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# Silence, Evil and Shusaku Endo

Yujin Nagasawa

## 1. Introduction

Philosophers of religion have discussed divine hiddenness intensively in recent decades. They have focused their debate primarily on God's apparent hiddenness from nonresistant nonbelievers (Howard-Snyder and Moser 2002, Schellenberg 1993).<sup>1</sup> My interest in this chapter, however, is on God's hiddenness from *devout believers*. I develop and discuss what I call the 'problem divine absence', which is a combination of the most intense form of the problem of divine hiddenness and the most intense form of the problem of evil. The problem of divine absence raises a challenge for belief in God through a scenario in which devout believers experience severe pain and suffering without understanding why God remains hidden and fails to respond to their desperate agony and pleas for help. I consider the problem of divine absence in light of historical events in seventeenth-century Japan, which are vividly described in Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence*. I argue that theodicies are of little use in solving the problem of divine absence because merely demonstrating the logical consistency of the existence of God with a state of affairs involving divine absence does not eliminate the experiential part of the problem. That is, the puzzlement and agony that arise in the experience of pain and suffering cannot be eliminated by logical reasoning. I propose a radically different way of approaching the problem. While the proposed approach does not *solve* the problem it does suggest how theists might be able to *respond* to it without giving up their faith.

This chapter has the following structure. In Section 2, I describe the persecution of the *Kakure Kirishitans*, or Hidden Christians, in seventeenth-century Japan through Endo's *Silence*. I explain in detail how much pain and suffering the Kakure Kirishitans had to endure. In Section 3, I explain the structure of the problem of divine absence and point out how it is exemplified in the cases involving the Kakure Kirishitans. In Section 4, I address the

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<sup>1</sup> For recent works on divine hiddenness see Howard-Snyder and Moser (2002) and Schellenberg (1993).

persistence of the problem of divine absence. I distinguish between the intellectual and experiential problems of divine absence and argue that no theodicy can solve the experiential problem because that problem is not concerned with logical consistency between the existence of God and His absence. In Section 5, I develop a response to the experiential problem, a response which diverges radically from the strategic approach entailed in theodicies. I base this response on Endo's unique way of understanding the nature of religion and the essence of religious faith. Section 6 concludes.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Persecution of Kakure Kirishitans**

In seventeenth-century Japan, *Kakure Kirishitans*, or Hidden Christians, were persecuted. In order to smoke out the underground Christians, security officials forced people to step on a *fumie*, a plate featuring iconography of Jesus or Mary, to prove that they were not Christians. Those who refused to do so were imprisoned and severely tortured.

In an early phase of this campaign of persecution, Kakure Kirishitans who refused to give up their faith were killed by decapitation, crucifixion, or execution by burning at the stake. However, the security officials came to believe that these methods of execution were too 'easy'—they do not involve sufficient pain and suffering. Also, in some cases methods of martyrdom were visually impressive and encouraged other Kakure Kirishitans not to give up their faith. Hence, the officials introduced slower, more painful and more dreadful methods of torturing Kakure Kirishitans.

For instance, they made sure that the process of burning the Kakure Kirishitans at the stake would go slowly. They kept a certain distance between the firewood and the victims' bodies or rotated their bodies while burning them to prolong their pain and suffering. It is reported that smoke rose from their mouths as their bodies burned internally. The officials also made the Kakure Kirishitans wear straw capes, which they set on fire while their victims were still alive. The Japanese authorities called this the 'straw cape dance' because it caused the victims' bodies to shake as if they were dancing. They also amputated fingers, noses and ears of the Kakure Kirishitans. They poured boiling water from a sulphur spring at the Unzen Volcano in Nagasaki. The victims usually lost consciousness and were severely burnt, after which they were treated; and once they were healed they were tortured again in the same way. Some Kakure Kirishitans were soaked in frozen ponds and if they lost consciousness the

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<sup>2</sup> Apart from passages from William Johnson's translation of *Silence*, I translate all passages from the Japanese works cited in this chapter.

security officials rescued them and warmed their bodies only to be soaked in the frozen water again. The methods of torture also included being stuffed into straw bags with their heads exposed, piled together, and whipped; being tied to pillars and having their necks slashed with knives; and having bamboo saws left next to them so that passers-by could saw their necks, making for a slow and painful death because bamboo saws are not as sharp as metal saws. Among the most ‘effective’ methods of torture was *anazuri*, which involved hanging Kakure Kirishitans upside down in pits and punching holes through their ears so that they would bleed slowly and not die too quickly, succumbing as their heads became congested with blood. During this process the victims’ bodies were bound tightly with ropes to prevent their organs from sagging within their bodies and the complete darkness of the pits added an extra measure of fear.

