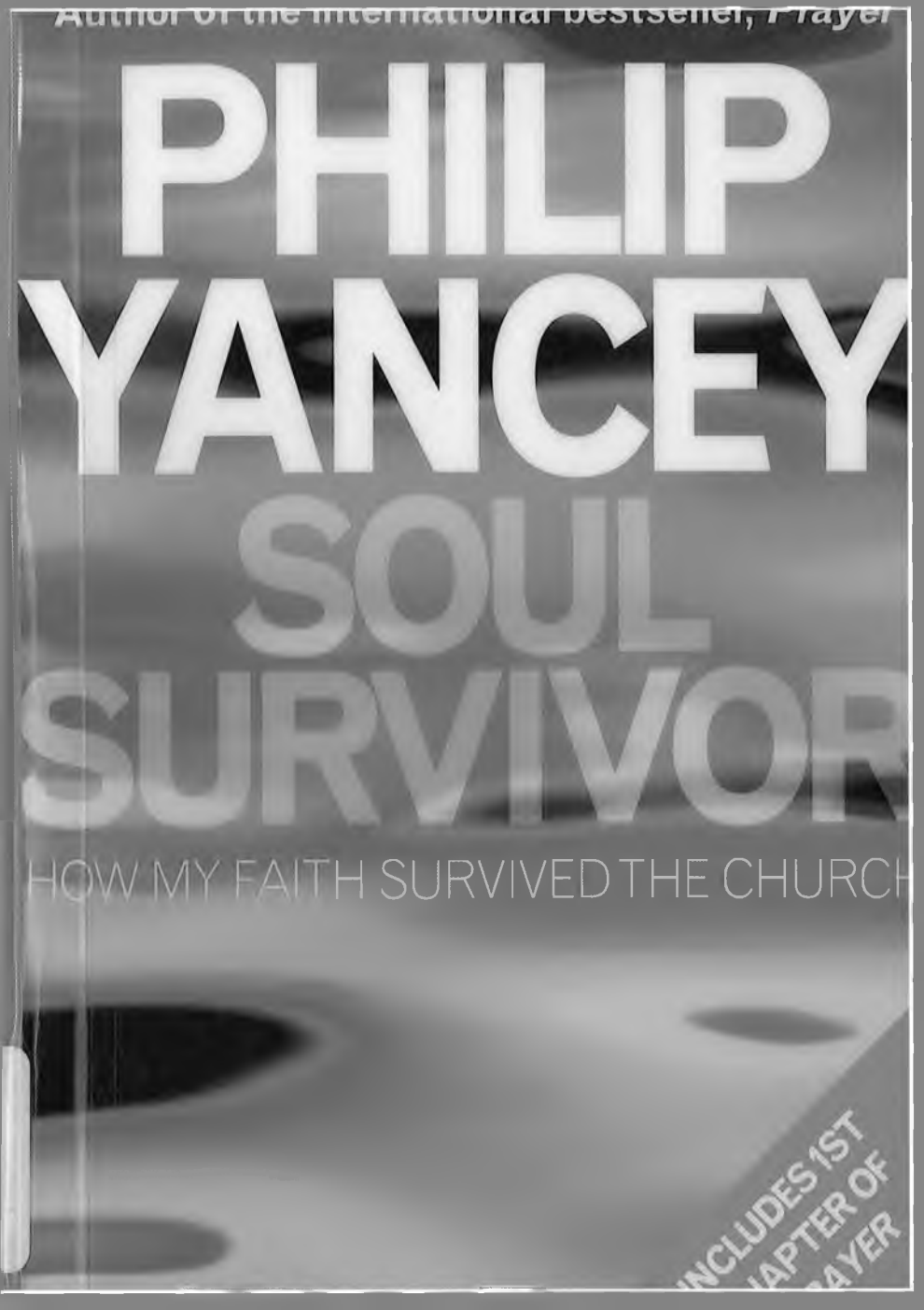
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PHILIP YANCEY SOUL SURVIVOR

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CHAPTER

TWELVE

SHUSAKU ENDO

A Place for Traitors

I DOUBT THAT ANYONE born in the last thirty years could possibly imagine the fear we lived under, those of us moving through adolescence at the height of the Cold War. For our school science projects we made bomb shelters, digging deep holes in our back yards and stocking them with our favourite comic books and snack foods. We watched educational films on the effects of thermonuclear war and learned, to the accompaniment of a bouncy soundtrack, the 'Duck and cover!' technique of crawling under our school desks to lessen exposure to radioactive fallout. I lived in Atlanta, Georgia, just within range of Cuba, and during the Cuban missile crisis each form period began with a 'Duck and cover' exercise.

My brother and I read aloud to each other horrifying accounts of what Communists did to their enemies. They pulled out your fingernails and toenails, or jammed bamboo splinters up the nail beds. They tied you down and slowly dripped water on your head until you went crazy. They set loose spiders and rats and poisonous snakes on your naked body. They cut off your fingers, one by one. They buried you alive. When they took over a town, they lined up all the occupants and examined hands; if yours showed any calluses, that meant you belonged to the worker class and they just might let you live. If you could speak Russian

or Chinese, as the case may be, they also might let you live. Otherwise, they would torture you for a few days and then kill you.

