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“If there is no love here...”: The witness  
of St. Maximilian Kolbe and the problem  
of theodicy in the prose of Shūsaku Endō

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## ABSTRAKT

*„Jeśli tutaj nie ma miłości...”. Świadectwo św. Maksymiliana Kolbego a problem teodycei w prozie Shūsaku Endō*

Jednym z najstarszych i najpoważniejszych zarzutów filozofów przeciwko istnieniu miłującego Boga jest problem zła, czyli teodycea. Ich zdaniem, jeśli Absolut istnieje, musi być obojętny na ludzki los albo kompletnie bezsilny. W dwudziestym wieku rozmaite reżimy autorytarne, m.in. hitlerowskie Niemcy, dokonały masowych mordów, co u wielu spowodowało utratę wiary. Problem zła jest obecny w licznych dziełach japońskiego pisarza katolickiego Shūsaku Endō, w którego wizji Boga widać wpływ kultury buddyjskiej, nacechowanej miłością. W dwóch utworach prozaika, powieści „Sachiko” oraz opowiadaniu „Japanese in Warsaw” („Japończycy w Warszawie”), pojawia się postać Maksymiliana Kolbego, franciszkańskiego męczennika, który dobrowolnie poszedł do celi w bunkrze głodowym w Auschwitz, by nieznamy współwięzień mógł przeżyć. Analiza polskiego świętego w prozie Shūsaku Endō w kontekście wizji chrześcijaństwa prozaika i w zestawieniu z pracami tak różnorodnych autorów, jak Clive Staples Lewis, Viktor Frankl czy kard. Robert Sarah, sugeruje odpowiedź na dylemat, gdzie był Bóg w obozie zagłady. Można zatem stwierdzić, że bohaterskie czyny miłości, jak np. męczeństwo św. Maksymiliana, nie miałyby miejsca bez terroru Auschwitz.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** św. Maksymilian Kolbe, Auschwitz, teodycea, Shūsaku Endō, Holocaust, problem zła, literatura japońska



## ABSTRACT

*“If there is no love here...”: The witness of St. Maximilian Kolbe and the problem of theodicy in the prose of Shūsaku Endō*

One of the oldest and most serious philosophical objections to the existence of a loving God has been the problem of evil. If God exists, it has been argued, He must be indifferent or impotent. In the twentieth century, the mass murders perpetrated by authoritarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany, led many to abandon their religious faith. The problem of evil is present in the work of the Japanese Catholic writer Shūsaku Endō, whose vision of God, strongly influenced by Buddhist culture, is one of love. In two works, the novel “Sachiko” and the short story “Japanese in Warsaw,” Endō depicts the Polish Franciscan friar and martyr St. Maximilian Kolbe, who chose to die in a starvation bunker at the Auschwitz concentration camp so that another man may live. An analysis of Endō’s interpretation of Kolbe, contextualized within a study of Endō’s interpretation of Christianity and compared to the works of such diverse thinkers such as C.S. Lewis, Viktor Frankl, and Cardinal Robert Sarah, seems to offer a response to the quandary of where God was in Auschwitz. Without the terrors of the camp, one could argue, heroic acts of love, such as that of St. Maximilian Kolbe, could not have happened.

**KEYWORDS:** St. Maximilian Kolbe, Auschwitz, theodicy, Shūsaku Endō, Holocaust, problem of evil, Japanese literature



The horrors of totalitarian rule in the twentieth century caused many witnesses and survivors of violence to question their earlier belief in God. The aim of this article is to summarize the response of the Japanese novelist Shūsaku Endō, arguably one of the most influential Catholic authors of fiction of the past century, to this problem. This response is symbolized by a recurring figure in two of Endō's works of prose: the Polish Franciscan martyr of Auschwitz St. Maximilian Kolbe. An analysis of Endō's depiction of Kolbe, a topic hitherto not undertaken by other scholars, provides a response to how to find God amidst extreme suffering akin to the views of Christian and Jewish thinkers such as Cardinal Robert Sarah, C. S. Lewis, and Viktor Frankl. While these three thinkers differed in terms of nationality, profession, and religious affiliation (although all three were representatives of the Judeo-Christian tradition), they are all influential authors who share with Endō within the context of theodicy and the novelist's depiction of Kolbe the conviction that suffering can provide fertile soil for human kindness.

One of the oldest philosophical challenges to the existence of a loving God, particularly the loving God of Christianity, is the problem of theodicy, which the *Cambridge dictionary of philosophy* defines as “a defense of the justice or goodness of God in the face of doubts or objections arising from the phenomena of evil in the world.”<sup>1</sup> Leszek Kołakowski has noted that the issue of theodicy has brought anxiety to his fellow philosophers since at least antiquity, when the Epicureans, who claimed that since our world is replete with evil, then God must be evil, impotent, or both. According to Kołakowski, “it is hard to find a theologian or a Christian philosopher who has not tried to cope with this alarming question [i.e., that of reconciling the existence of a loving God with the existence of evil and suffering],” and “the basic arguments on both sides do not seem to have changed much since St. Augustine.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Theodicy*, in: *The Cambridge dictionary of philosophy*, ed. R. Audi, Cambridge 1999, p. 910.

