

Necessary Reflections on Martin Scorsese’s “Silence”: Religious Violence in the Seventeenth Century, as Seen from Japan.¹

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1. “Silence” in the Times of Colonialism and Inquisition

Martin Scorsese’s movie “Silence” shows the arrival of two Jesuit priests in Japan (1639) and the ensuing struggles of Japanese Christian converts who defied the order to the ruling Shogun. Although the imagery of Scorsese’s movie is captivating, the story itself is surprisingly naive in neglecting the role of Jesuit mission in the Spanish colonization of the Pacific realm. This colonization brought with it forced conversions and executions of non-Christians, both forms of religious violence that had their roots in the recent history of Europe.

By 1639, the Shogun and his ministers were by no means uninformed about the methods and aims of colonial missions in the Americas and the Pacific realm. They were also aware of the brutal religious war that was turning Central Europe into a slaughterhouse: The Thirty Year’s War (1618–1648) raged in full fury, with no sign of abating. Thousands were tortured and burned in the mutual persecution of Catholics and Protestants. Furthermore, the Shogunate was well informed that the Philippines, Japan’s neighbor in the Pacific, had been brought under complete control by Spanish troops (1571), working hand in hand with Catholic missionaries. These events left the Shogunate with no illusions about what the Spanish crown had in mind for them.

Long before 1639, the first Christian missionaries had arrived in Japan in 1547. They operated freely and made converts of all walks of life, from simple rice farmers to local lords (*daimyo*). In Europe of the same time, one year after the death of Martin Luther (1438–1546), armed conflicts between Protestants and Catholics were already escalating and Catholicism was forcibly suppressed in several towns near the North Sea. All over Europe, missionaries of a foreign creed would find themselves in the dungeon or on the pyre. In Japan, too, Christian Daimyos forced their subjects to renounce their old faith and convert to Christianity. Although the historical records are scant, this surely happened with the approval of foreign missionaries. Religious persecution did not only target those Japanese who still venerated the local deities and Buddhist saints: In the decades between the onset of Christian mission and Japan and its prohibition, Protestant and Catholic missionaries competed for the favor of local Daimyos and were highly active in restraining each other’s activities.

In the meantime, the colonization of the Philippines was progressing. In 1543, even before the islands were brought under Spanish control, they were named after the ruling Spanish king, Phillip II (1527–1598). The Spanish crown then launched a heavy-handed campaign in 1565, and the last local resistance fell in 1571. Spanish ships, carrying

¹ Quote as Achim Bayer, “Necessary Reflections on Martin Scorsese’s ‘Silence’: Religious Violence in the Seventeenth Century, as Seen from Japan,” Kanazawa: Achim Bayer, 2017.

soldiers, canons, and missionaries, frequently passed Japan. Inside Japan, after about forty years of unhindered missionary activity, the first edicts against Christian mission were devised in about 1587. Although ancient Japan is often depicted as a “forbidden country”, secluded from the outside world, the Tokugawa Shogunate had established the strict seclusion of the country only by 1639. To the foreign visitor arriving in 1639, the isolation of Japan may have appeared as an age-old tradition. In fact, it was completely new.

2. The “Silence” of God in the Face of Suffering

Quite different from the mere historical facts, the title of the movie, “Silence” (Japanese “Chinmoku”) hints at a spiritual question, namely the very fundamental question whether or not a personal god presides over the fate of humanity. If He does, why is He silent in the face of cruelty, such as the Shogunate used to suppress Christian mission? Scorsese’s movie is an adaptation of a novel by the Japanese Catholic author S. Endo (1923–1996), published in 1966. For the author of “Silence”, the question of God’s silence underlies all the gruesome acts that Scorsese has now visualized so drastically.

Much of “Silence” revolves around a practice used by the Shogunate in order to persecute Japanese converts: Those who were suspected to be Christians were forced to trample on an image of Jesus Christ, and those who refused, put to torture and death, resembling the brutal trials of the Inquisition. It is in the face of these trials that Father Rodrigues, the main character of the novel, ponders God’s silence. Captured by Japanese officials, Rodrigues is witness one trial after the other, and told that he can save all these lives if he himself tramples on the cross. After much loss of life, Rodrigues finally hears the voice of Jesus, telling him: “You may trample. It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world.”