In a determined effort to stay alive, the two of us launched counter-measures. We scouted nearby woods for hideouts the enemies might not find. Hadn't some Southerners survived General Sherman's assault by hiding out like that for months at a time? We raked leaves with barehanded vigour in order to develop blisters and calluses on our schoolboy hands. Still afraid, we decided to study the Communists' languages. My brother signed up for a course in Russian and I took Chinese so that, no matter which direction the attackers came from, we would at least have a chance to talk them out of killing us. (Stories from my Chinese teacher, an upper-class refugee who escaped during Chairman Mao's reign of terror, did little to allay my fears.)

Church further fuelled our terror, adding gruesome accounts of what Stalin and Mao had done to the Christians. Soldiers would march into a church service, line up all the believers and demand that they denounce Christ. Those who agreed they would immediately reward with presents and food. Those who refused they would kill, slowly and cruelly, in front of the terrorised congregation.

'What would you say?' our pastor demanded. 'Would you stand firm for your faith, or would you betray the one who died for you?' It was a terrible question for anyone to contemplate, much less a fourteen-year-old plagued with questions about his faith. I practised Chinese calligraphy and raked leaves as if my life depended on it, because I believed it surely did.*

Much later, after I had grown up and forgotten all my Chinese, after the threat of nuclear war had receded, I came across historical accounts of a similar persecution that occurred several centuries

* Today, pastors ask their teenagers the same question, holding up Columbine High School martyr Cassie Bernall as the model of courageous faith. Only now the enemy threat comes from within, rather than overseas.

ago. At one point in history Japan seemed the most fruitful mission field in Asia. Francis Xavier, one of the seven original Jesuits, landed there in 1549 and spent two years establishing a church. Within a generation the number of Christians had swelled to 300,000. Xavier called Japan 'the delight of my heart . . . the country in the Orient most suited to Christianity'.

As that century came to an end, however, the shoguns' suspicion of foreigners, exacerbated by the divisions among Christians, led to a change in policy. The shoguns expelled the Jesuits, and required that all Christians renounce their faith and register as Buddhists. Twenty-six crucifixions soon followed and the age of Japanese Christian martyrs began.

The *fumie* plaque – a bronze portrait of Jesus, or the Madonna and child, enclosed in a small wooden frame – became the ultimate test of faith. Japanese who agreed to step on the *fumie* were pronounced apostate Christians and set free. Those who refused, the shoguns hunted down and killed, in the most successful extermination attempt in church history. Some were tied to stakes in the sea to await the high tides that would slowly drown them, while others were bound and tossed off rafts; some were scalded in boiling hot springs, and still others were hung upside down over a pit full of dead bodies and excrement. I had been raised on inspiring stories of martyrs advancing the cause: 'The blood of Christians is the seed of the church,' said Tertullian. Not so in Japan, where the blood of the martyrs was nearly the annihilation of the church.

Nearly, but not entirely. In the late nineteenth century, when Japan finally permitted a Catholic church in Nagasaki to serve Western visitors, priests were astonished to see Japanese Christians streaming down from the hills; they were Kakure Kirishitans, or crypto-Christians, who had been meeting in secret for 240 years. Worship without benefit of a Bible or book of liturgy had taken a toll, however: their faith survived as a curious amalgam of Catholicism, Buddhism, animism and Shintoism. Over the years the Latin words of the mass had devolved into a kind of pidgin language. *Ave Maria gratia plena dominus tecum benedicta* became *Ame Maria karassa binno domisu terikobintsu*, and no one had the slightest idea what these sounds meant. Believers revered the 'closet god', bundles of cloth wrapped around Christian medallions and

statues which were concealed in a closet disguised as a Buddhist shrine.*

In one of history's terrible ironies, the second atomic bomb exploded directly above Japan's largest community of Christians, destroying Nagasaki's cathedral. Clouds had obscured the intended city, forcing the bombing crew to turn towards a secondary target. A museum in the rebuilt city traces the history of Christianity in Japan, featuring relics from the age of Japanese Christian martyrs.

In the 1950s, the very period when I was growing up in fear of nuclear holocaust, a young writer named Shusaku Endo used to visit this museum in one of the two cities that had actually experienced such a fate. Drawn to the story of the martyrs, he would stand gazing at one particular glass case, which displayed an actual *fumie* from the seventeenth century. Black marks defaced the bronze portrait, which was so worn down he could barely make out the figure of Mary holding Jesus – the result, Endo learned, of human toes, the accumulated impressions made by thousands of Christians committing the *fumie*.

