

# Anna Głąb

---

## Moral Dilemmas, the Tragic and Gods Hiddenness. Notes on Shusaku Endos Silence

---

Diametros nr 58, 18-33

---

2018

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach  
dozwolonego użytku.

## MORAL DILEMMAS, THE TRAGIC AND GOD'S HIDDENNESS. NOTES ON SHUSAKU ENDO'S *SILENCE*<sup>1</sup>

– Anna Głąb –

**Abstract:** The essay discusses the religious and ethical message of Shusaku Endo's *Silence*. Briefly focusing first on the plot of the novel, the article proceeds to discuss the moral dilemma that is the core of the novel and asks whether the dilemma is symmetrical or incommensurable. Next, the essay analyzes the dilemma from the point of view of Max Scheler's theory of the tragic. Finally, to highlight Rodrigues's tragic situation, it discusses the notion of the hiddenness of God.

**Key words:** Endo, Rodrigues, moral dilemma, the tragic, Scheler, God's hiddenness

Published online: 19 December 2018

Even though *Silence*, the famous novel by Shusaku Endo, is concerned with the persecution of Christians in Japan between the years 1638 and 1640, its message remains universal; it is so not only because even in today's world people still die for their faith, but also because we share the same tragic dilemmas, and are faced with the hiddenness of God. Shusaku Endo, who died in 1996, is often called the Japanese Graham Greene and compared to such Catholic writers as Georges Bernanos or Francois Mauriac<sup>2</sup> due to his metaphysical sensitivity and depiction of the conflicts of conscience and spiritual dilemmas of Catholics. Undoubtedly, his novels faithfully reflect the twists and turns human condition and, since they are filled with suffering, are not easy to read.

This essay is concerned with the multifaceted approach to the philosophical themes discussed in *Silence*, which is why it asks multiple questions and thus consists of a few parts. First, I will present the story of the main character, Sebastian Rodrigues. Subsequently, I will discuss the main dilemma of the novel and the notion of the tragic. I will inquire whether Endo's novel describes an authentic moral dilemma and whether this dilemma is an example of the tragic. Finally, I will focus on the notion of God's hiddenness and investigate whether a believer can keep their faith in the world filled with great evil, the world where God is silent.

---

Anna Głąb

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

Department of the History of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy

Al. Raclawickie 14

20-950 Lublin

e-mail: aniaglab@kul.lublin.pl

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the reviewers for all their comments on the text.

<sup>2</sup> See: Rimer (1993): 59, 62.

## 1. The story of Sebastian Rodrigues

The novel is set in seventeenth-century Japan, during the Shogun's brutal fight with Christianity when every Christian who does not renounce their faith is tortured. When the news reaches Portugal that the Jesuit priest, theologian, and missionary to Japan, Cristóvão Ferreira, has apostatized, his three pupils cannot believe that their teacher has renounced God. To clear the Church's name of Ferreira's apostasy, the pupils leave Lisbon to reach the coasts of Goa half a year later. Upon their arrival, they learn that Japan has severed trade relations with Portugal, thirty-five thousand Japanese Christians have been murdered, and the Jesuit mission in Japan is about to be terminated. The fate of Ferreira is unknown. The priests convince the provincial to send them on a secret mission and, led by a Japanese guide named Kichijiro, they set off on a journey inland. During the journey, they learn about the various tortures and torments inflicted on Christians by the authorities – of the water torture, where the victim is tied to a pole by the seashore and is eventually drowned by the incoming tide, or the torture of the pit, where the victim is hung head down with cuts made behind their ears that causes the blood to flow slowly so that the victim does not die at once but bleeds out.

One of the missionaries is Sebastian Rodrigues who feels personally called upon by Christ and often imagines seeing His face. It is the face from Piero della Francesca's painting *The Resurrection*: "I feel great love for that face. I am always fascinated by the face of Christ just like a man fascinated by the face of his beloved".<sup>3</sup>

The Jesuits are most astonished (but at the same encouraged to continue their mission) by the faith of the Japanese who, even though they have been deprived of a priest's guidance for years, have kept their faith. The Japanese hide the priests. Someone, however, informs the authorities that there are Christians in Tomoga and a samurai announces that until they are turned in, hostages will be taken from the village and forced to spit on the *fumie*. Those unable to do so are subjected to the water torture. The agony of the Japanese Christians lasts for three days. The missionaries observe them from hiding, watching how the heartless sea washes both over the shore and over the dying people tied to the poles. First time during his journey Sebastian experiences God's silence. He is aware that he is witnessing Christian martyrdom, yet the suffering seems acutely miserable and bitter. Having parted with the other priests, he hides in the village, wrapped in starless, dark sky. Travelling through the landscape that looks as if hit by a tsunami, uncertain what to do, he sees his face reflected in a puddle:

I don't know why, but at that moment I thought of the face of yet another man. This was the face of a crucified man, a face which for so many centuries had given inspiration to artists. This man none of these artists had seen with his own eyes, yet they portrayed his face – the most pure, the most beautiful that has claimed the prayers of man and has corresponded with his highest aspirations.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Endo (2007): 47.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem: 115.

