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## Scorsese's Silence: Film as Practical Theodicy

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# Scorsese's *Silence*: Film as Practical Theodicy

## **Abstract**

Martin Scorsese's adaptation of Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence* takes up the anguished experience of God's silence in the face of human suffering. The main character, the Jesuit priest Sabastião Rodrigues, finds his faith gutted by the appalling silence of God as he witnesses the horrific persecution of Christians in seventeenth century Japan. Yujin Nagasawa calls the particularly intense combination of the problems of divine hiddenness and evil the problem of divine absence that resists resolution through explanations that have typically characterized the theodicies offered by philosophers. Drawing on the thought of Ignatius of Loyola, this essay explores the way Scorsese's *Silence* raises the problem of divine absence for Rodrigues and, through his experience, suggests a way of living with it. This mode of response, I contend, makes what Nagasawa calls cosmic optimism—a hopeful attitude that all is good on a cosmic scale—accessible to devout believers like Rodrigues by grounding it in identification with the god-forsakenness experienced by Christ upon the cross in an experience akin to catharsis that delivers a clarifying emotional consonance. Viewed through an Ignatian lens, the film does more than illustrate a way of responding, it actively engages the imagination in a way that enables viewers to encounter the problem of divine absence and gain the intimate knowledge needed to live with it themselves. In this sense, I argue, *Silence* can itself be a practical theodicy.

## **Keywords**

Martin Scorsese, *Silence*, Ignatius of Loyola, Shusaku Endo, problem of evil, theodicy, problem of hiddenness, divine absence

## **Author Notes**

Ian DeWeese-Boyd is Professor of Philosophy at Gordon College, Wenham. He wishes to express gratitude for the many helpful comments received on an earlier version of the essay that he presented at The Place of Religion in Film conference at Syracuse University on March 31, 2017. He also appreciated the excellent comments made by the two anonymous reviewers of this article.

## I. Introduction

Martin Scorsese's adaptation of Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence* takes up the anguished experience of God's silence in the face of human suffering. Set in 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan, *Silence* vividly depicts the brutal persecution of the *Kakure Kirishitians* (or hidden Christians) and the Portuguese Jesuits who try to support them. Some 40,000 were tortured and martyred during this period.<sup>1</sup> The main character, the Jesuit priest Sabastião Rodrigues, finds his faith gutted by the appalling silence of God, exclaiming "The weight of Your silence is terrible" (1:05).<sup>2</sup> His problem is not fundamentally intellectual. He does not really want or need a theodicy that explains why God's silence is compatible with God's love of these persecuted Christians. His problem is existential in the sense that he is directly experiencing this silence as a crushing weight. Rodrigues's words indicate that his problem is not precisely the one philosophers have generally set themselves to addressing, namely, whether God's apparent hiddenness is conceptually compatible with God's existence. Yujin Nagasawa calls the particularly intense combination of the problems of divine hiddenness and evil that Rodrigues and these hidden Christians experience the problem of divine absence: an experience of God's hiddenness that gives devout believers who are enduring great suffering reason to think that their lives are void of meaning.<sup>3</sup>

Philosophers widely acknowledge that the searing personal experience of evil and hiddenness is untouched by even the most sophisticated conceptual explanations of evil and hiddenness.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, Nagasawa argues that there can be no *solution* to the problem of divine absence, only a response that points toward a way of living with it. Drawing on Endo's novel and other writings, he suggests devout believers might adopt an attitude of cosmic optimism—a hope that all will be good on a cosmic scale despite their inability to see it—and regard their experience of divine absence not as the end of faith but as its true beginning. While Nagasawa is surely right to seek a practical as opposed to an intellectual response to this existential problem, the cosmic optimism he recommends may well not be accessible to those suffering so intensely. Not only is the attitude itself based upon a kind of conceptual solution, namely, that human beings are incapable of seeing how all could be well on a cosmic scale due to their cognitive limitations; it also requires some deeper experience to ground it.<sup>5</sup> To hold out hope in the midst of the darkness of divine absence, one must be intimately acquainted with the love and goodness of God.