It is important to note that the aim of the security officials in applying such cruelly painful techniques was to make the Kakure Kirishitans renounce their faith rather than kill them in punishment. This feature and the fact that a large number of Christians were martyred in a relatively short period make these cases unique. Hirofumi Yamamoto remarks, “The martyrdoms in Japan are unique in history. Apart from the time when Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire, there has hardly been any twenty-year period in history in which over 4,000 people were martyred”. In the early seventeenth century, Japan’s population was twenty million, among whom 450,000 were said to be Christians. It is difficult to estimate the exact number of Kakure Kirishitans who were martyred but 4,045 cases are reported in print. Some scholars estimate that as many as 40,000 Kakure Kirishitans were martyred (Miyazaki 1995).

Endo’s novel *Silence* (1980, originally 1969)—which was made into a movie in Japan in 1971 by the director Masahiro Shinoda and is currently being filmed in Hollywood by Martin Scorsese—vividly describes the agony of the Christians who were tortured.<sup>3</sup> One of the key characters in *Silence* is Cristóvão Ferreira, a historical figure who came to Japan from Portugal as a Jesuit missionary. He apostatised after being tortured by *anazuri* for five hours. Later he was given a Japanese name, Chuan Sawano, and married a Japanese woman. He

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<sup>3</sup> Philip L. Quinn discusses Endo’s *Silence* in his 1989 paper, ‘Tragic Dilemmas, Suffering Love, and Christian Life’, but apart from that there are very few philosophical discussions of Endo’s novels. This is surprising given the philosophical content of *Silence* and many other Endo novels.

published a book criticising Christianity and contributed to the crackdown against the Kakure Kirishitans.

The main character of *Silence* is Ferreira's disciple, a Portuguese Jesuit named Sebastião Rodrigues. He is a fictional character but is modelled on the historical figure Giuseppe Chiara from Italy. Like Ferreira, Rodrigues is arrested and severely tortured. He initially hopes to experience glorious martyrdom. However, he hears the groaning voices of Japanese Christian peasants being tortured. Rodrigues asks, "Why is God continually silent while those groaning voices go on? . . . Why do these people not apostatise?" The security official laughs and answers, "They have already apostatised many times. But as long as you don't apostatise these peasants cannot be saved" (p. 168-169). Throughout the novel the silence of God torments Rodrigues and makes him question God's existence. Rodrigues wants God to break the silence and rescue the tortured. Failing that, Rodrigues wants Him at least to explain why He cannot do it:

Why have you abandoned us so completely?, he prayed in a weak voice. Even the village was constructed for you; and have you abandoned it in its ashes? Even when the people are cast out of their homes have you not given them courage? Have you just remained silent like the darkness that surrounds me? Why? At least tell me why. We are not strong men like Job who was afflicted with leprosy as a trial. There is a limit to our endurance. Give us no more suffering. (Endo 1980, p. 96)

Rodrigues's deep perplexity about God's silence increases as he witnesses a seemingly endless series of Kakure Kirishitan deaths. He cannot bear it and eventually decides to trample on *fumie* of Jesus to renounce his faith:

The priest raises his foot. In it he feels a dull, heavy pain. This is no mere formality. He will now trample on what he has considered the most beautiful thing in his life, on what he has believed most pure, on what is filled with the ideals and the dreams of man. How his foot aches!. . . The priest placed his foot on the *fumie*. Dawn broke. And far in the distance the cock crew. (Endo 1980, p. 171)

### **3. The Problem of Divine Absence**

I have focused on the cases of the Kakure Kirishitans described in *Silence* because they vividly illustrate the problem of divine absence. Divine absence is defined as a form of divine hiddenness from devout believers who suffer from horrendous evil. I believe that the problem of divine absence constitutes one of the greatest challenges for theists because it involves (i)

horrendous evil as opposed to ordinary evil; (ii) divine hiddenness from devout believers as opposed to divine hiddenness from ordinary believers or nonbelievers; and (iii) the simultaneous, intertwined occurrence of horrendous evil and divine hiddenness from devout believers.