All the time Sebastian is followed by Kichijiro, who concocts a plot which culminates in his denouncement to the authorities. Rodrigues is taken to the village where other Christians are held. If he renounces his faith, the Christians will be released. But he will not hear of it – for him, to trample on the *fumie* is to betray Christ. At the same time Christian suffering and God's indifference start to torment Rodrigo.

A man had died. Yet the outside world went on as if nothing had happened ... Why are you silent? ... Why does this stillness continue?<sup>5</sup>

Rodrigues experiences God's silence when a missionary named Garupe refuses to trample on the *fumie* and is killed for that. He dies together with the Japanese thrown into the sea in straw bags. Rodrigues tries to stop the friend and in his thoughts urges him to renounce his faith; he even comes to blame God for the death of Christians. He thinks: "I will do it! I will renounce"; still, he does not do it yet.

Finally, there comes the day when Sebastian meets Ferreira who is writing a book that denounces the mistakes of Christianity. Ferreira convinces Sebastian that Christianity will not take root in Japan and those Japanese who worship the Christian God in fact still adore their pagan gods they see in Him. He accuses Rodrigues of egoism for instead of saving the suffering people he is preoccupied with his own salvation. "Christ would certainly have apostatized to help men. ... For love Christ would have apostatized. Even if it meant giving up everything he had",<sup>6</sup> says Ferreira. Rodrigues screams, covers his ears with his hands, but Ferreira takes him by the arm, leads him outside the cell, and says: "You are now going to perform the most painful act of love that has ever been performed".<sup>7</sup> Sebastian, even though he feels as if his legs were bound by chains, finally steps onto the *fumie*.

And then the Christ in bronze speaks to the priest: 'Trample! 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.'<sup>8</sup>

After his apostasy, Sebastian Rodrigues assumes a Japanese name and goes on to live among the Japanese. Even though he can find no excuse for what he has done, he finds solace in the words he heard just before trampling on the *fumie*:

'Trample!' said those compassionate eyes. 'Trample!' ... I understand your pain and your suffering. It is for that reason that I am here.'

'Lord, I resented your silence.'

'I was not silent. I suffered beside you.'<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem: 194.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem: 269.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem: 271.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem: 297.

Until his death Sebastian struggles with the awareness that he has been condemned by other priests, even though deep in his heart he has never denounced his faith and still loves "that Man." His love had to change due to his spiritual journey of self-discovery. "Everything that had taken place until now had been necessary to bring him to this love".<sup>10</sup>

## 2. A moral dilemma?

In many cases tragic dilemmas are not the result of intentional actions; usually, they stem from the inevitable relations between particular values. The major feature of these dilemmas is their insolubility. A dilemma is insoluble when there are no moral reasons that would justify choosing one option over the other. The conflicting options are either symmetrical or incommensurable.<sup>11</sup> A symmetrical dilemma consists of two equal values, whereas an incommensurable one consists of two values that do not share a common denominator that would allow to choose one option over the other.<sup>12</sup> Is the dilemma depicted in *Silence* a symmetrical one, that is one that presents the character with two equally valuable choices? It seems that for a monk who devotes his life to God, there is nothing more dramatic than renouncing his faith. The uniqueness of the dilemma presented by Endo results from a shocking choice: whether to stay faithful to God or to serve people. Therefore, as noticed by Philip L. Quinn, it points to the tragic dilemma within Christianity itself.<sup>13</sup> Sebastian is faced with two alternatives: either focus on God and thus lose the ability to selflessly love people or trample on Christ's face and thus die hating himself, a rebel against God. Endo seems to treat the two options as equal. For a believer, these options are undoubtedly authentic, but are they indeed symmetrical and incommensurable?

A person who lives by the Gospel knows that to love the God he cannot see, first he must love the people he can, and that "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (King James Bible, John 15: 13). Therefore, the common denominator of the two options must be love, which is not quantifiable. Hence one cannot claim that Rodrigues should love God *more* than people (or the other way round), even though Christ himself, asked about the first commandment, puts the love for God before the love for man (King James Bible, Mark 12: 29-31). But the Gospel often stresses that it is impossible to love God without loving people.

There are four possible interpretations of Sebastian's situation. In the first place (1), it may be stated that he is not facing a moral dilemma since the love for people implies the love for God, so there exists the right choice and Rodrigues makes it. The options do not meet the criteria of symmetry, since even though the love for God is a greater value, it can be fulfilled only as the love for people. These two options share a common denominator (which is love), so they are also not incommensurable. Consequently, it seems that Rodrigues made the right choice – the only way to express his love for God

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem: 298.

<sup>11</sup> See: Chyrowicz (2008): 176.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem: 196.

<sup>13</sup> Quinn (1989): 179.

was to help those who needed help. Hence this dilemma is not a symmetrical one: the choice between the commandment to love God and the commandment to love one's neighbor is formally simple for a Christian – the former takes precedence over the latter. The first one, however, can be fulfilled by complying with the commandment to love one's neighbor. Sebastian showed his love by performing concrete actions such as rescuing people. For the rescued Japanese, it was surely an example of genuine, concrete Christian love, which goes beyond beautiful words about commitment and solidarity and whose inherent part is the readiness to lay down one's life and sacrifice what is the most precious, i.e. convictions, plans, desires, dreams. This is how his love for God, which was modeled upon the love for God dying on the cross, took a concrete shape. If this is true, why do we feel anxiety while reading Endo's novel? Might this be caused by the tragic nature of Rodrigo's situation?