<sup>2</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Religion: If there is no God—on God, the devil, sin, and other worries of the so-called philosophy of religion*, South Bend 2001, p. 17.

There are few times in human history when so much suffering and evil was unleashed on innocent human beings as under the rule of Nazi Germany over much of Europe. The historian Alex J. Kay estimates the number of civilians and non-combatants murdered by the Third Reich – including Jews, Roma, the Polish elites and the people of Warsaw after the collapse of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, Soviet POWs, and people with disabilities – at thirteen million.<sup>3</sup> He notes that Hitler’s empire of evil was unique even compared to other totalitarian regimes: “[T]he Nazis actively planned the murder of millions *in order to achieve their goals* [emphasis in the original] in a way that neither the regime of Mao nor that of Joseph Stalin did, some exceptions aside.”<sup>4</sup>

The horrific experiences of survivors of the Nazi German atrocities caused many of them to reject or severely question their faith. This sentiment was expressed bluntly by the Italian-Jewish Auschwitz survivor and memoirist Primo Levi, best known for his account of wartime survival *If this is a man*; Levi told fellow Italian writer Ferdinando Camon: “There is Auschwitz, and so there cannot be God.”<sup>5</sup> Many other survivors of the German camps and of the Holocaust expressed similar views.

Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, a cardiologist, and a prominent activist dissident in the anti-communist movement in post-war Poland (in the 1970s, Edelman was active in the Workers’ Defense Committee, and in the 1980s he was a member of Solidarity) related to journalists Witold Bereś and Krzysztof Burnetko a horrific scene he saw in the ghetto: that of a pregnant nineteen-year-old girl, struck in the belly by the rifle of a Latvian SS-man. Edelman presented this as evidence against the existence of a loving God (while an avowed atheist, Edelman’s view expressed here is consistent with deism):

What did God have against nineteen-year-old girls? Why did she have to be killed? If God judges everyone, He must have looked away then. He fell asleep. Apparently, it’s not God who rules over the world.<sup>6</sup>

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3 See A. J. Kay, *Empire of destruction: A history of Nazi mass killing*, New Haven–London 2021, p. 294.

4 A. J. Kay, *Empire of destruction*, p. 7–8.

5 F. Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, trans. from the Italian by J. Shepley, Marlboro 1989, p. 68.

6 W. Bereś, K. Burnetko, *Marek Edelman. Bóg śpi*, Warszawa 2020, s. 47 (translation mine).

Edelman’s words are echoed by Stanisław Grzesiuk, a blue-collar bard, musician, and writer. Having grown up in the poor Warsaw neighborhood of Czerniaków, Grzesiuk spent five years of his life in the Dachau and Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camps for possessing firearms, a major offense in German-occupied Poland. Grzesiuk’s camp memoir *Pięć lat kacetu* (“Five years in the concentration camp;” while translated into German and Spanish, this book is not yet available to Anglophone readers) includes a description of his loss of faith. Grzesiuk writes that he had ceased to attend Mass at the age of fourteen, but the terrors of concentration camp life helped him to transition from being a non-practicing Catholic to atheism.<sup>7</sup> At Mauthausen-Gusen, Grzesiuk befriended a Catholic priest from Upper Silesia named Józef Szubert, an unlikely friendship given Grzesiuk’s radical leftist views and anti-clericalism, expressed on many occasions in his memoir. The two sparred on the existence of God, with Grzesiuk invoking the problem of theodicy. Here is a statement typical of Grzesiuk’s arguments:

You believe that there’s a God? Tell me, then, where is He? He’s certainly not here. Not even birds fly over here, because there’s no reason. [...] Even if He is here, He’s not wearing the same clothes as we; rain isn’t falling on His head; and no one is beating Him on the spine with a stake. If there is a God, may He strike me with thunder immediately because I won’t go to the barbed wire myself.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the above-cited imprecations of Levi, Edelman, and Grzesiuk, historian Nikolaus Wachsmann notes that some concentration camp inmates of various faiths did try to seek comfort in religion. He notes that despite the extreme difficulties in practicing religion in the German concentration camps, where prisoners had to work on holy days, access to liturgical materials was extremely limited, and worship was often treated by SS guards as an opportunity for particular abuse (Wachsmann gives the example of Polish priests interned at Dachau who were forced to drink large quantities of sacramental wine and were particularly tortured on Catholic holy days), some inmates persisted in practicing their faith. Orthodox Jews met in a barrack to say ritual prayers; Jehovah’s witnesses shared with one another the contents of packages from relatives; and Polish Catholic inmates, for whom faith was inextricably tied to

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7 See S. Grzesiuk, *Pięć lat kacetu*, Warszawa 2023, s. 118 (translation mine).