The *fumie* obsessed Endo. Would I have stepped on it? he wondered. What did those people feel as they apostatised? What kind of people were they? Catholic history books recorded only the brave, glorious martyrs, not the cowards who forsook the faith. They were twice damned: first by the silence of God at the time of torture and later by the silence of history. Endo vowed that he would tell the story of the apostates – and through novels such as *Silence* and *The Samurai* he kept that vow.

When I first discovered Shusaku Endo, I sensed an immediate bond, for he had grown up possessed by the same fear and self-doubt that had so troubled me in my youth. Standing in Hell Valley, a site where many Japanese Christians had been martyred, he concluded that probably he too would have denied his faith rather than endure such pain.

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* Around 30,000 of these Kakure Christians still worship today, and eighty house churches carry on the tradition of the 'closet god'. Roman Catholics have tried to embrace them and bring them back into the mainstream of faith, but the Kakure resist. 'We have no interest in joining his church,' said one of their leaders after a visit from Pope John Paul II; 'we, and nobody else, are true Christians.'

AS HE FURTHER REFLECTED, Endo realised what had drawn him so forcefully to the museum display case. The story of the Japanese Christians in the seventeenth century had disturbing echoes in his own life in the twentieth. Though he had never faced the wrath of the shoguns, ever since childhood he had felt a constant, unrelieved tension over his faith. Externally he was a Christian; what was he underneath?

At the age of ten, Endo had returned to Japan from Manchuria with his mother, who was fleeing a bad marriage. Suffering from the pain and social rejection of a divorce – a rarity in Japan – his mother found solace in the devout faith of her sister and so she converted to Catholicism. She faithfully attended mass each morning. In order to please his mother, Shusaku submitted to baptism as well. But had he meant it? Was he in fact the reverse image of the Kakure, a Christian who had gone through the externals while secretly betraying Christ?

'I became a Catholic against my will,' he later decided, likening his faith to an arranged marriage, a forced union with a wife chosen by his mother. He tried to leave that wife – for Marxism, for atheism, even contemplating suicide for a time – but his attempts to break away always failed. He could not live with this arranged wife and he could not live without her. Meanwhile, she kept loving him, and to his surprise eventually he grew to love her in return.

I recognised in Endo's groping towards faith an odd parallel with my own, lived out in a very different context. During high school years I attended a fundamentalist church I now see as almost cultic. I prayed the prayers, went forward at the altar calls and recited the testimonies, but inside I could not stop doubting. Did I truly believe, or was I merely mimicking the behaviour of those around me? I learned to excel at such behaviour, and mostly it brought me rejection and shame.

Even now those scenes of hot shame surge up. Standing before a high school Speech class trying to explain why I wouldn't be able to accompany them on a class trip to view Laurence Olivier's movie version of *Othello* (too 'worldly'). Asking a leering coach's permission to miss the square-dance lessons in Physical Education on religious grounds (also too worldly). Carrying a thick red Bible

around on top of my school books so that perhaps someone might ask me about my faith. Sitting on a garish red-and-white bus, piano-equipped and marked in large letters 'Youth For Christ Bible Club', as it lazily circled the parking lot, stirring up scorn. Listening to a Biology teacher sarcastically explain to the class why my twenty-page term paper had failed to demolish Charles Darwin's 592-page *Origin of the Species*. Shame, alienation and inferiority defined my adolescence. Like Endo, I grew up feeling outcast.

Later, when I realised that church had taught me lies as well as truth, I felt lost, homeless, adrift. For what had I sacrificed my pride and prepared for martyrdom? A religion of racists, anti-intellectuals and social misfits? Reaching for another analogy, Endo likens his pilgrimage of faith to a young boy squirming inside a suit of clothes. He searches in vain for a better-fitting suit, or perhaps a kimono. Endo said he was constantly 're-tailoring with my own hands the Western suit my mother had put on me, and changing it into a Japanese garment that would fit my Japanese body'. I too tried on different suits of clothes, and could never find one to replace the Christian suit I had been dressed in as a child.

Endo's life story reads like the plot of one of his novels. As a child in Manchuria he had lived as an alien, a despised Japanese occupier. Returning to Japan, where the Christian church comprised far less than 1 per cent of the population, he suffered once again the anguish of an alien. Classmates bullied him for his association with a Western religion. The Second World War intensified this sense of estrangement: Endo had always looked to the West as his spiritual homeland, but these were the people now vaporising the cities of Japan.

After the war he travelled to France to study French Catholic novelists such as François Mauriac and George Bernanos. Yet France hardly made him feel welcome either: as one of the first Japanese overseas exchange students, and the only one in Lyons, he was spurned this time on account of race, not religion. The Allies had cranked out a steady stream of anti-Japanese propaganda, and Endo found himself the target of racial abuse from fellow Christians. 'Slanty-eyed gook', some called him. He learned, as I did, that Christians have manifold ways of betraying their

faith. Some publicly renounce it. Others, more subtly, live in ways that contradict it.

During his three years in France, Endo fell into a depression. Worse, he contracted tuberculosis, had to have a lung removed, and spent many months laid up in hospitals. He concluded that Christianity had, in effect, made him ill. Rejected in his homeland, rejected in his spiritual homeland, Endo underwent a grave crisis of faith.