Secondly (2), it must be pointed out that even though it is not a moral dilemma, the situation presented by Endo is exceptionally difficult. Sebastian is suffering as a result of his choice since he finds it tantamount to renouncing God. To his mind, the love for people takes precedence over the love for God, whereas Christ clearly states: "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Mt 10, 37). Rodrigo could choose the love for God. In the eyes of the Japanese neophytes, that would confirm the sense of faith and suffering they experienced in the name of Christ. Many of them opted for suffering and death rather than renouncing faith. The example of saints and martyrs indicates that a tragedy is greater when one renounces faith, not when one sacrifices their life. Sebastian could choose this way and, bearing in mind that he was a priest, his decision would be understandable. However, Rodrigo – as a Christian – would not be satisfied with a decision that would incur the loss of life by the followers of his God. We, the readers, might argue that his Christianity failed to pass a test in a critical situation, as Rodrigo chose to protect only himself and his integrity as a clergyman.

It is possible to adopt yet another (3) interpretation and understand Rodrigo's choice as follows. Sebastian has to *choose either* to renounce God and rescue people *or to* save faith and condemn Christ's followers to death. It seems to be a choice between a moral sphere and a religious one, and, from a formal vantage point, it bears resemblance to the choice Abraham had to make between what is religious (obedience and faithfulness to God) and what is ethical (the love for his son). S. Kierkegaard believed that it could be comprehended only in terms of a paradox since "[t]he ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac".<sup>14</sup> This paradox is the source of Abraham's fear, without which he would not be a father, the knight of faith. Abraham suspends ethicality (he is ready to make an offering of his son to God) so that he can meet the expectations of religion, and Isaac is saved under this paradox. Abraham's trust in God extends to the boundaries of absurd, and this trust, which consists in sacrificing whatever was rational on the altar of faith, saved his son. Abraham had to prove his trust in God in a situation which was meant to undermine it. Abraham differed from Rodrigo in that the former believed till the end. Even when he was making an offering of Isaac, he did doubt that

---

<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard (2014): 33.

his son would be returned to him as unexpectedly as he was given to Abraham, which is pointed out by Eleonor Stump.<sup>15</sup> Sebastian stops at what is ethical because, in all likelihood, his faith was not as strong as Abraham's. However, his situation is different from Abraham's situation for one more reason. Sebastian is morally blackmailed and therefore his act, which he is forced to perform, seems to escape any moral evaluation. Even if we decide to make it, it must be much more balanced and less severe.

His choice can be interpreted in yet another (4) way. He to some extent renounces God to save people whose suffering is not directly his responsibility – it is the Japanese who torture these people, not him. He manages to achieve something good (save people) by doing something evil (renouncing God); thus, in this case evil becomes a means to achieve good. It seems that Sebastian should not yield to temptation (for the voice of God that persuades him to trample on His image is a form of temptation<sup>16</sup>) and should not step on the *fumie*. Following this interpretation (the dilemma is still not symmetrical, since one option – that is the love for God – is considered more valuable, although Sebastian chooses the love for people; and since in both cases the criterion is love, it is not an incommensurable dilemma either) Sebastian's choice is wrong – it betrays God and destroys Sebastian's moral and religious integrity.

The discrepancy between these interpretations brings up a question whether the message of Endo's novel also points to a deadlock. In order to answer this question, I would like to analyze Sebastian's faith till his fall since, as I believe, Endo's novel is first and foremost a novel focusing on Rodrigo's path to developing a more mature and profound faith which is preceded by doubt and betrayal. In my opinion, a person can reach a mature faith through suffering. Suffering may result from the awareness of one's own weakness, for instance, betraying one's ideals as in the case of Sebastian. It can also be preceded by the loss of the former concept of life that one regarded as valuable. In this sense, Sebastian's journey of faith bears resemblance to disciple Peter's journey of faith. Peter denied Christ when he understood that Messiah, whom he believed, does not tread the path of a triumpher, but instead he humbly accepts humiliation and eventually death. The example of Peter, whom Christ forgave, indicates that weakness does not discredit people in the eyes of God. On the contrary, the awareness of weakness and recognizing it may lead to a life which is better, more conscious and sensitive to the needs of others. Also, it proves that a Christian must be constantly ready to revise their current journey of faith, and a painful disintegration does not have to mean a destructive void, but a transition to what is better. Christ's words seem to suggest just this: "Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10, 38-39).

To characterize Sebastian's conversion to a more mature faith, it may be helpful again to apply categories introduced by Kierkegaard.<sup>17</sup> Rodrigo experienced faith as – to use Kierkegaard's term – "an aesthetic emotion".<sup>18</sup> Christ's face, which accompanied him

---

<sup>15</sup> See: Stump (2010): 258–307. Stump weakens Abraham's dilemma presented by Kierkegaard.

<sup>16</sup> It is a form of temptation brought on by God who looks for a weak spot in a human that would allow for His Power to be revealed ("my strength is made perfect in weakness" 2 Corinthians 12: 9).

<sup>17</sup> See: Głab (2015).

