

---

MARTIN SCORSESE – SHUSAKO ENDO: SILENCE (2016):  
HOW SILENCE SPEAKS

马丁·斯科塞斯——远藤周作：《沉默》（2016）：  
沉默告诉我们什么？

---

STEPHAN ROTHLIN AND AYAKO FUKUSHIMA  
罗世范及福岛绫子

ABSTRACT

Both the novel and the movie “*Silence*” feature cowards as “Anti-Heroes” as they reflect the amazement of the writer Shusako Endo and the movie director Martin Scorsese regarding how Jesus calls men and women to follow him who seem completely unfit to face all the hardships and challenges of sharing His cross. Silence emerges as a key driver of a profound transformation from the devastating experience of anxiety, abandonment, torture and failure towards the self-abandonment of the Risen Lord, who calls cowards to step into his life journey.

*Silence* is a 2016 historical drama directed by Martin Scorsese, based on the 1966 novel of the same name by Shūsaku Endō. Set in Nagasaki, Japan, the film was shot in Taiwan. Two 17th-century Jesuits travel from Portugal to Edo-era Japan via Macau where they meet their superior Alessandro Valignano who commissions them in the College of St. Paul with spreading the Gospel in Japan. The story recalls the fact that it was common for Japanese believers to hide from the persecution that resulted from the suppression of Christianity in Japan during the Shimabara Rebellion (1637–1638) against the Tokugawa shogunate. These are called the “*kakure kirishitan*”, or “hidden Christians”. *Silence* is the third of Scorsese's three films focused on the challenges of faith, following *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *Kundun* (1997).

Japan to Macau to save himself, agrees to guide them on the dangerous journey. In fact, Kichijirō's entire family was killed and he apparently many times renounced his faith.

Arriving in Japan the priests find local Christian communities driven underground, living in constant fear while enduring deep divisions and violent fights among themselves. The priests witness as officials searching for suspected Christians strap some of the villagers to wooden crosses by the ocean shore literally thus crucifying them, where the tide eventually drowns them. The bodies are then cremated on a funeral pyre to prevent a Christian burial. Garupe leaves for Hirado Island where Saint Francis Xavier first arrived in Japan around 1550. Rodrigues goes to Gotō Island, the last place Ferreira worked as a missionary where he eventually reunites with

Narrative analysis thus could radically question a superficial dismissal of Kichijiro as a ‘traitor’. Instead of a ‘traitor’ pure and simple, he could be viewed as another ‘Judas Iscariot’ whose betrayal enabling Jesus to be put on the cross, played a necessary part in the history of the redemption.

\*

The opening of the film features the Portuguese Jesuit Cristóvão Ferreira who witnesses the torture of Japanese converts he has been trying to bring to the Christian faith. The priest feels utterly helpless in the presence of Japanese authorities conducting the torture. A few years later the Italian Jesuit Visitor and founder of St. Paul's College, Macau, Alessandro Valignano, receives news that Ferreira has renounced his faith after being tortured in Japan. Valignano thinks that “Ferreira is lost for us Jesuits” but accepts the desire of Ferreira's Portuguese pupils, the young Jesuits Sebastião Rodrigues and Francisco Garupe, to find him in Japan. Kichijirō, an alcoholic fisherman who fled

Kichijirō, who betrays him into the hands of the samurai. An older samurai tells Rodrigues that other Christians will suffer unless he renounces his faith.

Rodrigues is then taken to Nagasaki, where he is imprisoned with many Japanese converts. At a tribunal, he is told Christian doctrine is hostile to Japan. Rodrigues demands to see the Inquisitor, the governor Inoue Masashige. Rodrigues is returned to prison, and Kichijirō is imprisoned as well. He explains to Rodrigues that court officials threatened him so that he would betray Rodrigues. Despite his previous apostasies, Kichijirō insists he himself is a Christian and asks to be absolved of his betrayal through confession, which Rodrigues reluctantly grants him. He later

is released after being told to step on a *fumi-e* (a likeness of Christian figures), an act symbolizing rejection of the faith. Later, Rodrigues is brought under guard to the shoreline to await someone. In the far distance, he witnesses Garupe and four other prisoners approaching on the shoreline under separate guard. The four other prisoners are taken offshore on a small boat and are dropped from the boat one-by-one in order to force Garupe to renounce his faith. However, Garupe staunchly refuses to apostatise and jumps. He then sees the desperate Garupe attempt to swim offshore to rescue the last prisoner, where he drowns with the other four prisoners.