Before returning to Japan from his studies in Europe, Endo visited Palestine in order to research the life of Jesus, and while there he made a transforming discovery: Jesus too knew rejection. More, Jesus' life was *defined* by rejection. His neighbours ran him out of town, his family questioned his sanity, his closest friends betrayed him, and his fellow citizens traded his life for that of a common criminal. Throughout his ministry, Jesus purposely moved among the poor and the rejected: he touched those with leprosy, dined with the unclean, forgave thieves, adulterers and prostitutes.

This insight into Jesus hit Endo with the force of revelation. From the faraway vantage point of Japan he had viewed Christianity as a triumphant, Constantinian faith. He had studied the Holy Roman Empire and the glittering Crusades, had admired the grand cathedrals of Europe, had dreamed of living in a nation where one could be a Christian without disgrace. Now, studying the Bible in its homeland, he saw that Jesus himself had not avoided 'dis-grace'. Many of the depictions of Jesus in Western culture were merely projections of Roman images of glory and imperial power. Jesus himself came as the Suffering Servant depicted by the prophet Isaiah: 'despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces . . .' Surely this Jesus, if anyone, could understand the rejection Endo himself was going through.

I must say that when I first encountered this Jesus, it hit me too with the force of revelation. As I studied the Gospels, I noticed a pattern so consistent it almost reduces to a mathematical formula. The more ungodly, unwholesome and undesirable the person, the

more that person felt attracted to Jesus. And the more righteous, self-assured and desirable the person, the more that person felt threatened by Jesus. Just the opposite of what most people assume! Evangelical Christians hold up the ideal of a balanced, solid citizen who believes in family values and hangs out with 'the right kind'. Consider who Jesus hung out with: a prostitute, an unclean man with leprosy, a moral outcast, a Roman centurion, a mixed-race woman with five divorces. Meanwhile the Pharisees – upright citizens who studied the Scriptures and scrupulously obeyed the law – the ruling establishment, the pillars of society: all these saw Jesus as a threat.

I discovered the Jesus of reversal, through Endo, just as evangelicals were gaining national attention and political power. It occurred to me that a phrase like Repentant Majority or Forgiven Majority might be a more correct way of describing Christians than Moral Majority. Such a label would credit God for any trace of goodness, thus assuring that, in Paul's phrase, 'no one can boast'. Instead, we convey an unctuousness that drives away the very people to whom Jesus directed his appeal: 'Come to me, *all you who are weary and burdened*, and I will give you rest,' he said. I could find no prod towards success or superiority in the invitations of Jesus. Grace, like water, flows to the lowest part.

How ironic, I thought, that a Japanese man rejected by the Christian West was introducing me to this Jesus. I began to read Shusaku Endo in search of the Suffering Servant, who understood rejection as well as anyone who has ever lived. As a young person in a fundamentalist church, I had known rejection and shame from the broader culture. As a struggling Christian I had received rejection from the church itself: they wanted me to conform and not quibble, to believe and not question. Now, in Jesus, I met someone whose message centred on the rejects.

Jesus told stories about lost sheep and prodigal sons, about bizarre banquets where only the poor and sick bother to attend. Truly, as the American slaves used to sing, 'Nobody knows the trouble I've seen – nobody knows but Jesus.' I began to believe that Jesus welcomed reluctant followers, even traitors, even me. My books *The Jesus I Never Knew* and *What's So Amazing About Grace?* came into being as I pondered this new side of Jesus, and the sheer wonder of God's grace.

After his research in Palestine, Endo returned to his native land with his faith intact, yet sensing the need to reshape it, to fashion a suit of clothes that would better fit. 'Christianity, to be effective in Japan, must change,' he decided. He became a novelist, in fact, in order to work out these issues in print. A lean, sickly man, wearing thick glasses, on the fringe of society, he slipped easily into the bookish life of a writer. He began cranking out novels at the rate of one per year, and his pace hardly slowed until his death in 1996.

I first visited Japan in 1997, so I missed any opportunity to interview Shusaku Endo. I found that the paradox of his life continues to this day. By and large, the Christian community does not acknowledge him as one of its own. He had doubts about key doctrines, which made other Christians suspicious of him. Whenever I mentioned him in one of my lectures, a Japanese Christian would come up afterwards and solemnly advise me that Endo might not be the best example to use.

In yet another irony, Endo's lifelong fixation on rejection and alienation brought him success and acclaim in the wider culture. He became Japan's best-known living writer, his books translated into twenty-five languages, his name making the short list for the Nobel Prize for Literature. Graham Greene called him 'one of the finest living novelists', and luminaries such as John Updike and Annie Dillard joined the chorus of praise. In his later years, Endo served as a cultural icon in Japan, prominent in newspapers and magazines and for a time even hosting a television talk show. In a nation where Christians still do not exceed 1 per cent of the population, it seems remarkable that Endo's major books all landed on the best-seller lists, for no important modern novelist worked so exclusively with overt Christian themes.