<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard (2014): 57.

during his journey, epitomized beauty that he longed for. At the beginning of his journey to Japan, he remained in an aesthetic phase of existence distinguished by Kierkegaard: he understood his mission through the lens of paroxysms of self-satisfaction and deriving pleasure from what one does. Rodrigo derived pleasure from his self-image, for instance, when he stayed in Tomogi. He enters an ethical phase when he is imprisoned on the outskirts of Nagasaki and defends faith in the courtyard. This is when he feels responsible for other Christians. Notwithstanding his engagement in the ethical, he is not yet capable of experiencing love that would involve complete sacrifice of life and devotion to God by means of martyrdom. He is not ready for a leap of faith, which was made by Abraham, Japanese martyrs, and Garupe.

The breakthrough on the way to a more mature faith comes only with betrayal. Endo emphasizes that God talked to him when *fumie* was being trampled; it happened in the moment of "infinite resignation," which "is the last stage before faith".<sup>19</sup> His situation then bears more resemblance to the situation of Job, who experiences God face to face, than to the situation of Abraham, who does not hesitate and believes in God's love. Rodrigo "he infinitely renounces the claim to the love which is the content of his life; he is reconciled in pain; but then comes the marvel".<sup>20</sup> He denies God (we need to remember, however, that he is forced to do so), but he paradoxically reestablishes his bond with God. The love which he discovers then – as Endo himself claims – is different. Quinn observes that Sebastian's new love for God and other people is a suffering love. Rodrigo does not renounce faith in his heart and this is how he is closer to Christ than he has ever been before.<sup>21</sup> Towards the end of the novel, Rodrigo even concludes that what he has experienced, including a tragic dilemma, was necessary for him to reach a new, mature faith. As Quinn believes, the objective Rodrigo sets for himself remained unshaken, despite the fall.<sup>22</sup>

In this way Endo's novel does not end with the protagonist's destruction; the author seems to believe that the different interpretations can be reconciled. Even though Endo depicts Rodrigues's decline as evil, it is the kind of evil that God can transform into the greater good. This greater good can be seen in Sebastian's growing humility and the transformation of his attitude to other people. After his apostasy, Sebastian sees no difference between himself and Kichijiro, whom he had previously considered a despicable traitor. Himself a sinner, Sebastian has become a brother of all sinners; he can forgive for he has been forgiven. He no longer looks for his own perfection, but holds his misery in his hands and offers it to God. Rodrigues has been equipped with strength that makes him capable of loving other people in a manner that imitates God's love for them.<sup>23</sup> The love he shows people is no longer his love, but has become God's love aimed at people's well-being. The face from the *fumie* that speaks to Rodrigues in the moment of his betrayal is no longer as beautiful as the face that he used to see when he started his journey, it is no longer filled with strength and glory. It is the face of the suffering God – the face of someone whom Rodrigues had avoided.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem: 56.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Quinn (1989): 180.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem: 176.

*Silence* shows that Sebastian's old faith ends when he steps on the *fumie*, yet this moment is at the same time a new beginning – an opening of a new chapter of Sebastian's relation with God. His renewed faith, understood as the Love that forgives, stems from suffering and discovering one's weakness. This weakness becomes Rodrigues's meeting ground with God. Simultaneously, however, Rodrigues feels guilt for betraying God. In psychological terms, Sebastian's situation is undoubtedly dramatic. Therefore, even though the message of Endo's novel seems to be positive and Sebastian's situation cannot be regarded as a moral dilemma, perhaps it should be described as tragic.

### 3. The tragic and the fragility of values

The direction taken by the message of Endo's novel will not satisfy the tastes of philosophers, who aim at weakening dilemmas, claiming that if one should face them, they would feel little more than grief, i.e. a morally irrelevant wish for something not to have happened, not guilt, which is a specifically moral feeling requiring a conviction that somebody did wrong.<sup>24</sup> In my opinion, Endo's novel encourages to assume a different philosophical perspective, which, however, complicates the image of Sebastian's situation, indicating the existence of a tragic dilemma that seems to be unresolvable on the ground of the pure mind. In this sense, as Barbara Chyrowicz states, "dilemmas are like storms – they disrupt ethics' abstract (and partially attractive) stability, force to re-think norms, and – more importantly – they teach an ethicist humbleness and distance to passed judgements. And it is not about relativism, but about the awareness that the drama of human condition cannot simply be written down as guidelines outlining how to deal with a highly dangerous situation, i.e. human life".<sup>25</sup> The understanding of a tragic quality propounded by Max Scheler and Martha Nussbaum, as I believe, offers an opportunity to analyze Sebastian's situation from the vantage point that will allow to capture the sophistication of an ethical essence of Endo's novel with greater subtlety.

Max Scheler, in his phenomenological analysis of the tragic, claims that the tragic is an objective qualitative characteristic of the world. "The tragic", Scheler writes, "is above all a property which we observe in events, fortunes, characters, and the like ... it is given off by them like a heavy breath, or seems like an obscure glimmering that surrounds them. In it a specific feature of the world's makeup appears before us, and not a condition of our own ego, nor its emotions, nor its experience of compassion and fear".<sup>26</sup> One of the conditions of the tragic is the conflict of values. The tragic can occur only in a world where values interact; what is more, it occurs through them. An action that is described as tragic is aimed at destroying a positive value, yet simultaneously the factor responsible for the action must also constitute a value. In this clash one of the values must be destroyed: "the same action may in some places produce a high value and in others – quite differently – destroy this value".<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> See: McConnell (1992): 36–47.

