

THE SAMURAI (SHŪSAKU ENDŌ)

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The Japanese author Shūsaku Endō is known primarily for his 1966 masterwork, *Silence*, about the persecution of Christians in mid-sixteenth-century Japan. The backdrop of *Silence* is the aftermath of the Shimabara Rebellion, a peasant rebellion crushed in 1638, which erupted in reaction to the vicious suppression of Christianity under the Tokugawa Shogunate, part of the turn of Japan inward. *The Samurai* focuses on events two decades prior, when Christianity was only partially suppressed, and the Shogunate still somewhat open to contacts with Europe. As with many of Endō's works, *The Samurai* focuses on the internal struggles of its protagonists to live a Christian life in circumstances of extreme external and internal pressure and conflict.

The pressures and conflicts facing the book's two protagonists are very different, however. The samurai of the title is Rokuemon Hasekura, a low-ranking samurai (described with the rank "lance corporal" in translation). Hasekura was a real person and many of the events described in the book are documented, though Endō takes some liberties with the historical record, especially in filling gaps. The other is a Franciscan monk and priest, Pedro Velasco, not a real person but closely based on one, Luis Sotelo, who participated in real events much as described in the book. Thus, *The Samurai* is a type of historical fiction, but one with more veracity than much such fiction, and free of the ideological agendas that frequently mar contemporary offerings, such as Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*.

Hasekura is only one step removed from the peasantry; he is a minor noble, but one who chops wood and farms just as do his neighbors, his inferiors. He is a simple man—not stupid, but tied to his family, living and, most of all, dead. His aim is to do his duty to his family and his lord; his only keen unfulfilled desire is to regain family lands lost due to his father's falling under a political cloud, which his uncle is always pushing him to regain, even though there is little chance of such a change. Velasco, on the other hand, is a schemer—deeply religious, but unable to separate his personal ambition from his desire to serve Christ through converting Japan. He is allowed to stay in Japan, discreetly running a

leper hospital, when most Christians have already been forced underground, because he is one of the few Westerners who can write and speak Japanese, and thus is occasionally useful to the rulers of Japan.

In most of Japan, Christians are being actively persecuted, but not yet, for the most part, in the land of the daimyo of this section of northeast Japan (referred to in the book only as the “Lord,” but in reality Date Masamune, the “One-Eyed Dragon of Ōshū”). Velasco, a Franciscan, blames the Jesuits for this state of affairs, believing they pushed too aggressively and made the Shogun fear they were a spearhead for domination by the Portuguese and Spanish. Therefore, he cooks up a plan whereby the daimyo will build a European-style ship with the help of stranded Spanish sailors, and send an embassy to New Spain (i.e., roughly Greater Mexico), to open a trading relationship. Velasco believes that this will pry open the doors of Japan to Christianity, as the Shogun will be unable to resist the lure of profits, and will be convinced that only by tolerating Christians will profits be possible. And, not incidentally, Velasco believes that if he can pull this off, the Pope will make him Bishop of Japan. The daimyo, none too eagerly and with a divided council, agrees to send four samurai, including Hasekura, as ambassadors to New Spain—but low-ranking ones, and without official portfolio. To Velasco, this is enough, since he believes that he, or if not him, God, can spin straw into gold. To Hasekura, this is his duty; whether he wants to do it (he does not) is irrelevant. He goes because he is told to and does not inquire much as to why.

The book relates, through the eyes alternately of Hasekura and Velasco, the journey to New Spain, the mixed results requiring a further trip to Spain itself, and then to Rome. Ultimately (spoiler alert), the ambassadors convert to Christianity in an attempt to get support for the formal opening of a trade relationship, which is, at the moment of success, torpedoed by news that all of Japan has now proscribed Christianity, contrary to Velasco’s false claims that Japan is becoming more receptive. The samurai return, after several years, to Japan and to their families, only to find it was all in vain. The daimyo has done an about-face; those on his council, including Hasekura’s lord, who supported the embassy have been purged; and the samurai are forced to formally and publicly renounce Christianity, which they do not find hard to do, since they never actually believed. But, within a year,

they are nonetheless executed for their crime of conversion. Velasco, offered a comfortable sinecure in Manila, instead sneaks into Japan, and is immediately captured. He, too, is soon executed, along with other priests, by burning at the stake. It is not a happy ending, though Velasco is happy enough, at the end of all things, and Hasekura, too, acknowledges that his fate was inevitable on the day he boarded the great ship to leave behind all that he had known. "And now, he was setting off for another unknown land. . . . Suddenly he heard [his Christian servant] Yozō's strained voice behind him. 'From now on . . . He will attend you.' The samurai stopped, looked back, and nodded his head emphatically. Then he set off down the cold, glistening corridor towards the end of his journey."