8 S. Grzesiuk, *Pięć lat kacetu*, p. 118–119 (translation mine).

national identity, smuggled in hosts to celebrate Mass. Naturally, prisoners who had lost their faith in the camps scoffed at such religious practices.<sup>9</sup>

The witness of St. Maximilian Kolbe illustrates that religious faith not only gave concentration camp inmates hope, but also led to tangible acts of love. Born in 1894 in Russian-controlled Poland and raised in the town of Pabianice, a major hub of the textile industry, Rajmund Kolbe was known for his devotion to the Virgin Mary. He became a Conventual Franciscan, taking the name Maximilian. He gained fame as a tireless evangelist, spreading the good word through the print media (“The Knight of the Immaculate” and the “Little Daily”) and radio (Radio Niepokalanów). He went on missions to Japan and India, where he founded friaries; miraculously, Kolbe’s monastery in Nagasaki survived the atomic bombing of the city.<sup>10</sup>

However remarkable Kolbe’s prewar evangelization efforts were, he is undisputedly best known for his wartime sacrifice. When the friar was interned in the Auschwitz concentration camp, a fellow inmate escaped. As punishment, the camp deputy commander Karl Fritzsche decided to punish ten prisoners, randomly selected during roll call, with death in the starvation bunker. One of the selected inmates, a sergeant in the Polish Army named Franciszek Gajowniczek, pleaded to be spared, claiming he was a family man and did not want to abandon his wife and children. Hearing Gajowniczek’s cries, Kolbe stepped forward and explained that as a Catholic priest he had no family of his own and volunteered to die in the former’s place. The SS agreed; after Kolbe was found still alive after a few days, he was killed by a lethal injection of carbolic acid.<sup>11</sup>

The Polish émigré writer Gustaw Herling-Grudziński wrote that in the 1970s, when Kolbe was beatified, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope St. John Paul II, said that that Franciscan’s Christian witness not only was manifested in his giving his life for Franciszek Gajowniczek, but also in the fact that

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9 See N. Wachsmann, *KL: A history of the Nazi concentration camps*, New York 2015, pp. 504–506.

10 Cf. R. Royal, *The catholic martyrs of the twentieth century: A comprehensive world history*, New York 2000, pp. 198–211. For a classic, comprehensive account of Kolbe’s life and martyrdom, see A. Frossard, “Forget not love”: *The passion of Maximilian Kolbe*, trans. from the French by C. Fontan, San Francisco 1991. For a more detailed biographical work in Polish, see: T. Terlikowski, *Maksymilian M. Kolbe. Biografia świętego męczennika*, Kraków 2017. Because the focus of this article is not on St. Maximilian as a historical figure but rather on how Shūsaku Endō uses him to make an argument about the existence of God amidst suffering, the biographical literature on the Franciscan martyr cited here will not be extensive.

11 Cf. R. Royal, *The catholic martyrs*, pp. 192–198.

he did not allow the inmates in the starvation bunker to die alone.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Herling-Grudziński praised the pope for comparing, during his canonization homily, Kolbe’s sacrifice to that of Janusz Korczak, a Polish-Jewish physician, writer, pedagogue, and orphanage director who refused numerous offers of asylum outside the Warsaw Ghetto to avoid abandoning Jewish orphans sentenced to inevitable death at the Treblinka extermination camp. Herling-Gruziński wrote in his diary:

Maybe between the starvation bunker in Auschwitz and the gas chamber of Treblinka the ambition to “be a saint” became synonymous with the ambition “to be human?”<sup>13</sup>

Shūsaku Endō (1923–1996) was one of the best-known Japanese writers of the post-world war era. He is most famous for his 1966 novel *Silence*, dealing with the persecution of Christians by the shogunate in the seventeenth century, as seen through the eyes of two idealistic, young Portuguese Jesuit missionaries. The novel was adapted for the screen twice, in 1971 by Japanese director Masahiro Shinoda and in 2016 by American filmmaker Martin Scorsese. While Endō’s other works are less famous, at least outside Japan, they frequently deal with faith and doubt as well as the conflict between Christianity and Japanese culture, which unlike Europe and the Americas lacks a deeply rooted Christian identity. Whereas Christians are a tiny minority in Japan, Endō was baptized at the age of eleven.<sup>14</sup> This was the decision of his mother rather than of himself, and the young boy did not fully comprehend the tenets of his new faith; since then, he struggled to reconcile his Catholicism, which he likened to an ill-fitting “Western suit,” not only with Japanese identity but with his own self.<sup>15</sup>

The time of World War II affected Endō’s faith; espousing the dominant Christian religion of the Western powers at war with Japan, he was considered a traitor who followed a colonial religion. He also struggled to reconcile

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12 See G. Herling-Grudziński, *Dziennik pisany nocą, 1980–1983*, Warszawa 1996, s. 262.

13 G. Herling-Grudziński, *Dziennik pisany nocą*, p. 264. For an English-language biography of Korczak, see: A. Marrin, *A light in the darkness: Janusz Korczak, His Orphans, and the Holocaust*, New York 2021. See also: J. Korczak, *Ghetto diary*, trans. from the Polish by B. J. Lifton, New Haven–London 2003.

14 See: E. C. Galbraith, *Agape unbound in “Silence” and “Deep river”*, in: *Approaching “Silence”: New perspectives on Shūsaku Endō’s classic novel*, eds. M. W. Dennis, D. J. N. Middleton, New York–London, 2015, p. 125; M. R. Reichardt, *Exploring catholic literature: A companion and resource guide*, New York–Oxford 2021, p. 179.