In my view, the narrative itself—both in the film and the novel—serves as the grounding experience that makes the attitude of cosmic optimism available to those experiencing divine absence. Jesuit founder, Ignatius of Loyola, placed imaginative contemplation at the heart of spiritual practice, believing that careful visualization—what he calls the composition of place (*compositio loci*) and the

application of the senses—creates a space for revelation and consolation.<sup>6</sup> Clearly schooled in this practice, Rodrigues often merges his experience with Christ's passion, reading his journey as so many stops along the *via dolorosa*. When his experience of silence is at its most intense, Rodrigues finds Christ's "Why hast thou forsaken me?" echoing in his mind, and senses the true, human terror Jesus felt before God's silence.<sup>7</sup> Viewers are invited, in Ignatian fashion, to stand with Rodrigues even as he stands with Jesus with this bewildering question on their lips, hoping for some consolation even when there is no demystifying word to be heard.

This essay explores the way Scorsese's *Silence* raises the problem of divine absence for Rodrigues and through his experience suggests a way of living with it, thereby offering a practical response, if not a solution, to the problem. This mode of response makes the cosmic optimism Nagasawa calls for accessible by grounding it in personal identification with the god-forsakenness felt by Christ upon the cross in an experience akin to catharsis that delivers a clarifying emotional consonance. Not only does the film offer a narrative that illustrates a way of responding to divine absence, it also creates a place where viewers themselves can encounter the problem of divine absence and find the intimate knowledge needed to live with it. In this sense, I argue that Scorsese's *Silence* itself can be a practical theodicy.

## **II. Divine Absence in Scorsese's *Silence***

To understand Nagasawa's problem and how it is raised in Scorsese's film, it will be helpful to situate this problem within the larger philosophical discussion of evil and hiddenness. Traditionally, the problem of evil and hiddenness have been construed as arguments against the existence of God. The argument from evil contends that one can infer from the amount and variety of suffering we see in the world that the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly loving God is unlikely. Similarly, the argument from hiddenness contends that one can infer from God's hiddenness from people "who are capable of relating personally to God but who, through no fault of their own, fail to believe"—so called nonresistant nonbelievers—that the existence of a perfectly loving God who desires such personal relationships is unlikely.<sup>8</sup> These arguments are raised by the general facts about suffering and hiddenness and are intellectual in nature; they focus on the rationality of belief in God given these facts. Responses to these problems—theodicies or defenses—aim to show that belief in God is rational, because God's existence is compatible with these facts about evil or hiddenness. As Peter van Inwagen points out, this task is fundamentally apologetic, not pastoral, and aims to address the intellectual problem, not the existential one raised by the pressing pain felt by those experiencing suffering or hiddenness at close range.<sup>9</sup> The existential problem is not experienced as rational doubt but as personal crisis. Philosophers

working on the problems of suffering and hiddenness, accordingly, have long recognized their discourse is signally unsuited to address this existential problem.<sup>10</sup> Their explanations, according to Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, seem “lame, if not contrived,” when offered as comfort to devout believers in the throes of existential crisis.<sup>11</sup> For such people the problem is not theoretical, some intellectual puzzle to be solved, but experiential, like a searing shock of electricity that concentrates every shred of attention on the immediate pain. Those experiencing the existential problem require something more and other than the explanations traditional theodicies and defenses offer; they require a practical theodicy that shows them the way to live with their experience. As I have already noted, Nagasawa’s problem of divine absence is existential and therefore calls for such a practical response. With this context in place, we can turn to the details of Nagasawa’s problem and the way it is raised in Scorsese’s *Silence*. In the next section, we will consider Nagasawa’s response.