Endo speaks to the inner person, where lie buried the feelings of shame and rejection that the average Japanese must endure in a culture that honours appropriate and proper behaviour, that is unfailingly polite and civil on the outside. Ask any Japanese the difference between *honne*, what takes place on the inside, and *tatemae*, what others see on the outside, and they will nod knowingly. Ask any American, for that matter, or any European or African. Endo explores the crevices of failure and betrayal every person on earth lives with, and often seeks to hide. In doing so,

Endo sheds new light on the Christian faith – at once a harshly revealing light that exposes long-hidden corners, and also a softening light that erases shadows.

FROM THE VERY BEGINNING, Endo sought to probe the differences between the Eastern and Western views of the world. He had been schooled in the Catholic literature of the West, which assumes a Supreme Being separate from creation. Most Japanese, however, believe in no such Supreme Being, and as a result the profound themes of God, sin, guilt and moral crisis that underlie much Western literature have little relevance to the average Japanese reader.

In the early novels Endo portrays Japan as a kind of swampland (and sometimes a literal swamp) which swallows up all that is foreign, including Christianity. One of his earliest works, *Yellow Man*, shows a French missionary abandoning his priesthood in order to marry a Japanese woman, and then later choosing suicide. The priest wonders aloud whether his God 'can sink roots into this wet soil, into this yellow race'. In *Volcano*, written a few years later, the foreign priest not only defects but turns seducer, enticing others to give up their faith. Behind these figures looms the silhouette of a lone young man standing before a display case in a Nagasaki museum.

In time, though, the novelist Endo seemed to find a path out of the swampland. Japanese writers have the custom of spinning off light, entertaining works in between their more serious books. In these 'entertainments', serialised in periodicals, a new figure emerged from Endo: the good-hearted fool, a Japanese comic version of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Endo's *The Wonderful Fool* presents a bumbling, horse-faced missionary who would easily win an 'ugly American' contest were it not for the fact that he is French – Gaston Bonaparte, to be precise, a descendant of the famous emperor. Gaston offends his hosts, commits a cultural *faux pas* every five minutes or so, and seems attracted to all the wrong kind: a stray mongrel, a prostitute, an old hermit, a murderer. Nevertheless, his bumbling/loving actions rekindle life for everyone he touches: the closing scene takes place in a swamp

where the love of Gaston moves the murderer – named Endo – to repentance.

In *The Samurai* and *Silence*, the clash of cultures works itself out in the form of tragedy, not comedy. Both novels reflect actual events and characters from the early 1600s, when shoguns were tightening the noose around the Christian community in Japan. *The Samurai* takes place just as the shoguns are reconsidering their policy of open exchange with the West. A priest leads four samurai on a trade mission to Mexico and Europe where, hoping to enhance the success of their mission, the samurai become nominal Christians. During their time abroad, however, Japan closes its borders, and upon their return they are executed as traitors. (Overtones of Endo's own life – the nominal baptism, the trip abroad, rejection for a faith he barely believes – abound.)

At least one of the samurai, though, may grasp the true meaning of a martyr's death. His servant Yozo speaks to him of Jesus: not the triumphant, resurrected Christ, rather the rejected One whom Endo himself had come to know on his visits to Palestine:

> I suppose that somewhere in the hearts of men, there's a yearning for someone who will be with you throughout your life, someone who will never betray you, never leave you – even if that someone is just a sick, mangy dog. That man became just such a miserable dog for the sake of mankind.

The samurai dies with these words from Yozo ringing in his ears: 'From now on he will be beside you. From now on he will attend you.'

Critics regard the other novel set in this historical period, *Silence*, as Endo's masterpiece. Its prose is spare and clean, the plot marches inexorably towards a tragic conclusion, the characters achieve a depth rare in Endo's fiction, and indeed the entire atmosphere is suffused with the power of myth. *Silence* follows a Portuguese priest, Rodrigues, on a dangerous mission to Japan. Word has filtered back to Jesuit headquarters that the most famous missionary in Japan, Father Ferreira, has apostatised. Rodrigues, who studied under Father Ferreira in seminary, cannot believe that the great man, his own mentor, would renounce the faith after twenty years of courageous service. He sets sail to find Ferreira, knowing

that he likely will not return alive. (All this is based on actual historical characters and events from 1635.)

Upon arrival in Japan, after a harrowing journey, Rodrigues hears the confessions of secret Christians – members of the underground Kakure church – who have not seen a priest in years. One of them, a despicable, cunning fisherman, turns Rodrigues in to the shogun for a reward. Rodrigues holds fast to his faith under torture, even when he faces an unbearable moral situation. Groups of Christians are paraded before him. If he steps on the *fumie*, he is told, they will be set free. He refuses, and they are taken away and killed before his eyes. 'He had come to this country to lay down his life for other men, but instead of that the Japanese were laying down their lives one by one for him.' Still, no matter what barbarous methods the shogun uses, Rodrigues will not renounce his faith.