15 Cf. M. B. Williams, *Endō Shūsaku: A literature of reconciliation*, London–New York 1999, p. 35–42.

monotheism with polytheistic *Shintō* and, in Endō's youth, worship of the emperor, then major components of Japanese culture, as well as Christ's preaching of nonviolence with his nation's belligerent foreign policy. *Silence* was a pessimistic take on the failed evangelization of Japan; its conclusion, in which its previously idealistic protagonists formally renounce Christ, was incorrectly understood as celebrating apostasy, hence the negative reaction in many Catholic quarters (some Japanese parishes even banned their faithful from reading the book). Yet Endō remained Catholic. Major factors that prevented him from succumbing to the temptation of apostasy were love for his neophyte mother and solidarity with the weak; having suffered from many medical ailments and spent many years in hospitals – Endō's ailments included diabetes, cancer, acute pneumonia, and renal failure; he wrote his final novel, *Deep river*, during a long period of hospitalization that involved dialysis – the novelist had a natural compassion for the weak.<sup>16</sup> Theologian Emi Mase-Hasegawa writes that the Japanese novelist's "evangelical goal was to spread the love of God so that the image of Christ would permeate the hearts of people in his homeland."<sup>17</sup>

Readers can also get a glimpse of Endō's approach to Christianity by reading his 1973 work *A life of Jesus*, a rare example of a work of non-fiction in the oeuvre of a writer best known for his prose. In the preface to the American edition of this biographical work, the Japanese novelist explains that "the Japanese tend to seek in their gods and buddhas a warm-hearted mother rather than a stern father;" thus, his Japanese conception of Christ (although the novel is true to the basic historical facts and set in the Holy Land) is one that emphasizes love and kindness.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere in the work, Endō notes that the Holy Land was a "desert" not only in a literal sense; until Jesus came, "[w]hat was wanting to the desert was love."<sup>19</sup> The author also writes of the miracles, in the literal, supernatural sense, performed by Jesus, such as the resurrection of the dead man Lazarus or the multiplication of fish and loaves: "[W]hat a shabby thing any miracle in itself is when compared to the love that flowed from Jesus like lifeblood from his [*sic*] body."<sup>20</sup> Thus, for Endō love for neighbor amidst suffering is at the center of Christianity.

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16 Cf. E. Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese culture: Theological themes in Shūsaku Endō's literary works*, Leiden–Boston 2008, p. 61–91.

17 E. Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese culture*, p. 83.

18 See S. Endō, *A life of Jesus*, trans. from the Japanese by R. A. Schuchert, New York–Ramsey 1978, p. 1.

19 S. Endō, *A life of Jesus*, p. 28.

20 S. Endō, *A life of Jesus*, p. 152.

At this point, it is worth recalling Japan’s traditional religious culture, in which Endō was brought up. As East Asian religions are often less dogmatic than Christianity, Japanese culture has often been fused with polytheistic *Shintō*, which means “way of the *kami* (gods),” the country’s original religious tradition. Before Buddhism, its structure has been described as vague, without sacred scriptures, rules of morality, or dogmatic beliefs; beginning around 900 AD, *Shintō* gods came to be regarded as local forms of Buddhist deities, and a syncretic amalgamation of *Shintō* and Buddhist worship was often celebrated in the same temple.<sup>21</sup>

Buddhism was brought to Japan from Korea in 538 AD, bringing Chinese civilization, including the Taoist and Confucian philosophies, to the island nation. Under the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867), Japan isolated itself from the world and brutally persecuted Christianity, brought by Portuguese missionaries, while making Buddhism the established state religion; the persecution of Christians during this period is the main theme of Endō’s best-known novel, 1966’s *Silence*. There are many schools of Japanese Buddhism, the most practiced of which is Pure Land Buddhism. One of its schools, *Jōdo Shinshū*, built fortified temples and organized peasant uprisings, eventually taking over the state.<sup>22</sup> After the Meiji restoration of 1868, Japan opened itself to the West, underwent a period of modernization, and adopted *Shintō* as its state religion; *Shintō* was used to justify Japanese wars against Russia and the colonization of Taiwan and Korea.<sup>23</sup>

This legacy of Japan’s traditional religions, both *Shintō* and Buddhism, used to justify aggressive state policies, may have made Christianity’s message of meekness and love appeal to Endō. On the other hand, there are certain parallels between Buddhist compassion and Christian charity. The Dalai Lama, the religious leader of Tibetan Buddhists, has seen similarities between Jesus’ calls to love one’s neighbor, especially one’s enemy, and the Buddhist focus on tolerance, impartiality, compassion, and equanimity to all sentient beings.<sup>24</sup>

This theme of love is apparent in other works by Endō as well. St. Maximilian Kolbe plays a prominent role in two works by Shūsaku Endō. The first is his

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21 Cf. E. D. Saunders, *Buddhism in Japan with an outline of its origins in India*, Philadelphia 1964, p. 182–184.

22 Cf. P. Harvey, *An introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices*, Cambridge 1990, p. 161–169.

23 Cf. P. Harvey, *An introduction to Buddhism*, p. 284–287.

24 See The Dalai Lama, *The good heart: A Buddhist perspective on the teachings of Jesus*, trans. from the Tibetan by G. T. Jinpa, ed. R. Kiely, Boston 1998, p. 45–52.