According to Nagasawa, the problem of divine absence is the coincidence of the horrendous suffering of devout believers and God’s hiddenness from them in that experience.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the traditional problem of hiddenness that focuses on nonresistant nonbelievers, the problem of divine absence focuses on the experience devout believers have of God’s hiddenness when they are experiencing horrendous evil. ‘Horrendous evil’ is Marilyn Adams’s term for evil “the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt

whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole."<sup>13</sup> Adams offers such gruesome examples as "the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one's deepest loyalties... parental incest, slow death by starvation. . . the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas."<sup>14</sup> In Scorsese's film, we see people beheaded, scalded to death, crucified, drowned, burnt alive, and hung upside down in pits of offal, all while their friends and families look on. For such people, these are horrendous evils. When those suffering these sorts of meaning destroying evils are devout believers, they experience the problem of divine absence. For such believers, the God whom they have trusted is not just hidden but absent. Suffering and seeing no sign of God poses a threat to the positive value of their lives, because what they most long for is God's redemptive presence. In Nagasawa's view, divine absence is particularly challenging to theists, since it calls into question the existence of the loving God that grounds their sense of identity and gives their lives meaning. Nagasawa argues that the suffering of the Kakure Kirishitans in 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan that Endo's novel *Silence* so vividly presents is an especially extreme example of this problem. As I will show, Scorsese's film raises and elucidates the problem Nagasawa has identified in a distinctive and visceral way that enables viewers to access the excruciating process of estrangement and disorientation that the experience of divine absence entails.



From the very beginning of Scorsese's *Silence*, suffering and God's silence confront the viewer. The film's plot turns on Sabastião Rodrigues and his companion Francisco Garupe's mission to find out what has happened to their superior, Father Christovao Ferreira. One of the last Catholic priests in Japan, Ferreira has fallen silent as the severity of the persecution of Christians has swept across the country. Their quest is personal. As Rodrigues puts it, Ferreira "nurtured us in the faith ... [and] shaped the world for us." Scorsese's film opens at the boiling springs of Unzen in the mountains outside of Nagasaki. The first thing we see are the severed heads of Christians on pikes slowly emerging from the steam. The ambient sounds of cicadas, hissing steam and chatter of the Japanese guards fade to the background as we hear a letter from Ferreira, delivered in his own voice, describe in excruciating detail the torture of priests he has witnessed, their slow death brought on by ladling the scalding spring water over their bodies. As he speaks, the scene at Unzen unfolds before our eyes. The voiceover continues in a steady reflective tone altogether incongruous with the shaken expression we observe on Ferreira's face as he is forced by his captors to look upon this torture. Ferreira's letter expresses deep admiration for these martyrs who would not renounce their faith, concluding: "The story of their courage has become almost legend. They give hope to those of us who remain here, against the shogun's order, to teach the faith. We only grow stronger, in His love."<sup>15</sup> The film, then, cuts to Macao some seven years later, where Rodrigues and his fellow Jesuit, Garupe, are

informed that Ferreira has apostatized and now lives as a Japanese in the service of his former persecutor, the shogun Inoue. They are staggered by the news, profess disbelief, and vow to recover Ferreira even at the cost of their own lives. If he has truly renounced faith, they ask, “what would it mean for *our* faith?” This question encapsulates what becomes Rodrigues’s central struggle, namely, how to maintain faith when God seems to have abandoned the most deeply devoted believers to the most horrific suffering. The doubt this divine absence stirs undermines the hopeful, triumphant narrative Ferreira’s letter tells and the one Rodrigues desperately wants to believe.