<sup>25</sup> Chyrowicz (2007): 17.

<sup>26</sup> Scheler (1992): 106.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem: 115.

Is the situation described by Endo an example of such a clash of values? Does Sebastian produce one value by destroying another? At first sight that seems to be the case: Sebastian chooses to serve people, which requires him to denounce God. The act of apostasy saves people, but simultaneously destroys Sebastian's faithfulness to God. Yet, we know that Sebastian does not destroy his love for God – the tragic would take place if the love for people required him to destroy the love for God. Although after his denouncement Sebastian leaves priesthood (which is considered a formal act of renouncing faith), many Japanese still visit him to confess their sins, and at the end of the novel he confirms his love for God. It seems then that Rodrigues's situation cannot be considered an example of the tragic. But is that truly the case?

Before I address the problem in question, I would like to comment on Martha Nussbaum's discussion of the tragic. Commenting on *Hecuba*, a tragedy by Euripides, Nussbaum notices that human nature is like a plant that in order to grow needs other people's support. The plant can be destroyed by unfavorable conditions; similarly, the good a human lives by but has no control over can be destroyed by external factors.<sup>28</sup> What is more, a tragic event can only take place in good lives of good people.<sup>29</sup> Where there is trust, attachment, and love, there is also the risk of the tragic. This rule seems to apply to Sebastian as well. Rodrigues, being a missionary, feels responsible for the persecuted Christians; he knows they trust him; he feels connected to them (he sometimes thinks that they die for him, whereas he is unable to die for them). The circumstances in which he finds himself reveal that it is his responsibility for the people that is stronger, even though it ruins his good, sensible life. Sebastian's character and morality turn out to be fluid, susceptible to change. They are shaken by Sebastian's belief that by trampling on the *fumie* he has control over that which he cannot control – the fate of the persecuted Japanese. The values he has lived by so far – his faithfulness to God being chief among them – turn out fragile, and avoiding the tragic proves impossible without rejecting other values.<sup>30</sup> It seems that even if Sebastian made a different choice, his situation would still be tragic. Why?

At this point, a distinction between moral guilt and tragic guilt may prove helpful. Scheler claims that while moral or 'guilty guilt' arises from the objective act of choosing, tragic or unguilty guilt springs from the objects of choice, thus the actual act of choosing by a tragic hero/ine is independent of their guilt, free from it. "The tragic guilt into which the hero 'falls' is much more accurately characterized by calling it a 'guilt' doing or renunciation of doing which darkens the areas of his possible choices and so makes a certain kind of guilt unavoidable, since the choice of the 'best' meaning is necessarily in error".<sup>31</sup> It seems that the term "tragic guilt" aptly reflects Sebastian's situation: *his actual sphere of choice* implies that for him there is no right choice. The best option would probably be not to choose at all, but the circumstances force Rodrigues to make a decision, whereas abstaining from making a decision seems to also belong to the sphere of choice. The subject of the tragic is therefore not human action that results in guilt. The subject

---

<sup>28</sup> See: Moyers (1989): 448.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem: 450.

<sup>30</sup> Nussbaum (1986): 51.

<sup>31</sup> Scheler (1992): 124–125.

of the tragic is, to quote Scheler, “‘the guilt of error’ itself”.<sup>32</sup> It is the gist of the tragic. Sebastian cannot escape some kind of guilt and falls prey to it even though he thinks that he has made the right choice. The border between what is right and wrong, good and evil, is thus blurred. This blurring is the result of the entanglement of motives, duties, obligations, and reasons. Sebastian's unguilty guilt is the climax of Endo's tragic novel.

Sebastian's situation, then, even though it is not a moral dilemma (it is neither symmetrical nor incommensurable), is tragic. The most important reason for that is that Rodrigues, even though not directly responsible for the death of his Japanese friends, is involved in it, since his presence, although against his will, becomes an indirect cause of their fate. One could respond by stating that his guilt is misdirected and Rodrigues is not responsible for the death of the Christians (What Sebastian experiences is not merely grief, that is a feeling or a wish that what happened to him would never have happened; he feels true guilt – a moral feeling that what he did was wrong), but such a statement seems to misrepresent the complexity of human condition and the phenomenology of our experience.

To even further stress the tragedy of Rodrigues's situation, I will now turn to the notion of the hiddenness of God, that is God's silence.

#### 4. Meeting the silent God

Contemporary philosophers of religion often discuss the problem of God's absence in the world;<sup>33</sup> the problem consists of two notions: God's hiddenness and the existence of evil. The existence of evil in the world serves as a basis for levelling accusations against theism by atheists and it is a frequent argument against the existence of God. This issue, however, seems to be more engaging for theists than atheists since, living in the world full of evil, they have to come to terms with faith in good and almighty God, who is at the same time hidden and silent. The conviction about God's hiddenness does not imply the conviction that God does not exist, but rather it leads to the conclusion that man cannot know God in a *certain* way – it has already been discussed by the prophet Isaiah (Is 45,15), St. Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, or Blaise Pascal, who discussed hidden God (*Deus absconditus*). The hiddenness of God was experienced by the greatest mystics of Christianity – John of the Cross describes the dark night (this is how he titled his work), St. Teresa of Ávila mentions a passage through the dark rooms of soul – “the internal castle,” St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) focuses on “the spiritual castle,” a gas chamber in Auschwitz becomes a tragic meeting place of soul with God.<sup>34</sup> All these mystics experienced the hiddenness of God, but this was not a reason for them to succumb to despair; it was rather a starting point to strengthen their faith. Not all Christians have the faith of saints that will not give in to doubts. Many of them believe that if God is almighty and perfectly good, He should react to the evil that occurs in the world, and the lack of His direct response makes many believers become disheartened,

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem: 125.