Let me explain how these three features are realised in the cases of the Kakure Kirishitans.

(i) Horrendous evil, as opposed to ordinary evil, occurs

The problem of evil is often cited as the greatest challenge for theists. However, the force of the problem varies substantially depending on which type of evil is involved. The problem of evil is most forceful when it is formulated in terms of what Marilyn Adams calls ‘horrendous evil’. Adams defines horrendous evil as a form of evil ‘the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole’ (1999, p. 26). Adams’s examples of horrendous evil include ‘the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one’s deepest loyalties, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, child pornography, parental incest, slow death by starvation, [and] the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas’ (p.26). While we might be comfortable believing that God allows a state of affairs to obtain which involves relatively minor mishaps (perhaps in order to instantiate greater goods), it is much more difficult to believe that God allows a state of affairs to obtain which involves utterly awful pain and suffering—so awful that it makes us doubt that a participant’s (especially the victim’s) life could be a great good to him or her on the whole. The problem of divine absence is so forceful because it involves horrendous evil as opposed to ordinary evil. As we saw in the previous section, the Kakure Kirishitans underwent horrific tortures, such as being hanged in *amazuri* for hours, being burnt to death slowly, and being axed at the neck. These are instantiations of horrendous evil.

(ii) Divine hiddenness from devout believers, as opposed to divine hiddenness from ordinary believers or nonbelievers, occurs

As I mentioned earlier, the philosophical debate on divine hiddenness has focused primarily on God’s hiddenness from *nonresistant nonbelievers* (Howard-Snyder and Moser 2002, Schellenberg 1993). This is because theists often claim that God is not hidden from believers and that God has reasons not to reveal himself to resistant nonbelievers. However, the

problem of divine hiddenness is most forceful when it is formulated in terms of God's hiddenness from devout believers. Why God is hidden from nonresistant nonbelievers is certainly puzzling but why God is hidden even from many devout believers, some of whom are prepared to sacrifice their lives for God, is more puzzling. Hence, just as the problem of evil can be strengthened by formulating it in terms of horrendous evil rather than ordinary evil, so the problem of hiddenness can be strengthened by formulating it in terms of God's hiddenness from devout believers rather than ordinary believers or nonbelievers.

The focus of *Silence* is indeed on God's hiddenness from devout believers. What Rodrigues finds puzzling is that God remains hidden even from devout Kakure Kirishitans who are prepared to die for God:

What he [Rodrigues] could not understand was the stillness of the courtyard, the voice of the cicada, the whirling wings of the flies. A [Kakure Kirishitan] man had died. Yet the outside world went on as if nothing had happened. Could anything be more crazy? Was this martyrdom? Why are you silent? Here this one-eyed man has died—and *for you*. You ought to know. Why does this stillness continue? This noon-day stillness. The sound of the flies—this crazy thing, this cruel business. And you avert your face as though indifferent. This . . . this I cannot bear. . . . Do not abandon me in this mysterious way. (Endo 1980, p. 119, emphasis added)

The one-eyed man, a devout believer, is executed with a sword for refusing to renounce his faith. As Rodrigues remarks, it is utterly puzzling why God remains completely hidden even when someone is willing to die *for Him*. God's hiddenness with respect to such a death is particularly difficult to understand.

(iii) Horrendous evil and divine hiddenness from devout believers are intertwined and occur simultaneously

Divine absence takes place when the above two features (i) and (ii) are intertwined and occur simultaneously. Devout believers in these cases suffer from horrendous evil without understanding why God remains silent despite their severe pain and suffering. The horrendous evil and the divine hiddenness enhance each other, creating great perplexities for believers. The presence of horrendous evil alone (despite the existence of God) is puzzling enough. God's hiddenness from devout believers alone is puzzling enough. God's hiddenness from devout believers despite their experience of horrendous evil is doubly puzzling.

