Theorizing Faith, Culture, and Identity in the Fiction of Shusaku Endo
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I. Brief Project Description with Major Goals

I propose to write an article for a peer-reviewed journal that uses the fiction of Shusaku Endo and the emergent scholarship on world Christianity to rethink some of the critical paradigms that postcolonial theory has developed on culture, faith, and identity. The result will be an article ready for publication and also ready, with some adaptation, to serve as a chapter in the book I am writing on Shusaku Endo.

II. Expanded Description of Project (Examination of Scholarly Literature and Integration Statement Included in this Expanded Description)

“... my Japanese sensibilities have made me feel out of harmony with European Christianity. In the final analysis, the faith of the Europeans is conscious and rational, and these people reject anything they cannot slice into categories with their rationality and their conscious minds.... But an Asian like me just can’t make sharp distinctions and pass judgement on everything the way they do.” (Otsu, in Deep River, 117)

From his debut companion novellas, White Man and Yellow Man (1955) to his final novel, Deep River (1993), the late Shusaku Endo seemed to be haunted by a recurring anxiety that his anomalous identity as a Japanese Christian represented a form of cultural betrayal. Often likening his baptism at the age of eleven to the forced imposition of a “Western suit, ill-matched to his Japanese body,” (Higgins 415), Endo explained how this ambivalence toward his adopted faith fed his artistic vocation: “I was often tempted to forsake this [Western-style] dress, but my attachment to my mother was the grace that prevented me from doing so. … I wondered whether it was possible for me to reshape this Western dress that my mother gave me and make it fit the Japanese body; that is, whether it was possible to adapt Christianity to our mentality without
distorting Christianity. And I decided that I should make this problem the main theme of my novels” (Yamagata 495).

Even as an undergraduate, Endo wondered if there were something intrinsic in the Japanese character that was inimical to the Christian faith. His undergraduate essay, “The gods and God,” advanced the thesis “that there is in the Japanese sensibility something that is incapable of receiving Christianity.” Endo described this absence as “a threefold insensitivity: an insensitivity to God, an insensitivity to sin, and an insensitivity to death” (translated and quoted by Mathy, “Thought,” 593). Such insensitivity indicates less of hostile opposition than simply indifference to basic Christian assumptions.

Similar claims of an incommensurability between Japanese and Christian sensibilities recurs frequently in Endo’s fiction, usually expressed by characters who have failed to bridge that divide. In Yellow Man (1955), the Japanese student Chiba and the disgraced priest Durant argue that the Japanese do not—indeed cannot—think in Christian categories of sin and guilt (cited in Mathy 58; see also Williams 74). In Silence (1966), the magistrate Inoue and the apostate priest Ferreira describe Japan as a swamp that invariably destroys the transplanted sapling of Christianity. They also insist that the Japanese mind cannot conceive of a God as a transcendent being, as is predicated in Christian theology (Silence 150). In Foreign Studies (1965), the expatriate Sakisaka describes the bitter lesson he learned after years of living in France, reflecting dismally on the “insuperable distance between the cathedral at Chartres and the Horyuji temple, the unfathomable disparity between the statue of St Anna and the Maitreya Bodhisattva. From the outside they may appear similar, but the blood of those who created them was very different.” He concludes metaphorically that “we cannot receive blood from those
of a different blood group” (Foreign Studies 225). In The Samurai, the formidable Jesuit polemicist, Father Valente, argues before a council of bishops that “‘The Japanese basically lack a sensitivity to anything that is absolute, to anything that transcends the human level, to the existence of anything beyond the realm of Nature: what we would call the supernatural’” (The Samurai 163).

That such claims about the incompatibility of Christianity and Japanese culture recur so frequency in Endo’s work suggests that the problem continued to exercise his imagination to the end of his life; indeed, in his final novel, it is the sympathetic protagonist Otsu who, as the opening epigraph indicates, emerges from seminary convinced that Christianity is too European for his Asian mind to comprehend. Consequently, Otsu comes to accept the pluralist creed that the love of his “Onion” (the arbitrary signifier that he and his atheist friend Mitsuko use to avoid traditional God-talk) can be found in all religions (DR 121-22).1 While Otsu himself never abandons the Church nor his radical commitment to Jesus, his assumptions about the relationship of the Christian faith to human cultures are troubling. Cultural identity, for Otsu, seems to be nearly immutable, and he comes precariously close to subordinating religious practice to cultural identity. Hence, if a religion like Christianity is perceived to be too closely aligned with a particular culture, it might be seen as culturally inauthentic within another. The task of translating the faith from western to eastern cultures might then be perceived as a fool’s errand at best and, at worst, an assault on those eastern cultures.