After some time, Rodrigues is eventually taken to meet an older Ferreira. Ferreira says he committed apostasy while being tortured, and states that after 15 years in the country and a year in the temple, he believes Christianity is futile in Japan. Rodrigues repudiates him, but Ferreira is implacable. That night in his prison cell, Rodrigues hears five Christians being tortured. Ferreira tells him that they have already apostatised; it is his apostasy the Japanese demand, if they are to relent. Rodrigues struggles over whether it is self-centered to refuse to recant when doing so will end others' suffering. As Rodrigues looks upon a *fumi-e* he hears the voice of Jesus, giving him permission to step on it, and he does.

Rodrigues, like Ferreira before him, is allowed to live in the country with an adopted Japanese name and takes a wife, their expertise on Christianity being used occasionally to prevent Dutch Dejima traders from bringing Christian influences into Japan. Years later, after Ferreira has died, Kichijirō asks Rodrigues to absolve him again, but Rodrigues refuses, saying he is no longer a priest. Rodrigues hears God's voice and is assured that rather than remaining silent, he also suffered alongside those who were tortured and killed. Only by letting go of what he held

on to himself could Rodrigues humble himself before Kichijirō - someone he previously looked down on. In the process of sacrificing his title and faith, he draws a parallel to Jesus' sacrifice of life; a parallel he was unaware of until comforted by God.

Kichijirō later is caught with a pouch he claims to have won while gambling, containing a religious amulet which he claims is not his own. He is taken away and never heard from again. Many years later, Rodrigues dies. He is placed in a large round wooden casket, and his body is cremated according to traditional Japanese rites: moments before his cremation, his wife is allowed to place an offering in his hand to ward off evil spirits — this turns out to be the tiny crudely-made crucifix that was given to him when he first came to Japan, indicating perhaps that Rodrigues had remained a Christian, hidden from outside view.

\*

In analysing the movie, it may be difficult to identify the authentic hero. At first sight the miserable figure of Kichijirō could be dismissed as an “anti-hero”, a “traitor,” because he keeps betraying and apostatising, whenever forced to do so; yet despite the devastating loss of his whole family he still seems to be coming back until the very end of the story. A key scene in the movie concerns a voice over during the episodes of torture when missionaries and lay people are forced to step on the *fumi-e*: “Go ahead. Let them trample on me. This is why I came.” The voice over could be understood as a deceptive justification from a coward in the face of torture; however, it could also be understood as the voice of Jesus the Redeemer who reassures his followers in the moment of an extreme test that he, Jesus, did the work of redemption, paying so to speak with his blood for the ransom of all people tied down by violence and sin.

The sequence of confessions by Kichijirō can be dismissed as an unavoidable repetition of lapses. However, from another point of view the journey of the Jesuits, guided by the “traitor” Kichijirō, who end up being forced to renounce their faith and religious vows, could easily be used to indicate the ultimate failure of their mission. However, *Silence* presents an ambiguity reminiscent of the Japanese classic movie *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa, where the same story of a rape is told in completely different versions, each depending on one of the four actors in the drama. The writer Shusaku Endo in his struggles and apparent failures as a Catholic identified himself most strongly with Kichijirō.

on the cross. And there is at least a discrete hint in the final scene focused on the dead body of Rodrigues that the cross which is put in his hand by his wife may be a token for his memory of his ongoing communion with the Risen Lord.

\*

Embracing the Imperfection:  
Endo Shusaku’s personal story and *Silence*  
Ayako Fukushima  
Apostatised missionaries

Endo Shusaku explained his motive for writing the novel “*Silence*” in the interviews and his essays. After Endo recovered from a serious illness in 1962, he travelled to Nagasaki and came

*Silence* was widely read among the Japanese, who are largely non-Christians. One of the reasons for this popularity was Endo’s compassion towards cowards and his interpretation of God who embraces all sorts of imperfections in humans.

Under many aspects *Silence* may also reflect Martin Scorsese’s own struggles over his vocation and faithfulness to Christian values in a context that appears exceedingly violent and prone to corruption. Narrative analysis thus could radically question a superficial dismissal of Kichijiro as a “traitor”. Instead of a “traitor” pure and simple, he could be viewed as another “Judas Iscariot” whose betrayal enabling Jesus to be put on the cross, played a necessary part in the history of the redemption. A theological insight could help overcome short sighted conclusions that despair of finding a true hero in a story; since the “traitor” nevertheless is the driving force in the drama: The Crucified and Risen Lord, first visually present in a painting, reminiscent of El Greco, as the narrative unfolds then disappears in the troubled waters along the road, only to be incarnated once more in the Christians nailed

across a *fumi-e* displayed at a museum. *Fumi-e* is a bronze or copper plate on which the image of Christ or Mother Mary is carved. During the period when the Christianity was banned in Japan from the 17th century to the late 19th century, the Japanese people were mandated to trample on *fumi-e* with their feet annually to prove that they were not Christians. When Endo saw one of *fumi-e* at the museum, his interest in “Hidden Christians” grew. Hidden Christians are those who stepped on the *fumi-e* and superficially denied their Christian faith but kept the faith secretly for generations.