Endō is well known for his claim that Christianity finds it extremely difficult to take root in Japan. In *Silence*, the apostate Jesuit protagonist famously compares Japan, for Christianity, to a "mudswamp." In *The Samurai*, Endō, through Velasco, repeatedly claims that the Japanese are focused solely on religion as it relates to this life, caring only for its instrumental benefits, wealth and health, unable to lift their eyes to anything higher, and therefore unable to warm up to transcendental religions. (For Velasco, this trait is what he intends to turn to his own benefit.) I am not sure if this is true; from my limited knowledge of Buddhism and Shintoism, it seems accurate, but Endō is not so much making a doctrinal claim about Japanese religions as a cultural claim about Japanese attitudes.

What makes me hesitate to take Endō's claim entirely at face value is that he has been accused, especially by other Japanese Christians, of importing modern concepts into his writings. Thus, for example, *Silence* famously revolves around the apostasy of a young priest (again, a real historical personage) when his Christian flock, not he, is tortured, and he is told he can stop their pain by apostasy. He sees Christ commanding him to apostatize; just another suffering the Lord must endure. But nobody in sixteenth-century Japan thought that way. The actual priest apostatized (and lived out his life in Japan) because he himself was tortured. The Church always admired, encouraged, and even demanded martyrdom; the idea that Christ could desire apostasy flies in the face of sixteen hundred years of Christian history and theology. As others

have pointed out, it is a very modern idea, fundamentally making the individual the focus, rather than Christ.

The Samurai does not contain any similar overtly modern angle, however. Velasco, offered the opportunity to apostatize to save himself from a terrible death, dismisses the offer out of hand. Hasekura is never offered any choices at all; at every turn those more powerful than him push and pull him one way and another. The arc of Hasekura's story is not from unbelief to belief; it is more an exploration of why the Japanese mind finds the transcendent story and promise of Christianity difficult to warm to, and how, for some, that warmth might be found. Hasekura, a man taught to worship, most of all, duty and honor, is unable to understand how Christians can worship an emaciated, beaten, crucified, dishonored man. Such a man, unlike the daimyo, is not worthy of respect. "He could detect nothing sublime or holy in a man as wretched and powerless as this." Yet the wheels of Hasekura's mind turn when that same wretched man inspires heroic acts in his worshipers, such as Velasco's brave service of the dying, onboard during a storm.

Still, Hasekura resists conversion, even only for appearances and to accomplish his mission. "He sensed the blood of many generations of the Hasekura family flowing through his own body, their ways permeating his own life. He could not willfully alter that blood or those ways by himself. . . . Those dead souls would not permit him to become a Christian." When he does convert, it is only for the desperate need to have his mission be a success, because he was ordered to ensure it was a success—though, unknown to him, the men above him who gave the order had their own hidden agendas and spoke with betrayal in their hearts. Hasekura does not believe that Christ is the Christ, not at his baptism and not even, necessarily, on his way to execution. To the extent he begins to understand Christ, it is only when he returns to Japan, and everything unravels for him, such that he begins to wonder if, after all, there is not something to Christ. In his travels, "What the samurai had seen was not the many lands, the many nations, the many cities, but the desperate karma of man. And above the karma of man hung that ugly, emaciated figure with his arms and legs nailed to a cross, and his head dangling limply down." Perhaps, Endō is saying, Christ will never offer to the Japanese wealth or health, but instead something

greater—the knowledge that neither wealth nor health really matters, only union with God, who loves mankind.

Yet this is no simple narrative. Another theme is whether bad acts can be justified by higher ends. Velasco justifies “soiling his hands,” lying and scheming, by arguing (to himself) that the lack of receptivity of the Japanese to Christianity requires extreme means. Still, he wonders. He wonders, too, whether the appalling treatment of the Indians in the New World can be justified by their now being brought to Christ, those that remain, that is. But he does not dwell on it. His counterpoint here is a Japanese man living in a small Indian village in New Spain, whom the emissaries happen to stumble upon. He became a monk some decades before, attaching himself to a Spanish missionary in Japan and following him to Mexico, yet abandoned the organized Church as complicit in the destruction of the Indians, and is now living out his life in the village. “My Jesus is not to be found in the palatial cathedrals. He lives among these miserable Indians.” If Christ is broken and suffering, and loves the broken and suffering, how can pandering to the powerful, whether Japanese or European, serve Him? Velasco has no answer for this, except, of course, his own ultimate sacrifice for the Japanese.

Perhaps this is why Velasco is tormented by doubts, until right before the end. After all, from his perspective, if God wants Japan converted, He should be helping the priest, because Velasco is a winner, at least in his own eyes. If Velasco were a modern management consultant, his prayers would tell God that “our goals are aligned; let’s drill down on some win-win situations.” Yet God thwarts his plans, and Velasco hallucinates, or maybe hears, as things fall apart, the cackling voice of a woman laughing at him. He despairs intermittently. “I even feel at times as if God was toying with me.” Doubts are nothing new for the spiritually focused; Mother Teresa, it turned out after her death, was tormented by doubt her whole life. Who is really better off—the tormented schemer, or the stolid samurai? The answer, really, is neither; they are both, and we are all, subject to God’s plan, whatever that is, under God’s sky.