Dramaturgically, this solution comes at the right time in the flow of the narrative. Philosophically, it is much too simple as to answer the fundamental question of “Silence”: If trampling on the cross is so unproblematic, why did God not reveal this earlier, before thousands had been tortured and killed? That Endo provides such an easy answer seems like a concession to the hopeful reader, a *deus ex machina* who saves the situation in a rather kitschy way. It hardly does anything to answer the more fundamental question of theodicy, the question why there is suffering the presence of an (almost) almighty God. Everything speaks against the assumption that this solution satisfied Endo himself, and the title of the novel, Silence, seems to surmount the apex of the plot.

Although Endo was raised a Roman Catholic, there was probably some development in the way he personally answered the question of God’s silence. According to a newspaper article that appeared in the Japan Times, Endo “in his late works, [moved] beyond Christianity and [explored] Buddhism.” Then, in “one of his final works, the 1993 novel ‘Deep River’, about a group of Japanese tourists in India, [Endo shifted] toward a pantheistic view of life.”²

² <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2015/09/12/books/jesus-christ-nobel-prize-shusaku-endo/>.

Endo was just as deeply concerned about human suffering as he was well-informed about torture and executions under the Shogunate. Therefore, it is quite remarkable that he should adopt a view of “pantheism”. If pantheism means that “everything (*pan*)” is “God (or several Gods, *theo-*)”, this would imply that even torture and executions are directly a manifestation of God. God would show himself in the persecution of the Shogunate, which we see in “Silence”, just as much as in the persecution of the Inquisition (which we do not see in “Silence”).

Although the details of Endo’s personal development cannot be traced here, it is worth noting that “pantheism” in fact became a major spiritual current in 17th-century Europe, where many people struggled with God’s silence in the face of the Catholic–Protestant wars. Therefore, while “Silence” deals with events in Japan, at the eastern limits of the Roman Catholic influence sphere, it might be worthwhile to relate these events with what was going on at its northern limits at the same time.

In Europe, the Jesuit order had been founded as a direct response to the Reformation. During the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), Scandinavian and Northern European states strove for independence from the Roman Catholic church, trying to liberate themselves from a system in which, for example, royal marriage alliances still had to be approved by the Vatican. By 1639, the Thirty Years’ War had turned much of Central Europe into a wasteland. When the war ended in 1648, eight million people had died due to starvation, torture, gruesome executions and major battles between the Catholic and Protestant forces.

3. Pan-Naturalism as a Response to Religious Violence: Spinoza

In this climate, the philosopher Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677) developed a new and radical form of pantheism. According to Spinoza, everything that occurs in the world is a manifestation of “God or Nature” (*deus sive natura*). Since everything, without exception, is just the same as this “God/Nature”, there can be nothing bad or evil in it, at least not in an absolute sense. Spinoza was living in Holland, his Jewish family having just escaped the inquisition in Portugal, but even in this new liberal environment, Spinoza was widely vilified, and there was even an attempt to murder him.

To many of Spinoza’s contemporaries, the idea that the recent carnage was a manifestation of God seemed outrageous. Furthermore, some of his critics saw his ideas either as leading to atheism and the word “God” in his peculiar phrase “God or Nature” was considered merely a concession to Protestant censorship in Holland. At the very least, Spinoza’s pantheism (or, pan-naturalism) would lead people away from the official churches, and it would lead them into moral irresponsibility. If everything in the world is ultimately “God or Nature”, there is no need to strive for good or to avoid evil.

On the other hand, in Spinoza’s time, it was probably clear to many that a strict distinction between good and evil was not a simple solution to the struggles of humanity: During the Thirty Years’ War, both Protestants and Catholics had declared themselves to be good and the others to be associated with the ultimate evil. The other side would serve the devil, the Catholics through pagan elements in their worship, the Protestants by disavowing the Pope, God’s representative on earth.

Spinoza's view that the world is essentially good would allow a more benevolent view on the Catholic–Protestant conflicts. It could reveal legitimate interests behind the actions of each party, a good basis for a negotiation in which these interests were met. On the other hand, Spinoza's critics were surely right in so far as "Spinozism" *can* be used in order to justify any kind of violence and social injustice as being just "God or nature". It is not an easy, foolproof solution to all questions of mankind, and Spinoza never claimed it was.