A few scenes help show how the problem of divine absence develops in Scorsese’s film and the specific texture it has for Rodrigues. When he and Garupe first arrive in Japan, they are sheltered by the Kakure Kirishitans in the small village of Tomogi just outside Nagasaki. Hiding these priests puts these villagers at significant risk. At one point, government officials, led by the shogun and chief inquisitor Inoue, come to the village. Having been informed of the presence of Christians, they demand the Christians to identify themselves. They also offer substantial rewards to anyone who identifies a Christian. Finally, four men tremblingly step forward to protect the other Christians and the priests. They know they face torture, even execution, if they do not publicly renounce their faith by spitting or trampling upon an image of their beloved savior or the virgin Mary called a *fumie*. As their inquisition continues, Rodrigues, deeply moved by this

demonstration of love for him, for the villagers and for God, reflects in voiceover:

These people are the most devoted of God's creatures on earth ... I confess, I began to wonder. God sends us trials to test us, and everything He does is good. . . . But why must their trial be so terrible? And why, when I look in my own heart, do the answers I give them seem so weak? (51:00).

Rodrigues recognizes in this moment that the answers generally given for suffering—theodicies—can give no substantial relief. In the end, three of the Christians cannot convincingly renounce their faith and are bound to crosses, submerged in the sea, and slowly drowned to death in the ebb and flow of the tide as the villagers look silently on. As Rodrigues observes this gruesome scene, we enter his mind, hearing in his voice the text of a letter addressing his superior in Macao,

You will say that their death was not meaningless. Surely God heard their prayers as they died. But did He hear their screams? How can I explain His silence to these people who have endured so much? I need all my strength to understand it myself. (1:01)

Rodrigues cannot conceive how their suffering and death could be rendered meaningful and cannot ignore God's apparent insensitivity to their 'screams.' In Nagasawa's terms, Rodrigues sees their suffering is horrendous and God's silence to their screaming prayer in their hour of need only exacerbates the problem by rendering it appallingly inexplicable.

After these executions, Rodrigues and Garupe part ways and the film follows Rodrigues in his quest to find Ferreira. In his flight, which he self-

consciously reads as his own *via crucis*, the experience of these crucifixions looms, gripping him more deeply with every step. At one point, Rodrigues, huddled against a rock, prays, cradling a tiny crucifix carved by one of the crucified Christians in his hands. In whispered voiceover, Rodrigues prays:

I feel so tempted. I feel so tempted to despair. I'm afraid. The weight of your silence is terrible. I pray, but I am lost. Or, am I just praying to nothing. Nothing, because you are not there (1:05-1:06).

These lines take a full minute to be delivered in a whispered voiceover that puts viewers in Rodrigues's mind. Scorsese uses a time-lapse effect to communicate the passage of time and the disorienting intensity of this moment. As he prays the last words, he looks up as if realizing for the first time the possibility that the God to whom he prays may not exist. In the script, Rodrigues says, "Despair is the greatest sin, but the mystery of your silence, it crowds my heart."<sup>16</sup> Dispensing with this commentary, Scorsese allows the words "you are not there," hollowly hanging in the emptiness, to communicate the existential crisis that threatens Rodrigues's belief in the God to whom he paradoxically cries. This crisis is only heightened as the film proceeds to its climactic scene in which Rodrigues is forced to apostatize to save five Christians from torture. In the moment before his apostasy, when he is challenged to believe Christ is absent, he desperately protests, "No. No. . . . Christ is here. I just can't hear him" (2:16). This moment, perhaps more than any other, captures the anguish of divine silence—the felt helplessness and abandonment in

the face of horrendous suffering—that is the essence of Nagasawa's problem of divine absence.

As these scenes make clear, Rodrigues's struggle with divine absence is not merely intellectual; it is existential, a crisis of faith. He does not want to hear an explanation—he already feels the feebleness of the available explanations—he wants to hear a voice of consolation; he wants to know personally that he is not alone. As Nagasawa puts it, he is not yearning for a third-person account of how God's love might be consistent with God's hiddenness from devout believers. His demand, like the Psalmist's "Why standest thou afar off, O Lord? Why hidest thou thyself in times of trouble?" (Ps 10:1), is a second-person demand for God's personal presence.