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1 In his notes about the composition of Deep River, Endo acknowledged having come across John Hick’s Problems in Religious Pluralism and having discovered with astonishment that Hick had articulated a position that he had been moving toward (Hick: Autobiography, 286). Hick’s position is that salvation or liberation may be found in all religions and that none has exclusive claims on religious truth.
The curious paradox for Endo, as for his character Otsu, is that he remained a devout Catholic to the end of his life, receiving the sacrament of the sick and a memorial mass administered by his good friend, Father William Johnston (Johnston 111), but his project to re-tailor the Christian faith in culturally-congruent garb seems by the end of his life to have moved much closer to a form of religious pluralism. Culture, it seems, assumes priority in defining the human dispositions that shape one’s religious beliefs and practices. The possibilities of religious experience become demarcated by culture and its seminal role in shaping human identity. Not insignificantly, the characters in Endo’s fiction who do end up in Jesus’ grasp, to use Otsu’s expression (DR 191), are the cultural anomalies: the betayers and betrayed, the apostates and seminary dropouts, the disillusioned and disenfranchised. The ones most closely identified as representative of Japanese culture remain alienated by, and often hostile towards, the Christian faith. Perhaps Endo means no more than that following Jesus is deeply counter-cultural in any society, yet he also suggests repeatedly that for the Japanese people, professing faith in Jesus Christ seems to demand a form of cultural renunciation not demanded of western Christians. The personal and cultural cost of such renunciation seems, to Endo, to have become too great, and in this conclusion Endo seems to be joined by increasing numbers of contemporary Christians who wonder if the gospel that missionaries have brought to many non-western nations does not amount to a form of cultural suppression.

While it may be time to provide a cross-cultural or global update of Richard Niebuhr’s classic categories for thinking about the relationship of Christ to culture, my purposes in this proposal are considerably more modest. What I propose to do with a
Pew Summer Research Fellowship in 2009 is to use Endo’s fiction as a stimulus for re-thinking some of our culture’s prevailing theoretical paradigms about cultural difference, religious faith, and personal identity. Specifically, I plan to write a 7000-8000 word article\(^2\) that will bring Endo’s fiction into dialogue with both postcolonial theory (which, I maintain, has powerfully shaped popular attitudes toward cultural difference and assumptions about cultural identity) and the emerging scholarship on world Christianity (which, I argue, has the potential to unsettle some of the received truisms of postcolonial theory). My tentative thesis is two-fold: first, Endo’s fiction challenges some of the assumptions in postcolonial theory about cultural difference, the intersections of power and culture, and the place of religion in global contexts; second, global Christianity challenges the oppositional and essentialist assumptions that lurk in both postcolonial theory and Endo’s fiction. My objective for this essay is to offer what I believe are more biblically-faithful models for thinking about cultural difference, religious practice, and personal identity than are present in the pluralistic and frequently relativistic paradigms bequeathed by postcolonial theory to popular culture.

It may seem anomalous to invoke postcolonial theory in a study about an author not writing out of the European colonial context. To be sure, postcolonial theory often invokes rather expansive definitions as to what constitutes colonialism\(^3\); more significantly, I believe that its categories for thinking about cultural identity and the inter-relationships of global cultures have influenced cultural assumptions about cultural difference and identity far beyond the post-colonial context, strictly speaking.

\(^2\) I intend both to publish this article in a suitable scholarly journal—perhaps *Christian Scholar’s Review*—and subsequently to revise the article to serve as the concluding chapter for a book I am writing on Endo.

\(^3\) Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin’s highly influential *The Empire Writes Back* makes a rather expansive case to include Australia, Canada, and the U.S. within the category of postcolonial studies (2), a definition which has not been unchallenged (see Gandhi 168).
Furthermore, there are similarities between the Japanese intellectual debates seeking to define the essential “Japanese spirit” during the first half of the twentieth century and the ways in which postcolonial theory often defines the identities of the colonized “other” over against the colonial culture.