<sup>33</sup> See: Howard-Snyder, Green (1996).

<sup>34</sup> This is how the last way of Edith Stein is interpreted by Hungarian director Márta Mészáros in her film *The Seventh Chamber*.

rebel, or denounce faith. Not everyone is willing to accept the fact that looking for God's presence in the world we will encounter many veils and that "*quid est Deus nescimus.*"

The issue of God's hiddenness, as it is observed by Yuijn Nagasawa, is addressed by philosophers from two vantage points: intellectual and experiential.<sup>35</sup> From an intellectual standpoint, they attempt to prove a logical cohesion between the existence of almighty and morally perfect God and states of affairs in the world that can be characterized by His absence, especially his lack of answer to evil (intervention when believers suffer). They ask from the point of view of the third party why God allows for evil in the world understood as a judiciously organized whole. This type of investigation and global solutions, which is known as theodicy of good will, was advanced by G.W. Leibniz, who claimed that we live in the best of all possible worlds. God cares about the world as a whole, but evil, which results from using one's free will, is needed to better optimize good. Undoubtedly, this issue opens new research areas for logicians and metaphysicians (for instance that was the reason why philosophers of process limited the concept of almighty God; similarly, many Jewish philosophers tried to deal with the experience of Holocaust). On the other hand, proving a logical cohesion does not have to entail the solution to the issue of God's hiddenness on the experiential, existential ground. On this ground, man struggles with suffering personally from the first person perspective, and the main question which one asks is why God remains silent in response to *his* suffering as well as how God, which one believes in, could save *him* from evil that he experiences.<sup>36</sup> As Nagasawa believes, these two perspectives are disjunctive and, what is more, he states that "we are mistaken if we think that theodicies can eliminate the experiential problem; that would perhaps be as absurd as thinking that we could eliminate a toothache with an intellectual argument".<sup>37</sup>

The issue of God's hidden presence seems particularly important for the believers who experience evil in its most terrifying form, the so-called horrendous evil that undermines all values and the meaning of life.<sup>38</sup> The situation depicted in *Silence* touches upon that issue presenting the horrendous evil of torture that causes the unbelievable suffering of Japanese Christians. The evil is horrendous not because it is unjust or committed in cold blood. The cruelty of that evil stems from the fact that the person who experiences it used to believe their life to be good, a life that had a meaning related to the transcendental goal that was God's existence. Still, suffering in a way abolishes the meaning of that good, undermines one's belief in God, for it is difficult to reconcile the belief in Providence and a well-ordered world with the experience of human lot that is chaotic, devoid of any positive value, and ultimately pointless. The problem is much more serious when it concerns people who devote their whole lives to God. Sebastian Rodrigues and the Japanese Christians are prepared to die for God, yet God is silent during their utmost abandonment. This fact is surprising because it is difficult to understand why God would hide when someone is dying for Him (there is a difference between God's silence when *someone gives one's life for Him*, and God's silence during the *Shoah* – the Jews were not killed because of their faith, but because of *belonging to the Jewish nation*). God's

---

<sup>35</sup> Nagasawa (2016): 7–11.

<sup>36</sup> Hubaczek (2010): 273–281.

<sup>37</sup> Nagasawa (2016): 9.

<sup>38</sup> See: Adams (1990): 26.

silence undermines the very meaning of existence and the meaning of one's death – a person cannot understand why God remains silent during his or her suffering which in fact constitutes an act of faith. God's hiddenness remains a mystery that a believer cannot fathom. Just like Ferreira and Rodrigues, a believer renounces their faith neither because they cannot stand torture, nor because they experience horrendous evil or witness divine hiddenness; they apostatize because they cannot reconcile horrendous evil with divine hiddenness.<sup>39</sup> The dilemma faced by Rodrigo does not only result from the hiddenness of God (the problem of the hiddenness of God can arise even when suffering is absent) and incompatibility of the said experience with the existence of omniscient God. Instead, its origin can be traced to the coexistence of God's silence *and* intense suffering present in human experience. It is, undoubtedly, the most difficult experience a believer may face, mostly because when it happens a person loses the meaning of their life without receiving from God anything in return – not even a glimpse of hope or solace – except for silence. Can the situation be in any way remedied?

