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Silence

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Silence

Abstract

This is a film review of *Silence* (2016), directed by Martin Scorsese.

Keywords

Japan, Christianity, Monasticism

Given the title of the film, one would expect sound to be an important item in the toolbox for Martin Scorsese in the making of *Silence*. However, I was surprised at how this tool was utilized. It would have been easy to emphasize the silence that the main character, Rodrigues (Andrew Garfield), experiences which then leads him to experience spiritual turmoil. Instead, Scorsese emphasizes constant ambient sound. The only moments of true silence in *Silence* are during its opening title and during its climax. This makes silence all the more impactful, and by the time it breaks in at the climax, the message it bears makes a statement, not only about the experience of faith but also its object.

The source book by Shusaku Endo is historical fiction, basing itself on the 1638 order by the Tokugawa shogunate to prohibit Christianity and expel foreigners from Japan. The film begins with Rodrigues and his *confrere* Garupe, learning that their mentor, Ferreira (Liam Neeson), has apostatized under Japanese persecution: news which only gives them a greater sense of urgency. They are paired with a guide, a drunk Japanese expatriate named Kichijiro. At first he denies being Christian, but he soon reveals himself as a convert, and he successfully leads the priests to a small fishing village full of Christians eager for the priests' services.

Scorsese places a strong emphasis here on the sacramental nature of these hidden Christians' faith. But as Rodrigues distributes various trinkets of Christianity to the villagers, even undoing his rosary and giving out individual beads, he notes with an air of disapproval that he thinks the people value signs of faith more than faith itself. Yet Scorsese sympathetically portrays the villagers with great resolve that contrasts with Rodrigues's sentiment. A village leader, Mokichi, asks Rodrigues before being seized by officials who uncover the presence of Christianity in the village, "My love for God is strong. Is that the same as faith?" The villagers' desire and reverence for the tokens they receive from the priest and their enthusiasm for the ritual

sacraments demonstrate a true spiritual ardor that anchors their faith in a way that seems to confound Rodrigues. But his own predilection to understand faith as a heroic commitment to imitate Christ, reflected in his prayers to undergo trials of suffering for his faith, prevents him from truly accepting this form of faith as humble love.

Yet Rodrigues's pity shows the start of change in his understanding. He urges Mokichi to make the demanded show of apostasy. The sign of apostasy typically demanded by the authorities is to trample on a *fumie*, a bronze plaque imprinted with Christian imagery. Mokichi and the other captives make the show of trampling, but prove unable to pass a follow-up verification—spitting on a crucifix. With the spiritual power of the tokens of faith clearly established by Scorsese, the anguish of their refusal hits poignantly. And Rodrigues's creeping sense of doubt is expressed when, as Mokichi and two other villagers are hung to die on crosses in the ocean surf, he narrates, "God heard their prayers but did he hear their screams? How can I explain God's silence to them?"

After the suppression in the village, Rodrigues and Garupe split up, the better to serve the remaining Christians and the better their odds at one of them finding reliable news of Ferreira. The story remains with Rodrigues, however, who ends up travelling with Kichijiro, who betrays Rodrigues to the officials, causing him to be arrested and taken prisoner in Nagasaki.

Rodrigues himself identifies Kichijiro as a Judas figure, and the authorities even toss a bag of coins at him as payment for his betrayal (cf. Matthew 26:15). But Rodrigues's narration just before the betrayal raises a central question. He asks if, when Jesus said to Judas, "What you do, do quickly," he was speaking out of anger or love. He then sees his own face reflected in a stream superimposed with an image of Christ's face from El Greco's "St. Veronica with the Holy Shroud." It is an astute choice for the film. The face is strikingly neutral and stares

outward like a traditional icon. It confronts the observer with the question of who he or she takes Christ to be. And in this moment of confusion, where his prior image of Christ as triumphant hero becomes muddled with his sense of pity for the weakness of Kichijiro and compassion for the suffering of the Japanese Christians, Rodrigues laughs hysterically just before being startled by his arriving captors.

During Rodrigues's imprisonment in Nagasaki, this confusion about his own faith and his own understanding of Christ reach their final test. The authorities have learned that torturing the priests only plays into their arrogance as imitators of a strong and triumphant Jesus. Instead, they torture the Christian peasants, even ones who have apostatized. In so doing, they can get priests to apostatize and portray a powerful sign against Christianity, aiding in the ideological rooting out of the faith that they ultimately want to accomplish. In addition, his captors confront Rodrigues with Ferreira, who has indeed apostatized and taken up a life with a Japanese wife. Ferreira chastises Rodrigues for his pride, urging him to apostatize because it is what Christ himself would have done. Ferreira's commentary serves to reflect back to Rodrigues things he has been struggling with throughout the film. And while he renounces Ferreira for his apostasy, he eventually does follow the same path.

This climactic scene of Rodrigues trampling the *fumie* makes clear that *Silence* is as much about the object of Christian faith as it is the experience of that faith. As ambient and live sound are washed out entirely, Rodrigues hears the voice of Christ telling him to trample, that it was to be trampled upon that Christ came into the world. The object of faith becomes a Christ who is a hero of pity, who takes up the weakness and suffering of humankind as his cross, rather than a hero of triumphant resolve. The Jesus of *Silence* is one of utter kenosis, and one who in the mercy of that kenosis radically sympathizes with the weakness, and frailty, of human beings,

even ones like Judas and Kichijiro. And the silence of this scene, which pierces dramatically because of the way Scorsese has insistently maintained a hum of natural and, when needed, artificial sound throughout the film, demonstrates the emptying of Rodrigues's own pride. Only in that silence is Rodrigues able to hear the voice of the compassionate Christ calling him to understand a faith of weakness.¹

Scorsese expertly gives life to these spiritual and internal tensions that drive the heart of the narrative, making the film's 161 minutes move rather propulsively. The frequent editing strategy that cuts between scenes of suffering and those watching it is perhaps the greatest aid to that effort, but Scorsese's ability to evoke sympathy and understanding for all the characters involved also creates engagement that helps the film's proceeding remain economical. The film is no doubt demanding, and requires an open predisposition, but the respect and richness with which it treats its themes offer great reward.

¹ This sort of Christology was key for Endo's attempts to reconcile Christianity with his Japanese cultural idiom. See his *A Life of Jesus* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1973). See also Fumitaka Matsuoka, "The Church in the World: The Christology of Shusaku Endo," *Theology Today* 39 (1982): 294-299.