

Do we have a true idea of God, or just a distortion?



Endo's error, and our's Do we have a true idea of God, or just a distortion?

In the Japanese Catholic novelist Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence* and the film version of it by Martin Scorsese, an apostate Jesuit priest in 17th-century Japan tells his protege that the mission to Japan has failed, not because of persecution, but because Japanese Christians did not actually come to believe what the missionaries had taught.

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Ferreira, the elder, tells his former pupil Rodrigues, "What the Japanese of that time believed in was not our God. It was their own gods. For a long time we failed to realize this and firmly believed that they had become Christians. ... From the beginning ... [Japanese Christians] changed our God and began to create something different. ... the Japanese did not believe in the Christian God but in their own distortion."

In what are probably the best-known words of the novel among Japanese Catholics, Ferreira says, "This country is a swamp. ... Whenever you plant a sapling in this swamp the roots begin to rot; the leaves grow yellow and wither. And we have planted the sapling of Christianity in this swamp."

Ferreira is, of course, wrong, and it is a mistaken idea that Endo may have shared.

Western missionaries then and probably still have not planted "the sapling of Christianity."

What they thought and often think of as the sapling of Christianity is actually a seedling from a sapling of Christianity that was long ago planted in the bogs and fens of Europe and there underwent a transformation similar to the one of which Ferreira speaks.

Ferreira could properly say of himself and even of Westerners today that "from the beginning European Christians changed God and began to create something different. Westerners do not believe in the Christian God but in their own distortion." We are so used to that distortion that we, like Ferreira, assume that it is a true picture of the real God.

That picture, whether painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo or drawn in a

cartoon showing a long-haired, bearded old white man among the clouds with a lightning bolt in his hand, owes more to the Greek god Zeus (though without his innumerable sexual escapades) than it does to Christianity.

And, when it is not presented visually, that distortion as often as not becomes the unmoved mover of Greek philosophy or some other intellectual abstraction.

The general Western idea of God is more or less a combination of Santa Claus and a traffic cop: a kind and generous old codger, but one on the lookout for infractions.

Might going back to the root stock, the faith of Israel, enable us to purify our image, to get the saplings to grow right?

Unfortunately, it is not so simple as that. Even the Bible has various versions of God, from the garden stroller in Genesis to the Oriental potentate in Isaiah to the Incarnate One on the Cross. Clearly, the seeds of faith of Abraham and Moses also wound up on soggy soil.

So, are we to give up trying to live with faith in God? Is it a useless endeavor? I think not. In every age, and either because of or in spite of the saplings under which they lived their lives, there have been saints.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the final outbreak of the persecution of which Endo wrote, an event so recent that I know a woman whose grandfather died in it. Families were split up, and 3,414 Christians were exiled to remote villages throughout Japan. Twenty percent of them lost their lives.

But in their exile, something occurred that would have surprised Ferreira. Those men, women and children who were the fruits of the sapling he and his fellows planted long before and which had been reshaped by the swamp of Japan became planters themselves. In several villages where the exiles were sent, their patience and kindness inspired locals to themselves become Christian.

Jesus said that it is by their fruits that people's hearts will be made clear. The fact is that in spite of the varied shapes the tree of faith might take, there is a sap within them all that carries with it the ability to bear fruit.

The images, the understandings will certainly be inadequate. That is of secondary importance so long as with intelligence, faith and prayer we come in touch with that sap.

One of the advantages of our now having a non-European pope is that the European sapling, which is no less but no more an imperfect manifestation of the mystery, is no longer the only "official" growth in the orchard of faith.

The challenge for Christians in Asia, Africa, the Americas, Oceania and even modern Europe is to find the sap in our various saplings so that it may produce fruit that will become the source of yet new saplings, new ways to experience and express the mystery of God.

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