Japan's Unknown Christian History: A Review of 'Silence'

Former Probe staffer Dr. Patrick Zukeran reviews Silence, *the book by Shusaku Endo and the movie directed by Martin Scorsese, which look at the little-known Christian history of Japan.*

Introduction: Historical Background

The novel *Silence,* written by Shusaku Endo, has been made into a movie directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Liam Neeson and Andrew Garfield. This historical fiction provides a glimpse into the little known Christian history of Japan. Few are aware that Japan has a rich Christian history that dates back over four centuries.

The first Christian missionary from Europe was Francis Xavier, who arrived in Japan in 1549. The Japanese embraced the message of Christ and for half a century Christianity flourished in Japan. By 1587, it is estimated that there were nearly 200,000 Christians in Japan. In 1597, it is estimated that approximately 300,000 Japanese had become Christian, 1.6% of the population.{1}

The situation changed dramatically in 1587 under the rule of the Shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi. He grew concerned about the growing influence of Christianity and viewed it as a threat to his power. He gave an edict outlawing Christianity in Japan. In 1597 the first 26 Christians were arrested in Kyoto and marched 600 miles to Nagasaki, the center of Christianity in Japan. There they were tortured and later crucified. This began the Christian persecution in Japan.

Following Hideyoshi came the reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate

(1603-1867), which lasted over 250 years. Under the Tokugawa rule one of the fiercest Christian persecutions occurred in Church history. Church historians estimate that between 300,000 and 500,000 Christians died during this time.

The Tokugawa Shoguns realized that killing the Christians did not diminish the growth of Christianity in Japan. The Shogun eventually devised a more sinister and effective way of thwarting the spread of Christianity. Instead of quickly executing Christians, it was more effective to torture the Christians and coerce them to renounce their faith. After committing apostasy, the apostate would be paraded throughout Japan and have them persuade fellow Christians to abandon their faith. This proved more effective in discouraging people from becoming Christians. Christians who apostatized were known as “korobi” or fallen Christians. Priests who apostatized were the most valuable in this endeavor.

To induce Christians to renounce their faith, the Shogun devised some of the most heinous forms of torture that he unleashed on the Christians. Christian men, women, and children were slowly burned at the stake, boiled in hot springs, thrown into frozen lakes and brutalized in various ways. One of the most feared methods was the pit. In this technique, people were hung upside down and their head was placed in a covered pit filled with sewage. The torturers would cut a slit behind the ears or across the forehead so the blood rush would not kill the person but prolong the agony for days.

The persecution proved to be very effective. In 1612 there were an estimated 300,000 Christians. In 1625 it is estimated that there were less than half that number. For the next 250 years the Japanese Christians were forced to worship secretly and were known as the “kakure” or hidden Christians.

This is the historical setting for the movie *Silence* which

takes place in 1639 during the height of the Christian persecution in Japan. Two Jesuit priests from Portugal, Father Sebastião Rodrigues and Father Francisco Garrpe, secretly enter Japan in search of their mentor Father Cristóvão Ferreira (Neeson) who is purported to have apostatized. Their goal is to find Ferreira and minister to the Japanese Christians who are without priests and thus without true spiritual guidance.

The priests arrive in Japan to find that the Christians live a very arduous life. The movie does an excellent job in revealing the poverty of the Christian communities who are forced to retreat to remote areas. The audience also feels the anxiety and fear that constantly looms over the Christian villages. The priests spend their days in hiding and in the evenings they minister to the community. However, the priests are discovered and eventually captured.

Silence vividly portrays graphically the brutal torture the Japanese Christians suffered at the hands of the daimyos. There are heart-wrenching scenes that depict the way fathers, mothers, and children were inhumanely tortured before they were executed. In many church history books we read of the glorious death of the Christian martyrs. However, this is not the case in the novel or the movie. In the book *Silence,* Susaku Endo wrote,

> I had long read about the martyrdom in the lives of the saints – how the souls of the martyrs had gone home to Heaven, how they had been filled with glory in Paradise, how the angels had blown trumpets. This was the splendid martyrdom I had often seen in my dreams. But the martyrdom of the Japanese Christians I now describe to you was no such glorious thing. What a miserable and painful business it was.{2}

Indeed, the horror of martyrdom is captured in the movie. The agonizing deaths of the Christians are not inspiring or

glorious but dreadful to watch.