At its best, postcolonial theory has drawn attention to the suffering and oppression inflicted upon indigenous peoples in the name of empire and has encouraged an identification with the colonized “other.” It is this ethical identification with the poor and the marginalized that has prompted several Christian thinkers in recent decades to find common cause with postcolonial theory, often drawing on the Old Testament prophets for theological antecedents to the postcolonial denunciations of injustice and oppression.4

Postcolonial theory has also provided a necessary, and at times healthy, critique of the master narratives of empire and of what Edward Said has described as the European cultural hegemony of the West (*Orientalism* 7). It shouldn’t come as a particular surprise that empires might use self-serving rhetoric to mask rapacious impulses. One need not subscribe to the complete relativity of knowledge to acknowledge the human propensity to universalize one’s own experience, to assume the normativity of one’s situated perspective, and postcolonialism has served the useful purpose of deflating the most egregious examples of such thinking by the colonial mindset.

Apart from such ethical impulses, postcolonialism has also shaped our cultural conversations about cultural difference and identity in some problematic ways. First, postcolonial thinking encourages oppositional habits of thinking. Postcolonial theory is built on a foundation of binary oppositions (e.g., colonizer/colonized,

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civilization/savagery, center/margins, rationality/intuition, order/chaos, etc.). These, and other, antitheses formed the intellectual justification for empire, which, as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* illustrates, could claim to bring the light of civilization to the darkness of savagery (1055). It is therefore understandable that post-colonial theory would need to deconstruct these binary oppositions, to deflate the self-justifying rhetoric of empire. However, I maintain that if such binary oppositions continue to shape our thinking about cultural difference, we have an equally problematic paradigm for thinking about cultural difference and identity.5 Binary ways of thinking, almost by definition, set up value-laden oppositions, and if the colonial mindset privileges a certain set of values (e.g., rationality, order, Europe, etc.), the postcolonial rejoinder often simply inverts the hierarchy of values to privilege what had been marginalized by the colonial imagination. It is hardly controversial to state that the postcolonial moral paradigm privileges the colonized voice over the voice of the colonizers. It is the moral privilege accorded victims of injustice and oppression. The problem with binary ways of thinking, however, is that they tend to reduce the complexities of history, including the vexed history of colonialism and empire, to a simplified moral that makes it far too easy to divide the world into the virtuous and the evil, to situate all of the ethical problems of colonialism and the postcolonial condition in the hegemonizing, totalizing, systemic structures of

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5 Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (*The Empire Writes Back*) basically define postcolonial literature in terms of antitheses: the distinctive characteristic of postcolonial literatures is their “foregrounding [of] the tension with the imperial power” and “emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre” (2). Thus the metaphoric opposition of the center and the margins informs the basic paradigm of postcolonial studies, as do a series of other binaries: the “constructed values” of “civilization, humanity, etc.” propagated by the imperial powers as contrasted with “‘savagery,’ ‘native,’ ‘primitive,’” which are their putative antitheses (3). Leela Gandhi echoes this binaristic paradigm, though attributing the sources of these antitheses to the imperial imagination: “Postcolonial theory recognizes that colonial discourse typically rationalizes itself through rigid oppositions such as maturity/immaturity, civilization/barbarism, developed/developing, progressive/primitive” (32). But even if these oppositions were entirely originated by the empire, binary habits of thinking remain stubbornly embedded in the postcolonial paradigm.
empire. Such a moral framework, I contend, is neither consistent with a Christian understanding of human nature and cultural systems nor consonant with the testimony of history.

Perhaps postcolonial theory is inevitably skewed toward binary thinking because of the intellectual debt it owes to both poststructuralism and Marxism. The particular genealogy of poststructuralist influence seems to emerge from the Foucauldian critique of power, the Lyotardian critique of master narratives and the Derridean exposure of the absent center in colonial discourses⁶, and in all cases, binary oppositions define the terms of the analysis. The binaries almost always presuppose a power-laden dynamic, with an oppressive hegemony that seeks to control and oppress the entities at the margins, however the center and margins happen to be defined. Likewise, the superstructure of the Marxist vision rests on what is likewise a binary vision of reality (e.g., capital and labor, the bourgeoísie and the proletariat, collectivism and the individual, etc.). These theoretical frames of reference seem to demand a hegemonous entity that must be toppled. Granting that such entities have been all too prevalent in history and contemporary culture, it is still, I would argue, an inadequate paradigm on which to build theories of cultural difference and identity. Not all cross-cultural exchanges amount to the coercive imposition of power upon the marginalized; not all expressions of cultural difference can be reduced to self-interested power politics.