### **III. Nagasawa's response: Cosmic Optimism**

In Nagasawa's view, there really can be no *solution* to the existential problem of divine absence.<sup>17</sup> The available explanations, as Rodrigues himself suggests, are "weak;" they cannot really explain why God does not respond to the "screams" of devoted believers. The suffering of divine absence cannot be simply balanced-off with some greater good in the future; it is an indelible, ineliminable feature permanently fracturing these lives.<sup>18</sup> In the end, all that can be hoped for is a way for devout believers to live with these fractured moments. In this spirit, Nagasawa

offers a way of responding to divine absence—not a solution—that he thinks is available for such believers. His response is based upon some of Endo's other writings and *Silence*, but, significantly, does not emphasize a key aspect of the way that Rodrigues learns to live with the problem. In part, this is because Nagasawa seems to reject as viable the kind of experience Rodrigues has, namely, that God in the person of Jesus *speaks* to him at the very moment he apostatizes. This is evident in the way Nagasawa poses the question to which his response is an answer:

How can we solve or address the experiential problem of divine absence if the only way to solve it fully satisfactorily is that God breaks His silence and eliminates the pain and suffering of the victims of horrendous evil or at least explains why He cannot help them? In this case, no successful *solution* to the problem is available to us, because God does remain silent.<sup>19</sup>

It may be that Nagasawa takes the voice Rodrigues hears as not breaking silence, since it offers neither explanation nor relief, only accompaniment. He might also reject this possibility, because such breaking of silence is not something one can simply make happen. In any case, Nagasawa is not only saying that philosophical explanations fail to resolve the existential problem in view, but that the most obvious experiential solution, God's breaking silence, is also off the table.<sup>20</sup> That leaves believers to find some other means for enduring the absence of God.

Nagasawa argues that the experience of divine absence itself can be a germinal moment of faith or the beginning of true religion. He cites the following passages from Endo's autobiographical work *Watashi Ni Totte Kami Towa* (What

is God for Me) as inspiration for this claim:

“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Without this, true religion does not even start. Imagine, for example, that a child is dying from leukemia. Her parents pray hard. Yet, the child dies. . . . So there is no God, and there is no Buddha. That’s the essence of ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’ But that is precisely where true religion starts. People start thinking seriously about what religion really is when they face the very situation which compels them to think that there is no God and no Buddha.<sup>21</sup>

Later in that same work, Endo writes:

But if faith does not go through such [cry of derelictions type questions] it is not true faith. It’s not true religion. Conversely, believers who avoid these questions are not true believers. No matter how far we go it is unlikely that we can resolve all the problems. Yet our effort to always keep in mind these problems and tackle them represents true faith and true religion; an attempt to solve all of them easily and quickly does not.<sup>22</sup>

The lesson Nagasawa draws from Endo is that the experience of god-forsakenness at the heart of Jesus’s cry of dereliction is the moment true religion begins and that such genuine religion not only begins with this experience, it holds onto it, resisting easy *solutions*, in the recognition that there just are not any available to such cognitively limited beings as humans are. Nagasawa calls the attitude Endo describes ‘cosmic optimism’ and characterizes it this way:

Cosmic optimism is not epistemic confidence but an *attitude* that believers can choose to hold with respect to the place of humans in the universe. This is an attitude of hope that the gap in our cognitive and epistemic capacity corresponds to the puzzlement raised by divine absence. Cosmic optimists regard their encounters with divine absence not as an end of their faith but as an opportunity to embrace cognitive and epistemic humility.<sup>23</sup>