The priests are coerced to apostatize while in prison. The priests do not fear their own death but they cannot bear to watch the suffering of others. Father Garrpe dies attempting to rescue Christians tossed into the ocean. Rodrigues is now the last missionary in Japan. Finally, the dreaded but sought-for meeting occurs. He meets his mentor Father Ferreira who has apostatized and now goes by his Japanese name Sawano Chuan. He is married and spends his days translating European writings for the Japanese and persuading Christians to abandon their faith in Christ. He encourages Rodrigues to save his life and his fellow believers by apostatizing. Rodrigues refuses and expresses his heartfelt disappointment at Ferreira. Rodrigues courageously resists but eventually he is unable to endure the suffering of his fellow Christians hanging in the pit. Worn down by the cruelty, he eventually steps on the portrait of Jesus, renouncing his faith in Christ. Knowing the Catholic Church cannot forgive him, Rodrigues wonders if Jesus will forgive him for what he has done. This becomes his agonizing struggle for the rest of his life.

The Silence of God

The main question that is asked throughout the movie is, Where is God? How can He let His people suffer and die like this? Why does He remain silent and not answer the cries of His people? The priests Garrpe and Rodrigues wrestle with that question throughout the movie and we are drawn into their struggle. This is the question people in every age ask in the midst of their suffering.

Each year I lead the Japan Christian Martyrs Tour where I take the group along the path of the Martyrs. We see the sites and hear the stories where thousands of Japanese Christians were brutally tortured and executed. At those times, even four centuries later, we still ask, “Where was God? Why was He

silent? How could He allow the violent massacre of His people in Japan?”

In the final moments of the movie, Rodrigues, now known as the Apostate Paul wrestles with God on this lifelong struggle. He reflects on his act of apostasy, stepping on the image of Christ but instead of anger in the eyes of Christ, he saw eyes of understanding, grace and love. He states,

> Even now that face is looking at me with eyes of pity from the plaque rubbed by many feet. “Trample!” said those compassionate eyes. “Trample! Your foot suffers in pain; it must suffer like all the feet that have stepped on this plaque. But that pain alone is enough. I understand your pain and your suffering. It is for that reason I am here.”

“Lord, I resented your silence,” states Rodrigues. Jesus replies, “I was not silent. I suffered beside you.”

Despite his act of apostasy, Rodrigues in the end finds forgiveness from a Christ who understands his situation and extends grace to him. He realizes Christ was not silent but with him though his suffering and remained with him even in his final days. He seems to realize the love of Christ is more powerful and faithful than he has ever known.

This is one of the unique aspects of *Silence*. Endo and Scorsese want us to see through the eyes of the “korobe” Christian. We applaud those who died never renouncing their faith in Christ and quickly condemn those who publicly renounced their faith in Christ. However, I believe Shusaku Endo through his novel tells us, “Not so fast!”

Those who apostatized struggled and suffered greatly too. I believe Endo wants us to see through the eyes of Rodrigues and ask ourselves the question, “Could we endure watching our wives, children and loved ones receiving such vicious treatment for days without end?” “Would we remain steadfast or would we renounce Christ to save our loved ones from such an

unbearable fate?" "Would Christ condemn us for renouncing Him to save our loved ones or would he understand and extend grace in such a situation as the Japanese and other persecuted Christian face?"

I believe Endo wants us to understand the struggle of persecuted Christians and wants us to understand they wrestle with their guilt for the rest of their lives. If God's grace is indeed "greater than all my sin," should we consider extending grace to our "fallen brethren" as well?

I believe another lesson Endo wants us to learn is that God is not silent but remains with His people in their suffering, never abandoning His people. Throughout church history, Christians have faced brutal persecutions. Even Christ the Son of God suffered the most dreadful death on the cross. Therefore, God understands the pain we experience, He grieves at the wickedness of men, and He promises to be with us always.

I agree with Endo that God is with us in our suffering. However, I feel his answer is incomplete. In a Christian's suffering, often a disciple feels the presence of Christ in an even greater way. In the writings of the persecuted saints and in the many interviews I have had with Christians who are suffering, many state they feel the presence of God in greater ways than they have ever known. The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 3:10-11, ". . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." So many times in suffering Christians identify with the sufferings of Christ and sense His presence in greater ways.