For regions of the world which do not fit the European colonial model—East Asia comes immediately to mind—the postcolonial paradigm proves to be inadequate at best and profoundly distorting at worst. It is in this context that Endo’s fiction offers a helpful

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⁶ See L. Gandhi (25-30) and Young (383-426). See also Benita Parry’s “The institutionalization of postcolonial studies” (66-80) and Simon Gikandi’s “Poststructuralism ad postcolonial discourse” (97-119) in Lazarus for other treatments of the theoretical underpinnings of postcolonialism.
corrective to postcolonial analyses of power, culture, and identity. Endo’s fiction complicates paradigms of power and powerlessness, particularly in relationship to questions of cultural identity. His historical fiction, set in the seventeenth-century Tokugawa government’s process of nation-building, offers an extraordinarily supple, complex analysis of power, cultural identity, and religious faith. His exploration of cross-cultural political exchange acknowledges what the poststructuralist critique insists upon: that national or cultural myth-making becomes an easy rhetorical tool by which to mask oppression and violence, but Endo adds this additional caveat—*that it can be directed against one’s own people as easily as against colonized “others.”* Furthermore, Endo recognizes that such oppression is not the sole province of the western hemisphere but rather is amply exhibited in both East and West. In his fiction, both the Japanese cultural brokers and the European missionaries and conquistadors invoke cultural purity as self-serving masks to control and oppress those who stand in their way. Endo’s critique of power in these novels undoubtedly modulates the postcolonial perspective because his thinking about evil and injustice has theological origins. Postcolonialism lacks the Christian vocabulary for talking about sin and redemption. In part, it may be because its poststructural theoretical assumptions do not permit any transcultural or transcendent point of reference—including the Christian insistence that both the human condition of sin and Christ’s redemptive work transcend cultural boundaries. It may also be because Christianity has come to be so closely associated with European colonialism that it cannot be understood in postcolonial thought as distinct from, and larger than, its European representation. Endo, however, recognizes evil and sin to be pervasive, to

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7 Where postcolonial theory does give positive attention to religion, it is as often as not to the indigenous religious traditions of the colonized peoples, the recuperation of which is part of the postcolonial resistance.
reflect the complicated mixture of good and evil that reside within the same human heart, and thus to be cross-culturally inclusive. Ironically, it is this propensity toward domination that unifies both East and West in their shared complicity in human suffering.

If, on an ethical level, Endo’s Christian analysis of the interstices of culture and power complicates postcolonial categories, there are also moments in his fiction where the power of identity politics shapes his own framing of culture and faith. There are times when the powerfully-attractive antithesis of East and West invests his fiction—or at least prominent characters within his fiction—with the notion that European and Japanese characters stand athwart a cultural chasm which cannot be bridged. I would argue that there remains, in Endo’s thinking, traces of essentialist thinking, much of which emerges out of the spirited twentieth-century debates in Japan over modernity and the preservation of “the Japanese spirit.” So many of his characters, including Otsu in Deep River, characterize “the Japanese character” or “mind” in highly essentialist ways. The syncretistic turn that Endo takes in Deep River towards Hick’s model of religious pluralism seems to be predicated on his inability to get beyond the apparent impasse between the “Japanese character” and Christian orthodoxy. Postcolonialism, too, has its essentializing problems, Said’s critique of the Orientalist’s essentializing imagination notwithstanding. Both Homi Bhabha’s concept of “hybridity” and, more recently, Kwame Anthony Appiah’s metaphor of “cosmopolitanism” have challenged the essentialist assumptions that underlie many of the claims to absolute cultural otherness. Such works challenge the notion that there exists some form of cultural purity and uncontaminated authenticity.