Apart from those hidden Japanese Christians, there were foreign missionaries who illegally stayed behind in Japan during the early years of persecution. They were eventually arrested and some apostatised after being tortured.

Endo became particularly interested in those apostatised priests. He visited Fr. Hubert Cieslik, S.J. of Sophia University, who specialised in the study of early missionaries in Japan, to find out information about those apostatised priests. However, Endo came to realise that very little historical records of those fallen missionaries survived: the Society of Jesus apparently regarded their apostatised members as shameful and did not leave much records. The Japanese Authority also did not leave many records. Endo writes that because the history, the Church, and Japan remain silent about them, it must take a novelist to give voice to those missionaries, let them say what they wanted to say and let us contemplate their sorrows (Endo, 2017a, pp.17-18).

After much study of the history, Endo selected four historical figures of apostatised priests. Among them he chose Fr. Cristóvão Ferreira and Fr. Giuseppe Chiara as the models for the novel “*Silence*.” Chiara is featured as Fr. Sebastião Rodrigues in the novel.

Fr. Cristóvão Ferreira appears as himself in Endo’s novel. The existing historical records on Ferreira show that he was ordained as a Jesuit priest in Macau and sent to Japan in 1609 (Endo, 2017b, pp.28- 49). He remained in Japan illegally after all missionaries were ordered to leave Japan in 1614, took the final vow as a Jesuit in 1617, and continued to minister to the Japanese Christians until he was arrested in 1633. He was tortured and five hours later apostatised. When the Society of Jesus received this news, it defrocked him officially. Ferreira was forced to marry a Japanese widow and given a Japanese name of Sawano Chuan. He served the Japanese officials as a translator. He wrote a book in Japanese to explain the errors of Christianity. He taught western medicine and astronomy to Japanese. He died in Nagasaki in 1650 and was buried in a Buddhist temple.

The real reason for Ferreira’s apostasy is unknown. What was in his mind is also unknown. Instead of judging Ferreira simply as a coward, Endo tried to understand Ferreira from the limited records. Ferreira remained in Japan after the banning of Christianity and took the final vow during that period. This shows Ferreira’s determination and readiness for torture and martyrdom, Endo writes (Endo, 2017b, pp.28-49). Endo described in the novel that Ferreira apostatised to save the lives of the Japanese Christians who were being tortured and begging to stop torture. Ferreira himself was willing to be a martyr but he then realised it was the selfish dream of a priest, who cares only about his own salvation and the Church’s judgment. If Christ were in the position of Ferreira, He would have apostatised for the Japanese. Endo says if Christ loves humans, He must have told humans to trample *fumi-e* (Endo, 2017a, p24).

Endo writes in his essays that Ferreira could have apostatised because he could not bear the physical and psychological pain of torture. The amount of pain from torture was so great that it cannot be imagined by those who have not experienced it (Endo, 2017b, pp.28-49). Hence, nobody can judge Ferreira as a coward, Endo says.

After Ferreira apostatised, he taught the Japanese students western medicine and astronomy and made contributions in these areas. Endo understood that Ferreira still had a missionary’s strong sense of serving the Japanese people.

In the story, Ferreira nudged Fr. Sebastião Rodrigues to step on *fumi-e* as Ferreira had done so in the past. It was then that Rodrigues heard the voice of God that He knows the pain of Rodrigues and He carried His Cross to share men’s pain.

When everything seems hopeless and helpless and when God seems silent, God is with you and suffers with you even though He may not remove the pain from you.

### Everyone is a Coward

Endo's compassion for the apostatised missionaries and Japanese Christians came from his experiences during World War II. He wrote "people, who spent their youth during the war time like myself, know that people had to lie to themselves and deny their own values, dreams, and desires because of the social and political situation. It was *fumi-e* in our time" (Endo, 2017a, p11). When Endo was young, he saw that the Japanese people were forced to worship the emperor and die for him. They supported and participated in the Japanese invasions of Asian countries. The majority of the people went along because they could not bear assaults and tortures that they would go through if they did not follow.

Endo also writes "I believe the post-war generations too have their own *fumi-e* in their lives. Sometimes we have no choice but trampling *fumi-e* in order to live" (Endo, 2017a, p12). He says "most of the people around me were cowards. Not a single Japanese person I know lived through with unbending faith until the end. That is why I chose cowards as the main characters of the novel instead of strong ones" (Endo, 2017a, pp.13-14).