Ferreira apostatised not because he could not bear the torture, the horrendous evil, or divine hiddenness in general. He apostatised because he could not bear God's hiddenness

with respect to horrendous evil that devout believers, such as himself and his fellow Kakure Kirishitans, had to endure. In the novel, Ferreira explains to Rodrigues:

Listening to those groans all night I was no longer able to give praise to the Lord. I did not apostatise because I was suspended in the pit. For three days, I who stand before you was hung in a pit of foul excrement, but I did not say a single word that might betray my God. . . . The reason I apostatised . . . are you ready? Listen! I was put in here and heard the voice of those people for whom God did nothing. God did not do a single thing. I prayed with all my strength; but God did nothing. (Endo 1980, p. 167–168)

It is interesting to note that the simultaneous occurrence of divine hiddenness and evil (not necessarily horrendous evil) is described in the Bible as well. In fact, most examples of divine hiddenness found in the Bible involve the combination of divine hiddenness and evil, rather than divine hiddenness alone: “Why standest thou afar off, O Lord? why hidest thou thyself in times of trouble?” (Ps 10:1); “Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord? arise, cast us not off for ever. Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and forgettest our affliction and our oppression? For our soul is bowed down to the dust: our belly cleaveth unto the earth.” (Ps 44:23-25). These passages seem to agree that God’s hiddenness is puzzling particularly for believers who are in ‘times of trouble’, suffering ‘affliction’ and ‘oppression’.

#### **4. The Intellectual Problem and the Experiential Problem**

The problem of divine absence can be presented as two distinct problems: an intellectual problem and an experiential problem. The intellectual problem, as I call it, which is formulated from a third-person perspective, involves logical consistency between the existence of God and the occurrence of divine absence. It asks how it is logically possible that an omnipotent and morally perfect God remains silent when devout believers suffer from horrendous evil. (There is also a version of the intellectual problem which is concerned with whether or not divine absence constitutes good *evidence* against the existence of God. In what follows I focus, for the sake of simplicity, on logical consistency when I address the intellectual problem. My claims, however, apply equally to the question regarding evidence.) On the other hand, the experiential problem, which is formulated from a first-person perspective, involves emotional puzzlement and confusion about divine absence. It asks God why He remains silent and abandons devout believers who suffer from horrendous evil.

Over the years theists have developed many theodicies in response to the problem of evil. One might wonder if we can apply theodicies to the problem of divine absence as well.

Consider, for example, the free will theodicy, which is arguably among the most popular. If the free will theodicy is applied to the problem of divine absence, it would say, roughly speaking, that free humans, rather than God, are morally responsible for horrendous evil and that God has to remain hidden from the victims of the horrendous evil because not doing so would undermine their free will. That is, horrendous evil is a consequence of human free will and divine absence is a necessary condition for maintaining human free will. To take another example, if the soul-making theodicy is applied to the problem of divine absence, it would say, roughly speaking, that God has to allow horrendous evil and remain hidden if humans are to grow spiritually. That is, both horrendous evil and divine hiddenness are necessary conditions for humans to cultivate their spirituality. However, these responses address only the intellectual aspect of divine absence, which is, again, concerned with logical consistency between the existence of God and the occurrence of divine absence. It does not answer the experiential problem, which goes beyond the question of logical consistency.

The question “Why is God silent in response to our pain and suffering?”—which Ferreira and Rodrigues pose in agony—should not be interpreted as equivalent to the consistency question: “How is it logically possible that God both exists and remains silent when we, devout believers, are in pain and suffering?” Ferreira and Rodrigues do not mean to raise a question for which someone can provide an abstract answer from a third-person perspective. They raise a question *for God* who remains silent despite their pain and suffering. The above question should, therefore, be interpreted as a plea for help from a first-person perspective: “God, why are you silent? If you exist, you should not be. Help us or at least explain to us why you cannot help us. Present your existence to us”.

Consider a parallel example. Suppose that a child is in trouble. She believes that her parents can easily help her and are willing to help her. However, her parents remain silent. The child asks, “Why are my parents silent in response to my suffering?” It is mistaken to construe this as a consistency question: “How could the existence of my parents and their absence be logically consistent?” This question should rather be construed as a plea for help from a first-person perspective: “Mum and Dad, why are you silent? You should not be. Help me or at least explain to me why you cannot help me”. We can make a similar claim about the saying of Jesus on the cross: “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Here, Jesus is not raising a consistency question; he is raising an experiential question. Philosophers seem to have assumed that the entirety of the problem of the co-occurrence of evil and hiddenness can in principle be reduced to the

consistency problem, which can in principle be fully answered by a theodicy. Yet theodicies do not address the experiential aspects of the problems.