The movie "Silence" mostly depicts Jesuit mission in seventeenth-century Japan in simple terms of good and evil, the pious against the brutish. Nonetheless, it is rarely possible to understand history as long as the categories of good and evil must be served: It is probably not "great" that Charles the Great (Charlemagne, 748–814) threatened the Saxons with complete genocide should they not convert to Christianity. It is probably not great that he executed 4000 Saxons at Verden. Still, it is equally true that he reduced tribal warfare and formed the Frankish empire which could halt the Islamic conquerors of Spain. Equally, the Inquisition, as evil as it may seem, can only be understood against the backdrop of the Islamic occupation of Spain. Whether we like it or not, this the way history unfolded, and when we go back the next step, the Islamic forces that invaded Spain in 711 surely had convincing reasons for considering themselves good, fighting against evil. Spinoza famously held that, "there is nothing in Nature that can be attributed to evil" (*nihil in natura fit quod ipsius vitio possit tribui*). In the history of religion, power, and violence, an unbiased look on the motives of the perpetrators of violence will, more often than not, confirm that, "knowing a man well never leads to hate and almost always leads to love" (John Steinbeck).

History unfolds not as an occasional descent of good or evil upon this world, but as a chain of events that dynamically depend upon each other. Spinoza's view allowed for a detached and benevolent view on this great miracle of existence, however cruel it might manifest itself. It allowed for hope at a point when many had lost hope in the institutional churches. It enabled thinkers of the time to step out of the hamster wheel in order to see what could be done on a higher level. In other words, leaving the categories of good and evil aside for a moment allowed for more freedom of thought. It allowed for a judgment that came much closer to the ideal of an informed free will, often considered the prerequisite for truly good and evil actions.

4. Pantheism as a Response to Religious Violence: Endo

As far as Endo is concerned, it seems as if writing "Silence" (1966) did not provide him with a sufficient answer to God's silence about evil. When "pantheism" appears as an underlying theme in his one of his final novels (*Deep River*, 1993), it is certainly not an accident that he tells the story of Japanese tourists visiting India, the homeland of Buddhism: In the eighth century, an elaborate doctrine similar to Spinoza's pantheism (or, pan-naturalism) had been introduced to Japan from India. According to the Indian Buddhist text "Flower Ornament" (Japanese: *Kegon-kyo*), the whole world is just a manifestation of an universal Buddha. Everything that can be seen is identical to the Buddha's body, all thoughts are his mind, all sounds his speech. The world unfolds as a play of cause and effect, a process called "dependent origination" (*en-gi* in Japanese).

The introduction of the “Flower Ornament” doctrines to Japan (8th century) came along with a unification of tribal territories under a central government, quite similar to the later unification of Central Europe under Charlemagne. In Japan, there was nonetheless no need to abandon the local gods of pre-Buddhist tribal territories. All local gods could be declared individual manifestations of the universal Buddha, a Buddha who was, on a higher level, not even an individual person.

As in the case of Spinozism, the pantheism of the “Flower Ornament” was no simple guarantee for peace and prosperity: Japanese history has had its fair share of ups and downs, of benevolence and violence. Still, the introduction of “Flower Ornament” doctrines was an important step in the development of Japan into a country that could eventually withstand Spanish colonialism.

5. Conclusions

Again, looking at the persecution of Christianity in 17th-century Japan, who is good, who is evil, at a time that non-believers are slaughtered in the Philippines, in Latin America and Europe? A pan-naturalist view on history allows us to see even those acts of cruelty without the need for an absolute distinction between good and evil. Rather than asking the childish question of who is good and who is evil, the human species has hopefully grown up to ask the realistic question how violent or benevolent human society can be, or should be.

Endo published *Deep River* in 1993, when he was seventy years old and not in good health. He would pass away three years later. The novel relates how the ashes of deceased Hindus are strewn into the *Deep River* Ganges. A former Catholic priest from Japan, excommunicated for his pantheist beliefs, lives in India and helps bringing corpses to the cremation grounds on the river banks. For Endo, the deep river was probably not still.

It has been said that all is well that ends well. By the 1960s, Jesuit priests such as Hugo Enomiya-Lasalle were among the most influential teachers of Zen Buddhism in the West, propagating a veritable sense of respect between Buddhism and Christianity. Nonetheless, in reality, history never ends. Scorsese’s recent movie seems like a lapse back into a time of religious self-righteousness and ignorance about the Christian violence of the seventeenth century. The movie’s silence about religious violence in Europe and its colonies is disturbing.