As the title intimates, the theme of silence pervades the novel. Over one hundred times Rodrigues sees the haunting face of Jesus, a face he loves and serves; but the face does not speak. It remains silent when the priest is chained to a tree to watch the Christians die, silent when he asks for guidance on whether to commit the *fumie* to set them free, and silent when he prays in his cell at night.

At first it seems *Silence* will pay homage to what has propelled the church through the centuries: the intrepid faith of heroic martyrs. Rodrigues, a priest without guile, has voluntarily taken on a suicidal mission. But in *Silence*, Rodrigues's love and faith extend beyond martyrdom, extend even to the point of apostasy.

One night Rodrigues hears a sound like snoring. The sound, actually moans of pain, comes from Christians hanging upside down over pits, their ears slit so that blood will drip and they will die a slow, agonising death. These too can be set free, if Rodrigues will only recant. Rodrigues has been warned about this torture by Ferreira, who visited him in his cell. To his horror, he learned on that visit that the great missionary Ferreira had indeed recanted, after just five hours of hanging in the pit. Ferreira urges Rodrigues, too, to step on the *fumie*. It is just a symbol, an external act. He need not really mean it. It will save so many lives . . . And so in the end the priest Rodrigues forfeits his own faith for the love of others.

Endo later complained that *Silence* was misinterpreted because of its title. 'People assume that God was silent,' he said, when in fact God does speak in the novel. Here is the decisive scene when silence is broken, at the very moment when Rodrigues is contemplating the *fumie*.

> 'It is only a formality. What do formalities matter?' The interpreter urges him on excitedly. 'Only go through with the exterior form of trampling.'
>
> The priest raises his foot. In it he feels a dull, heavy pain. 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! And then the Christ in bronze speaks to the priest: '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.'
>
> The priest placed his foot on the *fumie*. Dawn broke. And far in the distance the cock crew.

When *Silence* first appeared, in 1966, many Japanese Catholics responded with outrage. Protective of their martyred forebears, they objected to the 'romanticisation' of apostates like Ferreira and Rodrigues. How easily we forget that the church was founded by disciples who betrayed their master. None was willing to stand by Jesus as the religious and political authorities condemned him to death. At his moment of greatest need, the disciples fled in the darkness. The boldest of the lot, Peter, was the very one who cursed and denied him three times before the cock crew. It was for traitors that Jesus died.

In his own defence, Endo locates the theme of the novel in the transformation of the face of Jesus, not the transformation of the characters. 'To me the most meaningful thing in the novel is the change in the hero's image of Christ,' he says. Formerly, Rodrigues had believed in a Jesus of majesty and power. The image of Jesus that had appeared to him more than one hundred times was pure, serene, heavenly. Gradually, though, as Rodrigues's mission fails – and indeed causes the death of many Japanese – the face of Jesus

begins to change into one marked by human suffering. What must it have been like for Jesus himself, knowing as he must that the faith he would set loose on the world would result in the persecution and martyrdom of so many throughout history, including so many Japanese? 'Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child . . . All men will hate you because of me.'

Weary, hunted, near despair, Rodrigues catches a glimpse of his own reflection in a pool of rainwater, a glimpse that becomes an epiphany:

> There reflected in the water was a tired, hollow face. I don't know why, but at that moment I thought of the face of another man . . . the face of a crucified man . . . heavy with mud and with stubble; it was thin and dirty; it was the face of a haunted man, filled with uneasiness and exhaustion.

From that point on, the novel uses words like 'suffering', 'emaciated', 'worn down' and 'ugly' to describe the face of Jesus. And when the silence finally breaks, just as Rodrigues is about to step on the *fumie*, this face speaks, from the centre of the *fumie*. 'Trample!' says the face already 'worn down and hollow from the constant trampling'.

THE SCHEME BEHIND ENDO'S transformed image of Jesus comes to light in his non-fiction work *A Life of Jesus*. The book sold 300,000 copies and for many Japanese remains their primary introduction to the Christian faith. Shusaku Endo believes that Christianity has failed to make much impact on Japan because the Japanese have heard only one side of the story. They have heard about the beauty and majesty: Japanese tourists visit Chartres and Westminster Abbey and their digital cameras record images of that glory; Japanese choirs and orchestras perform the religious masterpieces of Handel and Bach. But somehow the Japanese have missed another message: of a God who 'made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant'; of a Son of God who wept, as if helpless, when he approached Jerusalem.

Endo explains that his point of contact with the Japanese centres

on the experiences of failure and shame because in his culture these leave the most lasting impact on a person's life. People raised in a Buddhist culture, Endo feels, can best identify with one who suffers with us and allows for our weakness. For Endo himself, the most poignant legacy of Jesus was his undying love, even for – *especially* for – people who betrayed him. When Judas led a lynch mob into the garden, Jesus addressed him as 'Friend'. His nation had him executed; while stretched out naked in the posture of ultimate disgrace, Jesus roused himself for the cry, 'Father, forgive them.' To those scandalised by the apparent apostasy of his characters Ferreira and Rodrigues, Endo points to the two great founders of the Christian church: Peter denied Christ three times, Paul led the first persecution of Christians. If grace had not encompassed those two, the church might never have got off the ground.