A relevant point was expressed in 2005 by Rowan Williams, then the Archbishop of Canterbury. He published an article entitled ‘Of Course this Makes us Doubt God’s Existence’ when the catastrophic tsunami disaster took place in December 2004, killing approximately 280,000 people in Southeast Asia. In the article he contends that even if there were intellectual answers to the question “How can you believe in a God who permits suffering on this scale?” it would not make us feel any better because an experiential problem remains unanswered: “If some religious genius did come up with an explanation of exactly why all these deaths made sense, would we feel happier or safer or more confident in God?” Williams’s focus is on the problem of evil but the same point applies to the problem of divine absence.

One might think that I am advocating so-called ‘anti-theodicy’ here. Proponents of anti-theodicy argue that theodicies always fail to respond to the problem of evil. Some of them go as far as saying that theodicies are immoral (Felderhof 2004, Phillips 2004) or even evil (Tilley 1991) because they are attempts to *justify* horrific events. Williams makes a similar point: “[If someone did come up with a solution to the problem of evil] wouldn’t we feel something of a chill at the prospect of a God who deliberately plans a programme that involves a certain level of casualties?” It is important to emphasise that I am not defending anti-theodicy here. I hold that theodicies can in principle be useful in solving the intellectual problem and might even offer believers limited consolation. I maintain, however, that theodicies do not eliminate the problem of divine absence altogether because they fail to answer the experiential problem, which concerns the pain and suffering of real people. 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. My focus in the rest of this chapter is on the experiential problem rather than the intellectual problem not only because that is what tormented Ferreira and Rodrigues but also because it poses a greater challenge to faith than the intellectual problem does.

A remarkable feature of the events described in *Silence* regarding the experiential problem is that the Japanese security officials, whether consciously or unconsciously, created an artificial mechanism to force the Kakure Kirishitans to *experience* the problem of divine absence. As I mentioned earlier, it is important to note that the goal of the security officials was not to kill the Kakure Kirishitans in punishment, nor even to torture them merely for the sake of causing suffering, but to make them renounce their faith. This goal could have in

principle been accomplished by presenting to the Kakure Kirishitans the intellectual problem in an abstract manner. In fact, some attempts of this kind were made. For example, after committing apostasy Ferreira wrote a book entitled *Kengiroku* aimed at undermining Christianity by presenting intellectual arguments against it. In the book he writes, for example, “Since God is the creator of heaven and earth, the master of all there is and the source of wisdom, He must create everyone in the world in such a way that He knows everything about them. If God is the source of mercy why did He create the eight types of suffering for humans, the five decaying conditions for angels, and the three realms without any peace [the formless realm, the form realm, and the desire realm in Buddhist cosmology]”? It is quite common even today for atheists to challenge believers by presenting similar intellectual arguments. Yet the officials concluded that it would be more effective to make the Kakure Kirishitans *experience* the problem of divine absence from a first-person perspective. This makes sense as most Kakure Kirishitans were poor peasants who were uneducated and illiterate. The security officials artificially created horrendous evil by torturing them brutally, which effectively made them acknowledge from a first-person perspective God’s absence and failure to do anything for them. This forced them to face the experiential, rather than intellectual, problem of divine absence. While it is difficult to prove that the security officials adopted the strategy with this distinction in mind, their campaign to eradicate Christianity in this way was very successful. Today, less than one percent of the Japanese population is said to be Christians partly because of the persecution of Christianity in the seventeenth century.

Note again that Rodrigues renounced his faith not because he could not stand the physical pain. In fact, he had originally wished to experience the pain and achieve a glorious martyrdom. He renounced his faith because he could not stand the absence of God. He just could not accept that God would remain silent despite the pain and suffering he and other devout Christians experienced. Of course there were other Kakure Kirishitans who reacted differently to the persecution. For example, Hirofumi Yamamoto argues that many Kakure Kirishitans passionately *wished* to go through torture and die in martyrdom so that they could go to heaven. (Yamamoto 2009, p. 42 and p. 251). There were also cases in which Kakure Kirishitans renounced their faith after being tortured but regained it later. The act of regaining faith is called *shinjin modoshi* in Japanese. There are reported cases of *shinjin modoshi* in which Kakure Kirishitans renounced their faith but regained it later and were martyred subsequently. However, cases like Ferreira’s—in which Kakure Kirishitans permanently renounced their faith after experiencing the problem of divine absence and spent the rest of

their lives supporting the persecution of Christians—were not uncommon. This suggests that at least in some of these cases it is not simply that Kakure Kirishitans renounced their faith simply because they could not endure the physical pain of being tortured, saying whatever they needed to say to stop the torture. They were experientially or intellectually persuaded that the problem of divine absence undermines theism.

