

## “regard as valuable”: Missiological approaches to “Silence”

Dr Steve Taylor, Flinders University: Knox Centre Ministry and Leadership

Email: [principal@knoxcentre.ac.nz](mailto:principal@knoxcentre.ac.nz)

Website: [www.emergenzi.org.nz](http://www.emergenzi.org.nz)

Accounts of conversion and transformation within the Christian tradition are often linked to narratives of expansion. This paper asks what avenues are open to missiology when expansion is not the entirety of the Christian story. *Silence* is a historical novel. Written by Shusako Endo (1923-1999). *Silence*, as movie, will undoubtedly rekindle debate regarding conversion and transformation. It challenges how we understand mission in the ‘silences’ of history, such as this time of apparent fruitlessness of conversion in Japan.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Jesus: the movie star

Lloyd Baugh, in his book, *Imaging the Divine*, identifies two categories of ‘Jesus: the movie star’ movies. The first is that of Jesus films. The second type of ‘Jesus Christ: movie star’ movies are those that employ Christ figures. Baugh offers a typology by which to assess Christ figures in such films. His eleven elements include:

- mysterious origins
- conflict with authority
- performing of wonders
- attracting a group of followers
- becoming a scapegoat
- withdrawing to a deserted place
- acting as a suffering servant
- showing a commitment to justice
- entering passion
- reaching out to the repentant thief and
- a metaphorical resurrection.

*Silence* (the book) weaves together both of Baugh’s categories. First, the main character, Sebastian Rodrigues, is a Christ figure. When we apply Baugh’s typology to the life of Rodrigues in *Silence*, six of these elements are evident. Arriving in Japan, he finds himself in **conflict with authority**, the Shoguns’ of Japan. In the face of this persecution, Rodrigues **withdraws to a deserted place**, first living in a hut on the outskirts of a village, then wandering alone from island to island. He **acts as a suffering servant**, deprived of food and water. When captured he **becomes a scapegoat**, being mocked and forced to watch Japanese Christian peasants die. He **enters passion**, being imprisoned and interrogated. He **reaches out to a repentant thief**, offering absolution to Kichijiro, who has trampled on Jesus.

However Rodrigues does not have **mysterious origins**, rather his sense of identity is as a priest sent by God from Rome. There is no evidence of the **performing of wonders**, **attracting a group of followers** or **showing a commitment to justice**. Finally, there is **no resurrection**. Instead, Rodrigues renounces his faith, overwhelmed by the lack of conversion resulting from the Christian mission to Japan and finding a transformation in his own motivation for mission. Of Baugh’s eleven elements, six are evident in the character of Rodrigues, all of which cluster around the events of Holy Week.

Second, *Silence* is also a Jesus film. The book contains a constant stream of references to the historical person of Jesus. Both the characterisation of Rodrigues and the references in *Silence* to the historical Jesus are clustered around Holy Week. Thus both in the references to historical Christ and the characterisation of Rodrigues, we see a similar pattern. The Christology of *Silence* is being fused with the missiology transformation of Rodrigues.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing this paper, the movie, despite multiple promises, had not been released. When my abstract was submitted, the movie was due out in November 2015. Release was then pushed back to Cannes Film Festival, May 11-26. Still waiting in June, there is now talk of release in November 2016. This makes a conference paper on the movie difficult! What follows is, after discussion with the conference organisers, a draft paper. It utilises *Silence* the book as an analytical conversation partner. When (if!) the film is released, I will supplement this paper with reference to the movie.

Rodrigues as a Christ figure is a mirror of Jesus, his life, as expressed in the book, an artistic depiction of the Christ. This makes *Silence* unique, blurring Baugh's categories of Christ-figure and Jesus film. I will return to this at the end, arguing that missiology needs a diverse set of depictions of Christ, each unique in order to capture the fullness of the Christ we follow.

## 2. Fruitlessness of mission in the movies

Given this paper is focused on the forthcoming movie adaptation of the book, it is logical to place *Silence* alongside other movies that considered fruitlessness, and as a consequence reflect on suffering, in mission. *The Mission* (1986) explores 18<sup>th</sup> Century Jesuit mission in South America. Both *The Mission* and *Silence* begin and end with fruitlessness. *God lives in the Himalayas* (2009) also explores fruitlessness in mission. This sanctifying of human suffering resonates with the beginning of *Silence* (the book). When Rodrigues sees his face as that of a "crucified man" (Endo 1980: 67), he is drawing hope from the belief that suffering has a redemptive purpose. However, this hope fades as *Silence* continues. For Rodrigues, purification is so complete that his faith dies. This is a disturbing response to a time in Christian history when conversion and transformation does not result in expansion. Such times occur. How has the missiological tradition responded?

## 3. Fruitlessness in mission

First, the work of Donald McGavran. Second, Philip Jenkins argued that Easter - both death and resurrection - is a Christian paradigm necessary for understanding conversion and transformation. Third, the apostle Paul, who refuses to remain silent regarding Epaphroditus' fruitlessness.

## Conclusion

But the gift of *Silence* is that it allows us to see the face of Christ as death on a cross. To represent the fullness of Christ, both Christologically and missiologically, we need the "face of Christ" giving inspiration to artists at every stage of the Philippians arc. When Christ is the Victor, the "conversion-transformation" narrative is one of triumph. We do not ask art images of Christ the Victor or Jesus the baptised to express a complete Christology, expressing every stage of the Philippians arc. We let them stand as Christological snapshots. In *Silence*, we are offered an artistic gift, that of obedience to the point of death. This is a truthful missiology which voices Christ's silence. Such is the Christological gift of *Silence* to missiology. It provides an essential snapshot, ensuring our accounts of conversion and transformation include not only narratives of triumph, but also narratives of solidarity with Christ's silence.

## Key references

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