What I found troubling about the novel and movie is the gloomy mood of the story. The movie emphasizes the brutal deaths of Christians, the struggles of a fallen priest, and what appears to be the demise and bleak future of Christianity in Japan.

Indeed, the Christian history of Japan is sorrowful and the movie ends in the midst of Japan's persecution so I can understand Endo's ending. On this earth, life will not always have a happy ending. What I find missing in Endo's story is the message of hope that is found in Christ even in suffering. What compels Christians to surrender their life for Christ is the assured hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:2 states, ". . . looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

There is little joy when focusing primarily on the affairs and outcomes in this fallen world. If this is where the story ends, it is indeed dark and disheartening. However, through the darkness shines the hope that allowed Christ to have joy even when facing the agony of the cross. Believers can also have joy and hope if they look forward to the glory that awaits every believer in Christ. Despite the suffering believers face, it pales in comparison to the eternal glory that is to come. Persecution teaches Christians we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom. Christians can endure and remain joyful even in their suffering when focused on Christ and the glory of our true home. The end is not the cross of death, but the resurrection of Jesus and every disciple of Christ. This is important in any story of persecuted Christians. It is emphasized in the New Testament and is the story of Christ's and the believer's ultimate triumph. The New Testament prophesies the future persecution of all believers but ends with the triumphant resurrection and return of Christ. Through Christ's victory, the Christian story ends ultimately in triumph. The end is not the death of the Christians in Japan but the glory they received from Christ in heaven. Their courageous commitment should be an inspiration to believers around the world and an example of what it means to live not for this world, but the kingdom of heaven. Hebrews 11:35-40 states,

> Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

The Japanese Christians were living for another kingdom and looking forward to the eternal glory of heaven. This message was not present in the novel or the film, which I believe made it a dark and gloomy story. Although Japan Christian history is discouraging, the end has not been written for the Christ's Church in Japan.

Can A Tree Grow in a Swamp?

One of the most significant dialogues in the movie occurs between Rodrigues and the Samurai Lord Inoue, also known as the Inquisitor. Inoue states,

> A tree which flourishes in one kind of soil, may wither if the soil is changed. As for the tree of Christianity, in a foreign country its leaves may grow thick and the buds may be rich, while in Japan the leaves wither and no bud appears. Father, have you never thought of the difference in the soil, the difference in the water?

Inoue tells Rodrigues that a tree cannot grow in a swamp. Therefore, Christianity will not take root in Japan.

There is a famous saying, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." In other words, persecution strengthens the faith of Christians and the church grows when persecuted.

This was not the case in Japan. The genocide that took place from 1600-1800 was devastating and Christianity has never regained a strong foothold in Japan. Another question Christians struggle with is, “Why has Christianity not taken root in Japan?” Today the largest growth of Christianity is occurring throughout Asia. Despite this, Christianity continues to struggle in Japan.

When Christianity first arrived in Japan in 1549, the Japanese embraced the gospel of Christ. Xavier was so impressed with Japan that he called for only the missionaries of highest quality to be sent.{3} Xavier wrote, “Japan is the only country yet discovered in these regions where there is hope of Christianity permanently taking root. . . . These are the best people so far discovered, and it seems to me that among the unbelievers, no people can be found to excel them.”{4} Father Organto, who followed Xavier, wrote that Japan would be Christianized in 30 years, expressing the optimism of missionaries that Christianity would thrive in Japan.{5} The situation quickly changed and the two centuries of persecution that followed nearly eradicated Christianity in Japan.

Today there is a famous saying among missionaries: “Japan is where Christian missionaries go to die.” Indeed, many return after years of labor discouraged and disillusioned by the little fruit they see in their years of labor in Japan. There are many reasons given why the gospel has not thrived in this country. Can the seed of the gospel penetrate the hard soil of Japanese culture?

As unbelievable as this may seem, I believe a spiritual revival for Japan. As the gospel flourished 400 years ago, spiritual awakening will come to this nation again. How it will come about only God knows. I believe the Japanese are realizing the emptiness of their secular outlook and lifestyle of materialism and consumerism. Their high suicide rate reflects the emptiness of these ideologies. Japanese Buddhism

and Shinto fail to answer the great questions of life or fill the void in the heart of all people. These religions are also largely built on myths and so they are not based on reality.