1982 novel *Sachiko*, which follows three interconnected narratives set in Nagasaki around the time of World War II. One is that of the two young friends Sachiko and Shūhei; the latter is in love with the former but is rejected. Both are Christians at a time when followers of the religion are routinely harassed as unpatriotic, as Christianity is the faith of Britain and the United States, Japan's wartime foes. Furthermore, Shūhei experiences a crisis of faith when he is conscripted into the Japanese military and must become a kamikaze pilot, which is contrary to his religious beliefs, and when the Japanese hierarchy fails to condemn the nation's participation in wartime atrocities. The second related plot, whose importance to the narrative becomes apparent only at the novel's end, involves Jim, Sachiko and Shūhei's American childhood playmate who eventually participates in the atomic bombing of Nagasaki.

The third intertwined plot involves St. Maximilian Kolbe, who is first depicted during his years as a missionary in Asia. Kolbe and other Polish Franciscans are depicted as passing out copies of the "Knight of the Immaculata" and evangelizing passersby on the streets of Nagasaki in broken Japanese. Later, the novel depicts Kolbe's internment and later death at the Auschwitz concentration camp. There, Endō imagines the Franciscan's dialogues with an unbelieving character named Henryk.

Unsurprisingly, Henryk's encounter with Kolbe leads to a clash of world-views. The irreligious inmate tells the Franciscan:

Father, I don't believe in heaven. But I do believe in hell. This camp is hell.<sup>25</sup>

Kolbe responds to him:

Henryk, hell is a place where love has utterly died out. But love hasn't perished here yet.<sup>26</sup>

Henryk is shocked and offended, claiming it is impossible to believe that there could be any evidence of love in such a cold, depraved place as Auschwitz. Yet Kolbe's conviction remains unshaken; as tangible evidence of love in the

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25 S. Endō, *Sachiko*, trans. from the Japanese by V. C. Gessel, New York 2020, p. 127.

26 S. Endō, *Sachiko*, p. 127.

“death factory,” he says that the previous day he had seen one prisoner share half his ration of bread with a dying inmate. Henryk responded with incredulity.<sup>27</sup>

An unnamed inmate asks Kolbe about where God was in Auschwitz; the Franciscan replies:

[I]t seems to me that God has given to man something that can triumph over the black smoke from the gas chambers. [...] [T]he will to love.<sup>28</sup>

When the prisoner laughs at the notion that there can be love in a place of such profound evil and suffering, Kolbe responds:

If there is no love here [...]. [T]hen we must create love ourselves.<sup>29</sup>

Henryk could not forget these words, which he particularly disdained of:

Henryk spat on the ground, filling the spittle with a curse: *Love is bulls—t. Love can do nothing to rescue a man from starvation.*<sup>30</sup>

During his time in the camp, Henryk is depicted as cynical and primarily concerned about his own survival. While Kolbe’s words about love profoundly irritated him, after the friar’s death Henryk is haunted by them. The Auschwitz-based subplot of *Sachiko* ends with Henryk fighting an internal battle; he aggressively but unsuccessfully tries to drown out Kolbe’s words from his conscience. Ultimately, the atheistic character sees a weak, starving prisoner brutally beaten by a kapo. No longer able to ignore Kolbe’s witness, Henryk shares a piece of bread with the beaten prisoner. The Auschwitz narrative ends with an observation simple yet profound like a haiku:

This was the sole act of love that Henryk was able to perform. Still, he had carried out an act of love.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See S. Endō, *Sachiko*, p. 127.

<sup>28</sup> S. Endō, *Sachiko*, p. 118.

<sup>29</sup> S. Endō, *Sachiko*, p. 119.

<sup>30</sup> S. Endō, *Sachiko*, p. 123.

<sup>31</sup> S. Endō, *Sachiko*, p. 218.

Despite Henryk's previous imprecations, this small act of love did indeed save a man from starving, at least for a short period.

Thus, we see parallels between Endō's depiction of Christ and his presentation of Kolbe. Just as according to the Japanese writer Jesus' biggest "miracle" was not something supernatural (Endō does, however, believe in the miracles themselves; he does not take a naturalist, materialist view of Jesus, like Thomas Jefferson, as witnessed by his confession of faith in the Resurrection<sup>32</sup>), but bringing love to the physical and spiritual desert of the Holy Land. Similarly, Endō's Kolbe created the miracle of creating love in the moral desert of Auschwitz, a place more synonymous with human depravity than perhaps any other.

In his account of Jesus' life, Endō argues that:

His whole life embraced the simplicity of living only for love, and because he lived for love alone, in the eyes of his [*sic*] disciples he seemed to be ineffectual. His death was required before the disciples could raise the veil and see into what lay hidden behind the weakness.<sup>33</sup>

Here, we have a striking parallel to the Kolbe subplot in *Sachiko*. Just as the disciples are blind to Christ's message of love until His ultimate sacrifice, similarly Henryk is cynical about love in such a place of evil as Auschwitz until Kolbe's Christ-like, voluntary martyrdom. Yet despite his attempts to silence Kolbe's witness in his conscience, the scales ultimately fall off Henryk's eyes and he emulates his former interlocutor's act of love, albeit on a much more modest scale.

Another noteworthy character in *Sachiko* is Heinrich Martin, a fictional adjutant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, whose dilemmas echo those of Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov. Martin professes to be an unbeliever; however, he is haunted by pangs of guilt, thinking to himself that: "If there is a God... I suppose I will be punished by that God."<sup>34</sup> Here again the author cautions about the dangers of a lack of Christian love.