What would then be a satisfactory solution to the experiential problem? Recall that Ferreira apostatised because he “heard the voice of those people [being tortured] for whom God did nothing.” He says, “God did not do a single thing. I prayed with all my strength; but God did nothing” (Endo 1980, p. 167–168). Rodrigues also shouts to God, “Stop! Stop! Lord, it is now that you should break the silence. You must not remain silent. Prove that you are justice, that you are goodness, that you are love. You must say something to show the world that you are the august one” (Endo 1980, p. 168). Rodrigues says that he cannot accept God’s silence by appealing to His mysterious nature, either: “[Y]ou avert your face as though indifferent. This . . . this I cannot bear. . . . Do not abandon me in this mysterious way” (Endo 1980, p. 119). He, like many other victims of horrendous evil, just cannot stand that God, who is meant to be omnipotent and morally perfect, remains completely silent. And he cannot accept that God leaves them in mystery as it is equivalent to abandonment. This suggests that the only situation that would fully satisfy such victims as Ferreira and Rodrigues who raise the experiential problem of divine absence is one in which God breaks His silence and eliminates their pain and suffering, or at least explains to them why He cannot do so. No other situation would satisfy them fully. Yet, clearly, no such situation is forthcoming—this is the very core of the experiential problem.

## **5. Responding to the Experiential Problem**

How can we solve or address the experiential problem of divine absence if the only way to solve it fully satisfactorily is that God breaks His silence and eliminates the pain and suffering of the victims of horrendous evil or at least explains why He cannot help them? In this case no successful *solution* to the problem is available to us, because God does remain silent. Yet, I argue, there is a *response* to the problem which suggests how theists might try to live with the problem. In what follows, I develop a response by appealing to Shusaku Endo’s religious insights into the nature of religion and the essence of religious faith.

Endo was a prolific author who published numerous essays as well as novels. In a book-length presentation of his religious views, *Watashi Ni Totte Kami Towa (What is God for Me)*, which has not been translated into English, he writes as follows:

“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 which compels them to think that there is no God and no Buddha. (Endo 1988a, originally 1983, pp. 71–72)

Endo does not present the above view in response to the experiential problem of divine absence but we can expand on his thought and apply it to that problem.

Endo implies in the above passage that we should reverse how we look at the experiential problem of divine absence. Atheists start with divine absence, which is, again, the hiddenness of God from devout believers who suffer from horrendous evil, and conclude that God does not exist. This is a common pattern of reasoning through which people reject theism. In fact, this is the reasoning through which, in the novel, Ferreira and Rodrigues decide to renounce their faith. By this reasoning, divine absence is where one’s religious faith ends. Yet is divine absence really the right place to end one’s faith? Let us hark back to the origin of religion and consider why people need faith in the first place. It seems reasonable to say that people need faith precisely because there are horrendous situations that make them think there is no hope at all—so hopeless that no mercy from God or Buddha seems forthcoming. If, on the other hand, we had not faced such situations, or we had had found solutions to such situations by ourselves, we would not have needed faith in the first place. Indeed, it might not be an exaggeration to say that all the major religions of the world arose from human encounters with evil and suffering. So the existence of evil is not the end of religion but *the very start of true religion*, which takes seriously the most difficult situations in life. Endo writes:

I have gone through questions about religion that people commonly raise. Everyone wonders, ‘Why does this have to happen?’ when they see, for example, innocent children dying in a war. I wonder too. That is why, I said to myself so many times, ‘I should give up my faith’. But if faith does not go through such questions it is not true faith. It’s not true religion. Conversely, believers who avoid these questions are not true believers. No matter how far we go it is unlikely that we can resolve all the problems. Yet our effort to always keep in mind these

problems and tackle them represents true faith and true religion; an attempt to solve all of them easily and quickly does not. (Endo 1988b, originally 1976 pp. 200–201)

Faith does not offer easy or quick solutions to difficult problems. Avoiding the problem or pretending that it does not exist does not represent true religion. True religion faces the most significant challenges to faith directly, maintaining optimism and thereby sustaining faith. We would not need faith in the first place if there were easy or quick solutions. But the more seriously we consider these problems and the more deeply we grasp their persistence, the more seriously we take religion.