In response to this problem, philosophers – and here I would like to refer to Marilyn McCord Adams' standpoint – construct the theodicy of redemptive suffering. They claim that no created good can compensate for the experience of horrendous evil. Therefore the only way to answer this problem is to suggest how theists can continue living with Him by indicating that only a closely knit bond with God can make one's life meaningful.<sup>40</sup> It happens when a person who is experiencing horrendous evil identifies with suffering Christ since – as Adams emphasizes – it is crucial to believe that Christ himself, who partook of human nature, experienced the destructive power of evil. A person needs to accept and want the evil they are experiencing to be redeemed on the cross by Christ.<sup>41</sup> One has to recognize a bond between themselves and God, even though it may be difficult when one experiences a hidden God. How difficult it is to recognize this bond is shown by Endo, who describes Sebastian's state of mind before the apostasy as follows:

The priest squatted on the ground, his hunched shoulders bathed in the silver moonlight that pierced the bars of his prison. ... Closing his sunken eyes, he relished the thick darkness that enveloped him. On this night when all those whom he knew were fast asleep, a thrust of poignant pain passed through his breast; and he thought of yet another night. Yes, crouching on the ashen earth of Gethsemane that had imbibed all the heat of the day, alone and separated from his sleeping disciples, a man had said: "My soul is sorrowful even unto death." And his sweat had become like drops of blood. This was the face that was now before his eyes. Hundreds and hundreds of times it had appeared in his dreams; but why was it that only now did the suffering, perspiring face seem so far away? Yet tonight he focused all his attention on the emaciated expression on those cheeks. ... "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!" ... The priest had always thought that these words were that man's prayer, not that they issued from terror at the silence of God.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> See: Nagasawa (2016): 6.

<sup>40</sup> Hubaczek (2010): 281.

<sup>41</sup> Adams (1999): 155.

<sup>42</sup> Endo (2007): 221–222.

In that moment Sebastian understands that, through his human nature, Christ too experienced the destructive power of evil, including the feeling of abandonment by His Father when He was dying on the cross. Endo stresses Sebastian's bond with God in that very moment – the moment of greatest abandonment. This bond with God, however, needs to be explained. Can it be concluded that a subjective recognition of one's own bond with God is a key factor in overcoming suffering? Adams believes that the identification of a suffering man with suffering God is insufficient as it would require a high level of spiritual perfectibility, which is achievable only for few. Still, she states that it is enough that God identifies with human suffering. Therefore it is not man who makes their suffering meaningful by unifying with God. On the contrary, it is God who makes it meaningful by unifying with a suffering man.<sup>43</sup> Suffering and dying on the Cross, Christ himself experienced God's silence. His experience of God's silence is an answer to the suffering of man who faces God's hiddenness. The love for God, as Adams explains, requires God not to act as a general leading a battle from a distant hilltop, but as a leader fighting at the very front with his soldiers.<sup>44</sup> In the context of experiencing God's hiddenness, this leader seems to be anonymous and hidden from soldiers. Faith, however, obstinately insists that he should be at the forefront and His experience – due to his human nature – is comparable with experiences of other combatants.

The experience of suffering combined with the experience of God's hiddenness does not have to lead to apostasy, but it requires a strong faith. More often than a strong faith that stands the test of suffering, however, *acedia*, spiritual or moral exhaustion, reaching point zero, or even the state of being internally torn apart are mentioned. As it is suggested by the comparison quoted by Adams which was applied by Simone Weil, suffering should then be read as a painful hug given by a beloved person, balancing out its negative dimension and including the suffering person in the stream of relations with a beloved person.<sup>45</sup> This is how one might understand Rodrigo's situation, which – notwithstanding its tragic quality – does not consist solely in despair. It may be interesting to quote Endo's religious remarks expressed in the essay "Watashi Ni Totte Kami Towa" ("What is God for Me"), where he states:

"Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Without this, true religion does not even start. Imagine, for example, that a child is dying from leukemia. Her parents pray hard. Yet, the child dies. A New Age religion might say that the child won't die, but it's most likely that she will die. So there is no God, and there is no Buddha. That's the essence of 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' But that is precisely where true religion starts. People start thinking seriously about what religion really is when they face the very situation that compels them to think that there is no God and no Buddha.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Adams (1999): 176.

<sup>44</sup> See: *ibidem*: 172-173.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Adams (1999): 161-162.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Nagasawa (2016): 11-12.

Endo seems to suggest a reversed line of argument. Atheists, seeing believers who suffer from horrendous evil and are faced with God's hiddenness, conclude that God does not exist. In this line of thinking the absence of God entails the end of faith. But does it have to be like that? Does a person who experiences God's silence have to renounce their faith? If not, then how should we understand faith? Georges Bernanos, whom Endo considers one of the writers most important to him, claims that faith is 90 percent of doubt and 10 percent of hope.<sup>47</sup> Endo seems to share that belief: in spite of many reasons for despair, hope should play a key role in a person's life, even if it is incommensurably smaller than the doubts. Commenting on Endo's novel, Nagasawa notices that a believer may connect this small portion of hope with John Hick's "cosmic optimism", according to which everything looks good in a cosmic scale.<sup>48</sup> Cosmic optimism is an attitude that a believer may take when considering their place in the universe. Cosmic optimists consider their meeting with the silent God not as the end of their faith, but a chance to assume cognitive humility. This is not, however, the solution to the hiddenness of God. A truly satisfying answer does not exist.