Endo writes he himself was one of those cowards: "as I am weak, I trampled *fumi-e* during and after the war" (Endo, 2017a, p16). Endo's own *fumi-e* was, first of all, his struggle to accept and live out the Christian faith. Endo was baptized when he was 12 years old, not because of his will but because of his mother's will (Kato, 2006). Throughout his life, Endo struggled with Christianity, which he described as "the cloth which does not fit me well." However, because

of his love for his mother, who was a fervent Catholic, he did not dare to abandon his identity and faith as a Christian.

He also struggled in his studies and career. He did not know what to do when he was young, so he failed to get into a university twice, whereas his brother as a straight A student entered the University of Tokyo and became an elite official of the government. Endo struggled to be a good son and a good Christian and made efforts. Just before his novel received an award for the first time, his mother passed away suddenly.

Endo writes that "I see myself in hidden Christians. I, too, have a secret that I have never told anyone and will never tell" (Endo, 2017b, p194). His secret could be the relationship with his ex-girlfriend, Françoise. He never mentioned or wrote to this French lady Françoise when he was alive. After Endo's death, his unpublished diary was found and it was revealed that he proposed marriage to Françoise when he was studying in France (Kato, 2006, pp.107-167). However, after Endo's return to Japan, he soon met a Japanese girl and married her. He never told Françoise about his marriage and after two years stopped writing letters to her.

Later it was discovered by a researcher that Françoise as a scholar in oriental studies came to Japan and Françoise and Endo met again. They respected each other and maintained a friendship. Françoise lived in Japan as a French teacher and started translating *Silence* into French. In the middle of the work, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and returned to France where she died at the age of 41.

Endo in his essays often emphasizes the importance of not "abandoning" (Endo, 2017a, p21): he did not abandon his Christian faith and his wife. Certainly, his actions were in line with his words. Only thing that broke his vow was perhaps the relationship with Françoise, whom Endo

apparently abandoned for an unknown reason. It is suspected this was one of the heaviest *fumi-e* in Endo's life. Even if this presumption is factual, we still never know what happened between two of them and what was in Endo's mind.

*Silence* was widely read among the Japanese, who are largely non-Christians. One of the reasons for this popularity was Endo's compassion towards cowards and his interpretation of God who embraces all sorts of imperfections in humans.

Allow me to write my own experience. In 2020, a friend of mine died of suicide. He was a Catholic priest. I still do not know what happened to him. Several months before his death, he sounded negative once in our text messages. I did not pay much attention because I thought he is always fine and he can take care of himself because he is a priest. One day, all the sudden, I heard he died. It was only then that I realised that I judged him. I judged that a priest must be always strong and perfect and cannot be weak and imperfect. The amount of my regret and guilt was so huge. A while later I talked with a priest whom I trust and came to realise that God is so merciful that He embraces all humans no matter how imperfect they are. God does not judge. He knows the pains of humans. He knows how much my friend suffered. I could finally trust that my friend is now at peace in heaven with God. And God will embrace my imperfection, too.

#### From *Silence* to *Deep River*

Endo Shusaku's own sufferings, regrets, and guilt gave birth to *Silence*. After this major work, Endo further pressed himself to work harder. His motive for hard work was primarily his mother, whom Endo will meet in heaven and for whom he always wanted to be a good son and a good Christian. Because of Endo's strong sense

of carrying his own *fumi-e* and not being good enough to please and comfort his mother, he never stopped struggling.

He completed his final major work *Deep River* while his health deteriorated (Endo, 1993). All the main characters of *Deep River* have different kinds of imperfections, sorrows and pains. Yet all of them are searching for something similar, something true and certain. The River Ganges is depicted as a river of humanity so deep to embrace all the imperfections, burdens, and sorrows of humans no matter whether you are a Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim or agnostic. Each one of us is embraced in this deep river. Endo attained his peace by completing *Deep River*. He passed away three years later. According to his will, *Silence* and *Deep River* were placed in Endo's coffin.



STEPHAN ROTHLIN is Director of the Macau Ricci Institute, Macau and CEO of Rothlin International Management Consulting Limited, Beijing and Hong Kong

PROF. DR. AYAKO FUKUSHIMA, Historian and Associate Professor, Kyushu University, Japan

## REFERENCES 参考资料

- Endo, S. (1993/1995). *Fukai Kawa Deep River*. Tokyo: Kodansha. English translation: New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation
- Endo, S. (2017a). *Jinsei no fumi-e*. Tokyo: Shinchosha.
- Endo, S. (2017b). *Chinmoku no koe*. Tokyo: Seishisha.
- Endo, S. (2016). *Silence*, Translated by William Johnston, New York: Taplinger Publishing Company
- Kato, M. (2006). *Endo Shusaku*. Tokyo: Keio Gijuku Daigaku shuppan kai.