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to colonial hegemony (in this case exemplified by Christianity). See The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, 2nd ed., Part Nineteen: “The Sacred” (517-540) for a striking example of this tendency both to recuperate indigenous traditions of the sacred and to de-legitimize Christianity as an instrument of colonialism.
Beyond these critiques of cultural essentialism, I also want to draw on the rich scholarship of global Christianity that has emerged in the past two decades. This tradition is particularly salient to the problem that Endo was seeking to work through because the more fully global history of Christianity that has been emerging through this scholarship is demonstrating precisely the process of cultural “re-tailoring” that Endo had defined decades ago as his life’s work. Andrew Walls has demonstrated in his brilliant and provocative manner that the history of Christianity demonstrates the process of cultural adaptation and continuity of core beliefs and practices. His metaphors of the “indigenizing principle” and “pilgrim principle” are very helpful in pointing out that the history of Christianity reveals the need both to find a place that one can call home and to be reminded that this earth is not our ultimate home. If the former process validates the need for cultural authenticity in one’s Christian confession, the latter reminds us that the Christian is adopted into a family that transcends time and place (Walls 7-9).

This scholarship on world Christianity is particularly exciting because it reminds us that, since its inception, Christianity has been a genuinely multi-cultural faith, and what we are learning from the growing chorus of non-western Christian thinkers are some fresh ways of thinking about faith and culture, and culture and identity. Like Endo, they can find common cause with the postcolonial critique of the unholy alliance of Eurocentrism and empire, and also like Endo, they remind us that the ethics of Jesus Christ provide a transcultural point of reference from which the virtues of justice, mercy, and compassion acquire real power to counter human folly and evil. But what they also do, I would like to argue, is to sketch out what Endo was less successful in doing—and that is to acknowledge that while cultural categories are powerfully formative of our
identities, they are not ultimately the most formative categories for constructing human identity. A theology of human identity that begins with the *imago dei* and that recognizes human cultures to share in both the goodness and fallenness of the created order offers, finally, a better way of understanding cultural difference and identity than does the paradigm of “otherness” that often leaves us questioning our capacity to reach beyond the confines of our cultural particularity to enter a kingdom comprised of “every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev. 5:9).

III. Brief Statement on Integration

While the preceding project description should give ample evidence of the ways in which I see my Christian faith informing my approach to Endo’s work and to literary theory, allow me to take a moment to articulate some of those assumptions. First, my faith alerts me to theological and spiritual implications of Endo’s work. It does not give me license to reshape his work in theological directions that I may wish it would take, but there are undoubtedly many ways in which my profession of faith in Christ helps me to see in Endo’s work his own attempts to work out questions of faith and culture. Second, my profession of faith draws me to many of the theological and religious implications buried within the foundational assumptions of literary theory. Sometimes those worldview implications are consciously foregrounded by literary theorists; at other times, they are implicit and perhaps not even conscious. It is in part my dissatisfaction with some of the premises and conclusions about human nature that I have encountered in postcolonial theory that makes me want to revisit those questions by drawing on writers (specifically Endo), theologians, and historians of Christianity who have been thinking
about cultural difference and identity in more explicitly Christian ways. What I’m hoping to do is to use the discourses of literary criticism and theory but to reframe the issues in a way that acknowledges basic Christian worldview premises.

IV. Schedule for Work

October, 2008 – December, 2008: finish some writing projects related to this project (the book chapter on Endo’s *Deep River* and the movement to religious pluralism).

January, 2009: read and review salient works of literary and postcolonial theory (e.g., Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Said, Bhabha, Spivak, etc.)

February – May: read and review salient scholarship in global Christianity (Bediako, Tennant, Walls, Sanneh, Volf, etc.)

Summer ’09:

   June: outline and draft the article
   July: revise the article
   August: prepare the article for publication. I imagine that *Christian Scholar’s Review* would be an amenable venue for this article, but I would like to try initially to send the article to a broader audience, perhaps Oxford’s *Literature and Theology* or Notre Dame’s *Religion and Literature*.
V. Budget: I will need approximately $500 for books. The rest of the fellowship stipend will serve to “buy out” my time from summer teaching responsibilities so that I can devote myself single-mindedly to writing.

VI. Relevant Bibliography


Hagiwara, Takao. “Return to Japan: the Case of Endō Shūsaku.” *Comparative...*


Spivak, Gayatri. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. 15