*Sachiko* is not the only work by Shūsaku Endō that deals with the Polish Franciscan saint. Kolbe is also the central motif of the short story *Japanese in*

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32 See: S. Endō, *A life of Jesus*, p. 176–178.

33 S. Endō, *A life of Jesus*, p. 178.

34 S. Endō, *Sachiko*, p. 190.

*Warsaw*, published in Endō’s short story collection *The final martyrs*. The story is set during the Cold War; while no specific date is given, we can assume it was before October 16, 1978, when Cardinal Karol Wojtyła of Krakow was elected pope, as Kolbe is described as “the Christian Father most revered by the Polish people.”<sup>35</sup>

The story follows a group of Japanese tourists visiting communist-era Warsaw and their guide, Shimizu. Endō depicts his compatriots in a damning way: materialistic, condescending, and marked by a sense of cultural superiority. Although some of the visitors are from Nagasaki, a city that, like Warsaw, experienced enormous destruction during World War II, they seem indifferent to the city’s tragic recent fate, ignoring Shimizu’s lectures on Warsaw’s and Poland’s recent history, instead scoffing at the communist country’s poverty and shabby infrastructure. When a Pole at a restaurant tells the tourists of the wartime sacrifice of St. Maximilian Kolbe, who is regularly invoked when the Poles learn that their guests are from the country where the martyr had once been on a mission, one of the Japanese scoffs: “What a horrid story!”<sup>36</sup> When one of the Poles recommends that they visit Auschwitz, one of the Japanese tourists, Tamura, who “spoke for all,” responds that “We’re not going. Warsaw has been more than enough.”<sup>37</sup> Shimizu, however, is different and does not “seem to feel a jot of intimacy of fondness towards his fellow countrymen.”<sup>38</sup>

A major theme in *Japanese in Warsaw* is prostitution, which Endō uses to depict the moral decay and spiritual aridity of his countrymen; when Shimizu explains the vibrancy of the Catholic Church in Poland despite an atheistic dictatorship, “not one of these Japanese sightseers had any interest in or curiosity about the commingling of communism and Christianity.”<sup>39</sup> When the Japanese tourists in the short story are disappointed by the fact that Warsaw lacks the charm of a Western European capital, like Paris, that survived World War II unscathed, by the absence of luxury Western goods like expensive perfumes, and by the poor infrastructure of the hotels, they decide to spend their time procuring the services of local prostitutes. Meanwhile, Shimizu’s use as

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35 S. Endō, *Japanese in Warsaw*, in: *The final martyrs*, trans. From the Japanese by V. C. Gessel, New York 1994, p. 106.

36 S. Endō, *Japanese in Warsaw*, p. 108.

37 S. Endō, *Japanese in Warsaw*, p. 108.

38 S. Endō, *Japanese in Warsaw*, p. 98.

39 S. Endō, *Japanese in Warsaw*, p. 105.

a “convenient tool” by the Japanese tourists and their ingratitude for his services is compared to prostitution; he is described as performing “pimp-like work.”<sup>40</sup>

The theme of prostitution takes on an unexpected turn, however, when one of the Japanese tourists, Imamiya of Nagasaki, goes to the cramped apartment of a Polish call girl. When Imamiya keeps hearing of Kolbe, he remembers seeing Polish missionaries in Nagasaki as a young man. Like the people of communist Warsaw, the poverty (in this case, voluntary poverty) of the Franciscans contrasts with relative Japanese prosperity:

Those men eat wretched food. [...] All they eat is cold rice and broth. And they sleep on a wooden plank with just a blanket over them.<sup>41</sup>

The young Imamiya, like other Japanese youths, is afraid of these bearded foreigners. Yet he recalls seeing a skinny, exhausted priest with glasses struggling to climb up a hill. He paused to wipe his glasses and said with a smile: “Konichiwa”.<sup>42</sup> This small act of friendliness had haunted Imamiya; when he sees an icon of Kolbe in the prostitute’s apartment, he immediately recognizes his face as that of the ascetic foreigner he had seen decades earlier. He asks the girl who this man is, and she confirms that indeed he saw Kolbe, the man all of Warsaw had been telling the Japanese tourists about.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, once more we have Endō’s notion of Kolbe as the personification of love. Here, the Japanese are depicted as loveless, taking an exploitative attitude to both impoverished Polish women and their tour guide, and callously indifferent to the wartime suffering of Poland. This is contrasted with the Polish people, embodied by Kolbe, who despite their hardship are more capable of love, exemplified by the Franciscan’s sacrifice.

One of the many Christian thinkers who have throughout the centuries grappled with theodicy was the Anglican writer Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963), himself a convert from atheism and likely the best-known Christian apologist of the twentieth century.<sup>44</sup> Lewis grappled with this philosophical problem in

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40 S. Endō, *Japanese in Warsaw*, p. 102.