Why is Christianity virtually the only Western practice that has failed to take root in Japan, which so quickly adopted baseball, McDonald's and rock music? Following another thread of thought, Endo traces its failure to the Western emphasis on the fatherhood of God. Therapist Erich Fromm says that a child from a balanced family receives two kinds of love. Mother-love tends to be unconditional, accepting the child no matter what, regardless of behaviour. Father-love tends to be more provisional, bestowing approval as the child meets certain standards of behaviour. Ideally, says Fromm, a child should receive and internalise both kinds of love. According to Endo, Japan, a nation of authoritarian fathers, has understood the father-love of God but not the mother-love.

An old Japanese saying lists the four most awful things on earth as 'fires, earthquakes, thunderbolts and fathers'. On my trips to Japan, many have told me of their authoritarian fathers who never apologise, who remain emotionally distant, who show nothing resembling love or grace, who offer much criticism and little if any encouragement. One woman told me she had actually plotted to kill her father at the age of thirteen, after he sexually abused her. Afraid of capital punishment, she went away to study in America instead. When her mother died, he demanded that she return to care for him, and under Japanese custom she felt obligated. 'Last month for the first time in my life, my father thanked me for something I had done,' she told me. 'I consider that a real victory.'

For Christianity to have any appeal to the Japanese, Endo concludes, it must stress instead the mother-love of God, the love that forgives wrongs and binds wounds and draws, rather than forces, others to itself. ('O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!') 'In "maternal religion" Christ comes to prostitutes, worthless people, misshapen people and forgives them,' says Endo. As he sees it, Jesus brought the message of mother-love to balance the father-love of the Old Testament. A mother's love will not desert even a child who commits a crime; it forgives any weakness. To Endo, what really impressed the disciples was their realisation that Christ still loved them even after they had betrayed him. To be proven wrong was nothing new; to be proven wrong and still loved – that was new.

A Life of Jesus fills in the portrait of the mother-love of Jesus:

> He was thin; he wasn't much. One thing about him, however – he was never known to desert other people if they had trouble. When women were in tears, he stayed by their side. When old folks were lonely, he sat with them quietly. It was nothing miraculous, but the sunken eyes overflowed with love more profound than a miracle. And regarding those who deserted him, those who betrayed him, not a word of resentment came to his lips. No matter what happened, he was the man of sorrows, and he prayed for nothing but their salvation.
>
> That's the whole life of Jesus. It stands out clean and simple, like a single Chinese ideograph brushed on a blank sheet of paper.

Traditional Christians will find Endo's portrayal of Jesus incomplete. He says nothing of Jesus' miracles and, frankly, they seem almost irrelevant to his aims. He leaves out scenes that show Jesus' authority and power. He is presenting a Jesus the Japanese can relate to, and for them all tokens of power make Jesus intimidating and difficult to accept. Similarly, Endo gives a limp rendering of the Resurrection, which to him poses a barrier to Japanese belief. To critics who judge his theology harshly, he replies, 'My way of

depicting Jesus is rooted in my being a Japanese novelist. I wrote this book for the benefit of Japanese readers who have no Christian tradition of their own and who know almost nothing about Jesus.'

Yet we who grow up hearing about Jesus have much to learn from Endo as well. I remember addressing the topic 'Culture Wars' before a large gathering that was tilted toward the liberal Democratic persuasion and included a strong Jewish minority. I had been selected as the token evangelical Christian on a panel that included the presidents of the Disney Channel and Warner Brothers, as well as the president of an elite Eastern university and the personal attorney for Anita Hill, who had testified so strongly against Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. I felt like wearing a T-shirt with a bull's-eye target painted on it, for all of them had stories to tell of powerful Christian lobbies that had battled them.

Southern Baptists were boycotting Disney, evangelicals were expressing outrage over a blasphemous art exhibit at Wellesley College, and Anita Hill was still getting angry letters from conservative Christians years after her appearance before Congress. The youngest panellist, Lucinda Robb, granddaughter of President Lyndon Johnson and daughter of Senator Chuck Robb, told of a bruising campaign against Oliver North, in which right-wing Christians picketed their every appearance. 'I thought we were Christians,' Lucinda told me. 'We grew up with Billy Graham as a frequent visitor, and we have always been active in church. We truly believe. But these demonstrators treated us like we were demons from hell.'