These analyses *attempt* to solve the tragic dilemma of how a person is to follow faith in a world where God is silent. Firstly, one should take up the risk of hope and faith *in spite of* evil and suffering. If God remains elusive, faith cannot be conditioned upon seeing Him, or having certain knowledge of His existence. Paraphrasing Blaise Pascal, to live by faith is to take a risk. Secondly, to live by faith is to follow the example of Sebastian Rodrigues and discover God in one's own failures and – even more importantly – in the experience of forgiveness when God breaks the silence and lets people experience His presence by forgiving them. Notwithstanding its tragic quality then, Rodrigo's situation also has a positive aspect.

The dilemma presented in Endo's *Silence* is highly intriguing. It is not a moral dilemma that results from advancing the thesis that both choices are symmetrical. It cannot be regarded as such, which proves that ethical theories we formulate will not always adequately reflect the complexity of moral situations, and may often lead to simplifications that serve the purpose of inscribing them (forcibly) in the pattern of abstract categories. In my opinion, Rodrigo's situation is tragic from the perspective of pure (theoretical) mind since it traps his obligations (faithfulness to God, faithfulness to one's neighbors) and unexpected choices leading to abandoning the previous concept of life. The tragic quality of the situation lies in the fact that the principles Rodrigo has followed so far – including faithfulness to God – turn out to be fragile. At the same time, it is impossible to avoid a tragic situation without renouncing other values that are equally important. Additionally, the story of Rodrigo is an outstanding challenge that concerns especially his faith as it combines the experience of God's hiddenness and tremendous suffering. Still, I believe that what Endo wishes to communicate to the readers is not despair. Rodrigo discovers himself and comes to terms with his own weakness, but – as it is pointed out on the last page of the novel – he does not feel abandoned by God, who made Rodrigo tread the path of paradox so as to discover Him and perhaps to achieve

---

<sup>47</sup> See: *ibidem*: 13.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

greater intimacy with Him. The experience of losing one's ordered and secure lifestyle becomes a new beginning, i.e. regaining the experience of God and a new quality of life with Him. Rodrigo's situation contains suffering, but – in Marilyn McCord's terms – it is a redeeming suffering. It does not destroy the bond with God. It reinstates this relationship and strengthens it.

Theodor Adorno once wrote that if Samuel Beckett were in a concentration camp, his writings would not be that depressing; he would rather write to give people courage.<sup>49</sup> Shusaku Endo wrote a tragic novel which, paradoxically, can bring believers courage to take up the risk of faith – in spite of God's silence.

## References

- Adams, M.M. (1999), *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Adorno, T.W. (2003), *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, trans. R. Livingstone and Others, R. Tiedemann (ed), Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Chyrowicz, B. (2008), *O sytuacjach bez wyjścia w etyce*, Kraków: Znak.
- Chyrowicz, B. (2007), "Doświadczenia, wzory, zmagania i portrety," *Znak* 626–627: 11–18.
- Endo, Sh. (2007), *Silence*, trans. from the Japanese by W. Johnston, London: Peter Owen.
- Głąb A. (2015), "Tortor heroum, czyli etyka Kierkegaarda i tragiczne dylematy w nawiązaniu do historii Abrahama i powieści Shūsaku Endō *Milczenie*," [in:] M. Gołębiewska (ed), *Studia o filozofii Sørensa Kierkegaarda. Koncepcje, polemiki, inspiracje*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN: pp. 200–223.
- Howard-Snyder D., Green A. (1996), "Argument from Divine Hiddenness," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (4): 433–453. URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/divine-hiddenness/#Bib>
- Hubaczek, K. (2010), *Bóg a zło. Problematyka teodycealna w filozofii analitycznej*, Warszawa: Fundacja na rzecz Nauki Polskiej.
- Kierkegaard S. (2014), *Fear and Trembling. Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de Silentio*, transl. with and introduction by A. Hannay, New York: Penguin Classics.
- McConnell, T. (1992), "Moral Residue and Dilemmas," [in:] H. E. Mason (ed), *Moral Dilemmas and Moral Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press: 36–47.
- Moyers, B. (1989), "Martha Nussbaum, Classicist and Philosopher," Interview with Bill Moyers, [in:] B. Moyers, *A World of Ideas: Conversations with Thoughtful Men and Women about American Life Today and the Ideas Shaping Our Future*, New York: Doubleday: 447–459.
- Nagasawa, Y. (2016), "Silence, Evil and Shusaku Endo," [in:] A. Green and E. Stump (eds) *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 246–259. URL: [https://media.wix.com/ugd/6d4b8e\\_758ef0fe2f2c4cb0b-c685486f7cd2d4e.pdf](https://media.wix.com/ugd/6d4b8e_758ef0fe2f2c4cb0b-c685486f7cd2d4e.pdf), pp. 1–16.
- Nussbaum, M.C. (1986), *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Quinn, Ph.L. (1989), "Tragic Dilemmas, Suffering Love, and Christian Life," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 17 (Spring): 151–183.

---

<sup>49</sup> Adorno (2003): 448.

- Rimer, J.T. (1993), "That Most Excellent Gift of Charity: Endō Shūsaku in Contemporary World Literature," *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 27 (April): 59–66.
- Scheler, M. (1992), "On the Tragic," [in:] A. B. Coffin (ed), *The Question of Tragedy: A Selection of Essays on Tragedy and the Tragic*, Trans. Bernard Stambler, San Francisco: Edwin Mellen: 105–126.
- Stump, E. (2010), *Wandering in Darkness. Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 258–307.