41 S. Endō, *Japanese in Warsaw*, p. 109.

42 S. Endō, *Japanese in Warsaw*, p. 110. The correct English transliteration of this Japanese greeting is “konnichiwa”.

43 S. Endō, *Japanese in Warsaw*, p. 113.

44 Lewis’ intellectual and spiritual journey from faithlessness to belief is chronicled in his memoir; see: C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The shape of my early life*, New York 2017.

his book *The problem of pain*. In it, he argues that suffering is not good in itself; however, it can produce good in “the compassion aroused and the acts of mercy to which it leads.”<sup>45</sup> Using Lewis’ line of argumentation, without the great suffering unleashed by Nazi Germany, figures like St. Maximilian or Janusz Korczak could not have been able to give their inspiring sacrifice, and they would be best known by historians for their literary (and, in Korczak’s case, pedagogical) activities.

Whereas Lewis writes that suffering is not good in itself, Cardinal Robert Sarah, former Prefect of the Congregation (now Dicastery) for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, has stated that poverty does have value from a Christian point of view. Coming from the West African nation of Guinea, Cardinal Sarah knows extreme poverty, one of the most salient sources of suffering in today’s world. Whereas Africa did not experience the horrors of Auschwitz, as did Kolbe or Viktor Frankl, it is also an example of human misery resulting from iniquity, in this case the exploitative colonization of the continent by the European powers. Whereas Lewis’ and Sarah’s views on the value of poverty differ, their ultimate conclusions are quite similar. The cardinal stated that “[i]f in order to eat and care for himself, a man must turn to someone else, this necessarily results in a great enlargement of his heart.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, both authors agree that human suffering can have the beneficial consequence of leading to acts of charity.

Endō’s depiction of Kolbe is also reminiscent of that provided by Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Theresienstadt Ghetto as well as the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Dachau concentration camps. Like Sigmund Freud, Frankl was a pioneering Viennese Jewish psychologist. However, Frankl eschewed Freud’s cynical approach to religion; instead, he created logotherapy, a school of psychotherapy that emphasizes the patient’s search for meaning in the process of healing, one that appreciates religious faith.<sup>47</sup> In his best-known work, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, which is a concentration camp memoir ending with an outline of his innovative approach to psychotherapy, Frankl quotes Freud, who claimed that

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45 C. S. Lewis, *The problem of pain: How human suffering raises almost intolerable intellectual problems*, New York 1962, p. 110.

46 R. Sarah, N. Diat, *God or nothing: A conversation on faith*, trans. from the French by M. J. Miller, San Francisco 2015, p. 140.

47 See: V. Frankl, *Recollections: An autobiography*, trans. from the German by J. and J. Fabry, New York 2000.

when faced with hunger all humans act the same way. The father of psychoanalysis, Frankl writes, “[t]hank heaven [...] was spared knowing the concentration camps from the inside,” while his subjects “lay on a couch designed in the plush style of Victorian culture.”<sup>48</sup> Frankl continues to argue that “in the filth of Auschwitz” individuals’ true nature was revealed, and it became clear who was a “swine and saint.” While himself not a Christian and therefore not believing in the communion of saints, Frankl wrote that when studying the witness of people like St. Maximilian, whom the psychologist explicitly invokes, “you no longer need to hesitate to use the word ‘saints.’”<sup>49</sup> Thus, both Endō and Frankl presented Kolbe as someone who made love possible in the “hell” or “filth” of the *anus mundi*.<sup>50</sup>

While Henryk is a fictional character, St. Maximilian’s kindness in reality did give succor to many victims of war of all religious beliefs during the war. According to André Frossard, Kolbe’s biographer, for the several hundred Jewish refugees who were sheltered in the Niepokalanów monastery the Franciscan was “their last experience of goodness and fraternity on this earth.”<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, the twelve Auschwitz survivors, both Christians and Jews, who testified during Kolbe’s cause for canonization, were unanimous that the Franciscan was “unconcerned about his own fate, too concerned with others to be worried about himself, and seeing everywhere those more unhappy and more pitiful than himself.”<sup>52</sup> Upon learning that a fellow Auschwitz inmate, Jan Szegide-wicz, belonged to Poland’s tiny Tartar Muslim community, Kolbe consoled him with Islamic teachings.<sup>53</sup>

Kindness experienced from fellow inmates did not always inspire faith among concentration camp prisoners. Earlier in this article, the atheist Polish

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48 V. Frankl, *Man’s search for meaning*, trans. from the German by I. Lasch, Boston 2006, p. 153.

49 V. Frankl, *Man’s search for meaning*, p. 153.

50 This graphic but apt metaphor of Auschwitz (“the anus of the earth” in Latin) was coined by Johann Paul Kremer, a German war criminal and physician at Auschwitz. According to Nikolaus Wachsmann, Kremer’s diary reveals an obsession with scatological humor; however, this is a perfect depiction of the moral, physical, and sanitary conditions at the camp. *Anus mundi* also was the title of a memoir by Polish filmmaker Wiesław Kielar, part of the first transport of prisoners to Auschwitz (from Tarnów in 1940; his inmate number was 290). See: N. Wachsmann, *KL: A history of the Nazi concentration camps*, p. 338; W. Kielar, *Anus mundi: 1,500 days in Auschwitz/Birkenau*, trans. from the Polish by S. Flatauer, New York 1980.