When my turn came to speak, I mentioned that on such issues I seek guidance from the life of a Palestinian Jew from the first century, who was also involved in a culture war. A rigid religious establishment hounded him throughout his time on earth, worried that his revolutionary message might upset the ruling authorities. And surely the pagan empire he lived under gave him cause for offence. Rome had practices – slavery, mass executions, infanticide, public gladiator games – that no modern state would tolerate. Jesus relied on one main weapon to 'fight' the culture wars: sacrificial love. Among the last words he spoke before death were these: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'

After the panel, a television celebrity came up to me whose

name every reader would recognise. 'I've got to tell you, that stabbed me right in the heart,' he said. 'I was prepared to dislike you because I dislike all right-wing Christians and I assumed you were one. You can't imagine the mail I get from right-wingers. I don't follow Jesus – I'm a Jew. But when you told about Jesus forgiving his enemies, I realised how far from that spirit I am. I fight my enemies, especially the right-wingers. I don't forgive them. I have much to learn from the spirit of Jesus.' The power of Jesus' sacrificial love was at work yet again.

TOWARDS THE END OF his career, Endo turned to more personal, even autobiographical themes. In 1988 his novel *Scandal* appeared which, rather shockingly, presents as the central character a famous Catholic writer in Japan who is accused of frequenting the red-light district of Tokyo. The reader is never quite sure whether this writer, with his obvious resemblance to Endo, is being set up by his accusers, has a shadow side, or is experiencing some kind of *doppelgänger*. Endo lays bare the treachery of his own soul. 'Don't overestimate me,' he tells his readers. 'It's as much as I can do just to deal with my own problems. I can't take on the responsibility for your lives too.'

As a writer, I find *Scandal* the most courageous, and in many ways the most moving, of Endo's novels. Writers of faith have a tendency to sanitise their characters, to portray them with a kind of glow about them. This tendency directly contradicts the example of the Bible, which depicts the flaws in its great characters – Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, Paul – with brutal realism. In this sense, Endo is one of the most biblical of all modern fiction writers, for the theme of betrayal surfaces in every one of his major books. In *Scandal*, Endo himself is the traitor.

'A novelist cannot write about what is holy,' Endo says. 'He cannot depict the holy Christ, but he can write about Jesus through the eyes of the sort of people who stepped on the *fumie*, or the eyes of his disciples and others who betrayed the Christ.' He might have added that the novelist can only write about Jesus through the eyes of the novelist himself, for in the end Endo did not stray far from his own autobiography. Inside the elderly,

esteemed man of letters was still a little boy struggling to make his foreign suit of clothes fit a Japanese body.

One of Endo's short stories, 'Mothers', tells of a man who visits a group of Kakure Christians on a remote island in search of some truth about himself. These crypto-Christians, devoted to Mary, with an acute sense of historical failure, appeal to the visitor. He senses in them something of the longing he felt as a child, unable to communicate well with his own mother. 'Sometime I catch a glimpse of myself in these Kakure, people who have had to lead lives of duplicity, lying to the world and never revealing their true feelings to anyone.'

In a recurring dream, the narrator lies in a hospital, heavily drugged. As he fades in and out of consciousness he sees that beside him, patient, doggedly loving, sits his mother – no one else, just his mother. In lucid moments he ponders her intense faith and his own waywardness. 'The more she compelled me to share her faith, the more I fought her oppressive power, the way a drowning child struggles against the pressure of the water.'

As the narrator thinks these thoughts, listening to the hum of life-support machines, shifting mistily between the present and the past, preparing for a future he cannot imagine, his mother sits beside him, silent, waiting.

Getting started with Shusaku Endo

Start with *Silence*, Endo's acknowledged classic. I deeply admire *Scandal* also. One of his last novels, *Deep River*, revisits many of the themes of the earlier novels – trips abroad, a shattered faith, the bumbling fool – but explores the new territory of comparative religions through the eyes of a Japanese tour group visiting India. Many readers find Endo's fiction repetitive or difficult to relate to, perhaps because of cultural differences; these might prefer the short stories collected in *The Final Martyrs*. His *A Life of Jesus* helps explain the point of view expressed in the novels.

EPILOGUE

WRITERS HAVE THE PREROGATIVE of focusing on one thing for months, even years at a time. Recently, I have thought about little else than the thirteen people in this book and how they have affected me. Doing so was a wonderful tonic, one I would recommend in smaller doses to anyone. Make a list of the people who have shaped your life for the better, and try to figure out why.

As I review the list in total, I see flawed, not perfect, people. Several of them a psychiatrist would probably diagnose as unstable. Each one had longings that went unfulfilled, dreams that never entered reality. I learn from them how to handle my own longings. Do they drive me on, towards the person I want to become and haven't, towards the God I want to know? Or do they depress me, make me tired and cynical? From these mentors, I have learned to sense longings as intimations of something more, worthy of my ceaseless even if futile pursuit, and to resist the temptation to settle for less.

Søren Kierkegaard said, 'With the help of the thorn in my foot, I spring higher than anyone with sound feet.' Some of the people profiled in this collection demonstrate that proverb as well. I would only add that we also need the help of those who show us what direction to spring. For me, these people point the way.

I have dealt mostly with my past in this book, for these guides set me on my own pilgrimage at a crucial time when my beliefs were taking shape. As for the present – well, that's the subject of most of my other books . . .