How can we understand faith in this framework? Endo expresses his sympathy with the view of the French author Georges Bernanos, according to which faith is ninety percent doubt and ten percent hope (Endo 1988b, originally 1983, pp. 15–16). Endo says that faith is *not* one hundred percent confidence. He says instead that it is mostly doubt but leaves a small space for hope and that space is crucial. Endo is not a philosopher, so he does not develop this idea as a philosophical view. We could nevertheless develop it as follows: if we focus on the problem of divine absence the world appears religiously negative, which means that the world appears more compatible with the non-existence of God rather than with the existence of God. However, people with faith can still try to keep a small portion of hope and hold onto ‘cosmic optimism’, according to which ultimately all is good on a cosmic scale (Hick 1989).

Philosophers of mind discuss ‘cognitive closure’ and ‘epistemic boundedness’. Proponents of these theses argue that given our cognitive and epistemic limitations it is reasonable to think that solutions to certain fundamental philosophical problems, such as the problem of consciousness and the problem free will, are beyond our ken.<sup>4</sup> In the same way that dogs are cognitively closed with respect to solutions to problems in physics and mathematics, they say, we are cognitively closed with respect to solutions to these philosophical problems. Whether or not their application of the theses to those specific philosophical problems is tenable, it seems undeniable, given the finitude of our brain functions, that our cognitive or epistemic capacity is limited and that there are many things beyond our comprehension. Our capacity seems particularly limited compared with the vast extent of God’s power, knowledge and love. Cosmic optimism is not epistemic confidence but an *attitude* that believers can choose to hold with respect to the place of humans in the universe. This is an attitude of hope that the gap in our cognitive and epistemic capacity

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<sup>4</sup> See Chomsky (1975), Fodor (1983) and McGinn (1989)

corresponds to the puzzlement raised by divine absence. Cosmic optimists regard their encounters with divine absence not as the end of their faith but as an opportunity to embrace cognitive and epistemic humility. There is no definitive argument to establish that it is rational to adopt such an attitude but notice that (i) the focus of the problem of divine absence is on devout believers who are already committed to faith—so my proposal here is not directed to those with a weak commitment to faith or without faith; and (ii) we are not seeking a successful *solution* to the problem—we have concluded that there is no such thing. We seek instead a *response* to the problem which suggests how devout believers can accept the problem yet try to live with it without giving up their faith.

It should be noted that what I am sketching here is related to but distinct from sceptical theism. Sceptical theism purports to solve the intellectual problem of evil by appealing to our limited knowledge, particularly of morality. Again, my intention here is not to address the intellectual problem or establish a solution that persuades everyone. I am only suggesting an attitude that people such as the Kakure Kirishitans, who are already committed to faith, can adopt in the face of the experiential problem.

In *Silence*, Rodrigues's old faith ends when he steps on *fumie* but doing so opens up a new phase of his religious life:

No doubt his fellow priests would condemn his act as sacrilege; but even if he was betraying them, he was not betraying his Lord. He loved him now in a different way from before. Everything that had taken place until now had been necessary to bring him to this love. 'Even now I am the last priest in this land. But Our Lord was not silent. Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him.' (Endo 1980, p. 191)

Rodrigues's new faith takes divine absence seriously but does not undermine itself as it retained a small portion of optimism.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have made three main points. First, I have argued that the problem of divine absence constitutes one of the most significant challenges for theists because it combines the most forceful form of the problem of divine hiddenness and the most forceful form of the problem of evil. I have addressed the cases of the Kakure Kirishitans in seventeenth-century Japan and Endo's novel to illustrate the force of the problem. Second, I have argued that theodicies cannot eliminate the experiential problem of divine absence because, unlike the intellectual problem, the experiential problem is not concerned with logical consistency

between the existence of an omnipotent and morally perfect God on the one hand and divine absence on the other. It is concerned rather with the emotional puzzlement and confusion that devout believers who suffer from horrendous evil feel when they make a plea for help from God that is seemingly unanswered. Third, I have developed a response to the experiential problem by relying on Endo's insights into faith and religion. While such a response does not solve the problem it does suggest how believers can take divine absence as the starting point of true religion rather than the end. It reverses how we think about the relationship between the problem of divine absence and faith and motivates believers to embrace cosmic optimism.<sup>5</sup>

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