51 A. Frossard, “Forget not love”, p. 165.

52 A. Frossard, “Forget not love”, p. 191.

53 Cf. R. Royal, *The catholic martyrs*, p. 209.

writer and musician Stanisław Grzebiuk's disagreements on God with Father Józef Szubert (reminiscent of the discussions between Henryk and St. Maximilian in *Sachiko*) were mentioned. Yet their friendship was genuine; it was not just based around the need for a conversation partner. The working-class Grzebiuk initially scoffed at the physical awkwardness of the intellectual Szubert, unused to manual labor. Yet the two quickly forged a bond and helped one another: Grzebiuk helped the priest to avoid a transport to Dachau. Meanwhile, after the latter was released from Mauthausen-Gusen, he assured Grzebiuk that he would remember and help him. Having heard similar lovely but empty assurances from other fellow inmates, Grzebiuk laughed at the priest's words. Yet, much to his surprise, Szubert regularly sent packages with money, food, clothes, and even a mandolin to his musically inclined friend; he also sent money to Grzebiuk's mother and sister each month. Grzebiuk knew these gestures were sincere and appreciated them.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, Bronisław Horowitz-Karakulska, a survivor of the Krakow Ghetto and the KL Plaszow concentration camp, owed her life to the kindness of a fellow human being, the German industrialist Oskar Schindler who saved more than a thousand Cracovian Jews. Echoing Marek Edelman, Horowitz-Karakulska told Polish journalist Magda Huzarska-Szumiec that in the concentration camps many people asked God where He was when their children were shot, yet “He was silent.” Therefore, she was incapable of believing.<sup>55</sup>

Scripture reminds us that faith is a grace (Ephesians 2:8), and it may be difficult for many who have experienced extreme hardship to feel that grace. And yet despite Grzebiuk's and Horowitz-Karakulska's faithlessness, the kindness of their benefactors did move them, much like it moved Endō's Henryk, and restored their faith in their fellow humans. Grzebiuk's biographer, Bartosz Janiszewski, noted that the bard's irreligiousness and anti-clericalism were deeply rooted. In the late 1930s Grzebiuk worked in a Warsaw factory that manufactured bells for streetcars and trains. There, his foreman constantly shared Masonic and communist literature with the future memoirist, which had

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54 See S. Grzebiuk, *Pięć lat kacetu*, s. 128–130.

55 See M. Huzarska-Szumiec, *Niusia z Listy Schindlera. Historia ocalenia*, Warszawa 2024, s. 192 (translation mine).

a tremendous impact.<sup>56</sup> And yet Janiszewski notes that although Szubert failed in restoring Grzesiuk's faith in God, he helped bring back his faith in man.<sup>57</sup>

Although Bronisława Horowitz-Karakulska was raised in a Jewish home, her gratitude to Schindler is reminiscent of the Catholic veneration of the saints. She told Magda Huzarska-Szumiec:

I've completely lost my faith. This isn't easy, because I don't have anyone to pray to. But I still pray, nevertheless. [...] I also pray to Oskar Schindler. I have a portrait of Mr. Schindler, which hangs above my bed. I like to look at him. I like his facial features. They calm me to this day. When my pelvis broke, I lay all the time and couldn't move, but I felt his presence above me. It was as if I had fallen into a river and someone had pulled me out before I drowned. To me, Mr. Schindler is god [lowercase in the original].<sup>58</sup>

Thus, while Grzesiuk and Horowitz-Karakulska lost their faith after the traumatic violence they suffered at the hands of Nazi Germany, they experienced the love that was at the core of Shūsaku Endō's Christianity.

## Conclusion

One of the most honest literary treatments of St. Maximilian Kolbe was offered by the Polish writer Jan Józef Szczepański. In his essay *Święty* ("The Saint"), this author writes that Kolbe's highly conservative view of Catholicism clashed with his own progressive, rationalist worldview; Szczepański confesses that if he were to meet Kolbe personally, he would "simply dislike him a priori."<sup>59</sup> Yet Szczepański's treatise is by no means an attack on the Franciscan saint. While baffled by the latter's approach to religion, Szczepański concedes that Kolbe performed "a deed that transcended the contradictions of defective human cognition, a deed that confirmed the greatest values, the greatest dignity of humanity."<sup>60</sup>

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56 See B. Janiszewski, *Grzesiuk. Król życia*, Warszawa 2017, s. 111–114.

57 See B. Janiszewski, *Grzesiuk. Król życia*, s. 170.

58 M. Huzarska-Szumiec, *Niusia z Listy Schindlera*, s. 192.

59 J.J. Szczepański, *Święty*, w: *Przed nieznanym trybunałem*, Kraków 1997, s. 36.

60 J.J. Szczepański, *Święty*, s. 46.

If according to Scripture God is love (1 John 4:8.16), then God was present in the acts of love present amidst the most horrifying acts of violence by the Third Reich. St. Maximilian Kolbe’s radical act of love was one dramatic example. Shūsaku Endō, stricken by many illnesses throughout his life, knew suffering, and through his vision of Catholicism, influenced by his cultural heritage of Japanese Buddhism, offered a response to the problem of theodicy through his depictions of St. Maximilian. Whether one shares Kolbe’s worldview or not, his act of sacrifice has impressed many and often provoked them to do acts of good. While Henryk in *Sachiko* was a fictional character, his being haunted by Kolbe’s sacrifice was representative of many who have reflected on the evils of the past century.

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