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Silence: A Review Essay



by Josh Matthews

Silence, Martin Scorsese's new movie, might be for another time and place. It opens with ambient nature sounds and then, for thirty seconds, is silent. During that time, I heard the bass rumbling in the theater next door, and my friend's jowls—munch, munch, crunch!—chomping on popcorn. *Silence* is best experienced in a place allowing for isolated contemplation, but it is unlikely that such places exist anywhere that films can be shown. The bass in the theater next door never stopped, so at my showing, *Silence*—a movie with scarcely a note of music in it—had an unwanted soundtrack.

The movie features Portuguese missionaries in 17th-century Japan, hardly a popular topic at the cinema today. Nearly everyone in the film is tortured for their Catholic faith, either persecuted or actually tortured. Scorsese dedicates the film to “Japanese Christians and their pastors,” a move that probably did not help his chances at awards

nominations or box office success. As of this writing, *Silence* is tanking at theaters, unwanted by viewers and disparaged by critics. One theater owner told me that the movie is too “boring” to show in his theater; he watched only its first hour before shutting it off.

That is *his* problem. He missed a fine meditation on agony and the seeming impossibility of missionization. Scorsese has made his most “Christian” movie here, at least overtly Christian. *Silence* says in a hundred creative ways that God is Not Dead, though not, thankfully, in the title.

Based on a 1966 novel by Shūsaku Endō, a Japanese Catholic, the story of *Silence* focuses on Portuguese Jesuits and their attempt to missionize the country. One of those Jesuits, Father Ferreira (Liam Neeson), has reportedly “apostatized,” or renounced his faith. [That the movie does not define “apostatize” through dialogue for a modern audience is an example of its being either too stubborn or too courageous, or both.] Two of Ferreira's younger Jesuit students, Sebastião Rodrigues (Andrew Garfield) and Francisco Garrpe (Adam Driver), travel to Japan to track him down.

But when Rodrigues and Garrpe sneak into Japan, they face the prospect of imprisonment and death. Japan has cut off all Christian missionary efforts. The warlords, believing that Christianity is antithetical to Japanese culture, want to extricate it. They face a competition in power from four European nations. Japanese Christians, already too heavily taxed, are thus persecuted and tortured. In spite of the danger and their search for Ferreira, the priests also must pastor the Japanese Christians, who are desperate for a priest. Their devotion to their faith seems exceptional, in spite of their terrible poverty.

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All except for Kichijiro, a Japanese man and Judas-figure who at times guides Father Rodrigues. When we first meet Kichijiro, he looks like a drunk, dirty dog, which signals to the priests that he cannot be Christian. Rodrigues thinks that Kichijiro is a hypocrite, one day asking for absolution, another day betraying his faith and betraying other Christians. This behavior becomes a stumbling-block. While Kichijiro might be a Judas, Rodrigues is—as another Japanese calls him—“arrogant.” He believes that, unlike Kichijiro and Ferreira, he would never apostatize. No, he is much too faithful for that, just like the greatest of saints, including the apostle Peter. If you can’t hear the cock crow three times in the soundtrack when Rodrigues is faced with the challenge of apostatizing, you will know that it is there anyway.

The story hints at a heart-of-darkness motif, the journey of the priests from the outer edges to the interior, from the edge of Japan to its black center in Nagasaki. That motif, though, is buried in favor of long scenes of imprisonment. The second half of the movie depicts the extreme measures and the enormous use of resources that the state takes to reconvert an ordinary man. In this case, the Japanese warlords want the most important Christians, the priests, to deny Christianity by stepping on sacred Christian images. If they do not step on those images, then other Christians will be tortured slowly. Horrors ensue when the priests refuse the state’s demands.

There are long scenes of agony in which priests and Japanese Christians consider whether to step on these sacred images. Actually, it is always just one image at a time. None of these images, to mod-

ern eyes, will probably seem important—not in a world, as Scorsese himself has said, where an endless barrage of images everywhere means that there are no special images. I had a hard time identifying with the central problem myself: why not just step on one simple picture and get the torture over with?

And yet, what if the Japanese warlords had asked modern Christians to step on and crush their smartphones, those gushing fountains of endless images? The dilemma of the priests might be far more relatable than it at first appears.

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Silence is a different Scorsese movie in many ways, as I’ve tried to indicate, although the master’s techniques are all on great display. His love of Japanese cinema, especially *Ugetsu* and many of Akira

Kurosawa’s movies, is wonderfully obvious. He is too faithful to the novel itself, though. Endo’s novel includes four different kinds of documents—letters, stories, logbooks, accounting books. Scorsese has tried to ape too much of the discourse of the logbook, written by a minor Dutch merchant character, by including an out-of-nowhere voiceover by that Dutchman near the end. The last ten minutes of *Silence*, unlike its first 150 minutes, move quickly through time via those voiceovers. For that reason alone, the five hours it takes to read the novel might be better spent than the three hours watching this movie.

However, Scorsese has offered us creative, and occasionally artistically excellent, ways of depicting God in the silence. Father Rodrigues thinks that the absence of sound is God’s refusal to talk to him. He believes, then, that there are parts of nature where his God is not. He learns otherwise.