Xavier realized the Japanese religions did not answer the big questions of life such as the origin of life and the universe, the nature of God, the origin of evil, the answer to the problem of evil, and what happens after death.{6} The ideologies that dominate Japan still fail to adequately answer these questions today. As Xavier demonstrated that Christianity provides the best answer to these questions, so the Church in Japan must do the same. Christianity has the evidence to uphold its claims to truth and life everlasting in Jesus. I believe that Christian apologetics would do well in this country that is very rational and well educated. The message of the gospel provides the true message of hope for this nation. I hope that the message and lives of the Japan Christian martyrs will one day be recognized and remembered by the people of Japan.

Conclusion

Scorsese's film is one of the few films about the little known Christian history of Japan. Even the Japanese are not aware of the tremendous Christian history of their nation. We should be thankful to Scorsese for showing the brutal persecution and the suffering endured by the Christians of Japan. Endo and Scorsese reveal to us the heinous tortures but they also take us into the mental torture that those suffering persecution go through. The struggles of the priests and the questions they ask are the same questions we all struggle with in our journey of faith. Endo and Scorsese present a unique perspective looking through the eyes of one who apostatizes and yet finds God's grace through it all.

It is my hope that Christians throughout the world gain a greater awareness of one of the greatest massacre of Christians that took place in Church history. I also hope that

people will appreciate and admire the courage and commitment of the Japanese Christians who gave their lives for Christ. The Japanese unfortunately hide this part of their history. However, the Japanese and the world should recognize this facet of their history. The story of the men, women and children who gave their lives for Christ is moving and inspirational. They truly lived out the call of discipleship as Jesus commanded. In Matthew 10:37-39 Jesus said,

> Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Few have lived out the commands of Christ so faithfully and courageously as the Christians of Japan. I hope that more will recognize and remember the Christians of Japan who gave their lives for the Gospel.

Notes

1. Keith Webb, *Overcoming Spiritual Barriers in Japan*, (Nextchurch Resources, 2010), 15.
2. Shusaku Endo, *Silence* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1969), 60.
3. John Dougill, *In Search of Japan's Hidden Christians* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2012), 34.
4. Webb, 15.
5. Dougill, 51.
6. Henry Coleridge, *The Life and Letters of Francis Xavier* (London: Burns and Oates, 1881), 572.

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Addendum 1/3/2022:

We received this inquiry to our website:

I was fascinated by this article on your site https://probe.org/japans-unknown-christian-history-a-review-of-silence/ about unspeakable torture that rulers of Japan did. But it is said there is many reasons why Japanese people do not come to Christ in large numbers. So what are these reasons? Help me to understand, please. Also, I believe that the tortures that rulers of Japan performed could only take place because God granted them freedom, and there should be sufficient moral reason why He permitted it. It is known that the blood of martyrs brings salvation to the land; maybe we just need to wait more and we'll see how their sacrifice will bring God's grace and Christ' salvation to people of Japan, especially now in the era of info technology.

Dr. Pat Zukeran, now leading his ministry Evidence and Answers from his Hawaii home, responded:

Aloha,

Thank you for reading the article on the movie *Silence* and your questions.

First, we do not know why God allows evil and suffering on some people and nations. God is in control of all things and has a plan for all that happens. Sometimes, only He knows the reason for the suffering of the Japanese Christians.

Today, less than 1% of Japanese are Christian. There are numerous reasons the nation of Japan is resistant to the Gospel message but no one really knows for sure. Here are some factors that contribute to their resistance to Christ.

First, the Japanese culture is a "group think" culture. Before a person makes a decision, he or she must consider how it will affect the family, clan and ancestors. Often they must consider how it affects their business partners, friends, etc…. The group pressure is very high in Japan.

Second, Japan is a very materialistic culture and it places

little importance on the spiritual life. As a result, there really is no Sabbath day or rest. Most people from students to business people work 6 to 7 days a week. This makes time for church or Bible study very difficult.

Third, Christianity is seen as a western religion. The Christian history of Japan is not usually portrayed in a positive way.

Fourth, the concept of sin is unclear in Japanese thinking. There is no accurate word for sin. The term used now, *shimi*, actually means “criminal.” They view human nature as good and most would not see themselves as criminal. So it is hard to receive the gospel if you do not understand sin and the need for a savior.

Ultimately, there is a dark spiritual stronghold on Japan. We hope one day, a spiritual awakening will occur in that land.

Thank you for your question, I hope this was helpful.

Blessings,

Patrick Zukeran
Evidence and Answers