The way he sees it, the problem of divine absence may well lead one to view the world as religiously negative, that is, “more compatible with the non-existence of God rather than with the existence of God,” but for devout believers it is possible to hold onto the hope that “all is good on a cosmic scale.”<sup>24</sup> He emphasizes that this response is not one that he is presenting to nonbelievers or even those with a weak faith commitment, but to devout believers experiencing this problem. He writes, “we seek instead a *response* to the problem which suggests how devout believers can accept the problem yet try to live with it without giving up their faith.”<sup>25</sup> He concludes by pointing to the way Rodrigues maintains faith after his apostasy and throughout the years he lives as a Japanese in service to Inoue’s government. “Rodrigues’s new faith,” he writes, “takes divine absence seriously but does not undermine itself as it retains a small portion of optimism.”<sup>26</sup> So, for Nagasawa, devout believers can live with divine absence—the horrendous evil and divine hiddenness—by accepting its reality and holding out the hope that all is well from a cosmic point of view, i.e., having an attitude of cosmic optimism. Crucially, this attitude is compatible with substantial existential doubt.

While this attitude of cosmic optimism may describe a way of maintaining faith and living with divine absence, it does not explain how the devout believers make their way to this attitude, or how precisely the experience of divine absence could possibly prompt such an attitude. It is difficult to imagine Rodrigues telling himself, after he has apostatized, that he should maintain some hope, be optimistic:



Who knows all may be good on a cosmic scale? It is harder still to imagine that such a thought could be any real response to the existential anguish he is experiencing in that moment. It seems unlikely from a psychological point of view that he or anyone experiencing divine absence could simply decide to adopt this attitude of optimism. This attitude of hope itself needs some grounding in experience; it cannot rest on the intellectual recognition that human beings are too cognitively limited to solve the puzzle of divine absence. The problem is that Nagasawa takes the experience of divine absence itself to be the beginning of cosmic optimism without adequately explaining how. What practices enable devout believers to cultivate cosmic optimism? Endo's testimony is suggestive, since he says that the cry of dereliction is the start of true religion. While Nagasawa sees the importance of this cry as entering into and holding onto the fact of divine absence, he does not spell out how this cry itself is related to the attitude of cosmic optimism. Perhaps it is the active participation with Christ in this lament of divine absence, not simply the passive suffering of it, that grounds cosmic optimism in experience. So, the question is how devout believers can participate in that cry in a way that generates the faith and hope characteristic of this attitude. If we understand a practical theodicy as a way of responding to the existential problem, then the question is what practices engender cosmic optimism. This is a question to which, I think, Scorsese's *Silence*, viewed through an Ignatian lens, offers an answer.

#### IV. *Silence as Spiritual Exercise*

Reading Scorsese's film through the lens of Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* helps shed light on the way Rodrigues ultimately deals with the problem of divine absence and suggests a way the film itself might offer viewers, regardless of their religious commitments, the possibility of vicariously encountering the problem of divine absence in a productive way.

Since the founding of the Society of Jesus or Jesuit order in 1540, Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* have played a central role in the training and spiritual practice of the members of this order. In the film, as in the novel, Rodrigues and Garupe are both Jesuits and as such would have worked their way through the intense thirty-day series of meditations that comprise the *Spiritual Exercises* during their novitiate and again just before taking their vows during their 'tertianship.' The practices of this manual would have shaped their whole attitude toward the world as well as their understanding of their mission. Scorsese's script indicates a deep awareness of this fact, quoting directly from the *Exercises* at several key points. Moreover, the film itself bears the marks of a person familiar with the way this spiritual practice works, not just in the way the scenes are set up and shot, but also in the way the audience is drawn into Rodrigues's thoughts and prayers.<sup>27</sup>

*The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola are essentially a series of guided meditations aimed at helping people discover how they can best serve God

and reflect the image of Christ. What is most distinctive about the *Exercises* is their use of the imagination in the process of seeking divine guidance. Exercitants are asked to imagine particular ideas or scenes from the life of Jesus, in the latter case carefully applying their senses, considering how the scene looks, what it smells like, what people are saying and the like. The expectation is that in this imaginative space exercitants will find some revelation about their path in life and their relation to God. Each meditation concludes with a colloquy in which the exercitant speaks to God or before God as a friend about whatever the meditation has brought to the surface. As Roland Barthes suggests, there is multiplicity at the heart of the *Exercises*; it is a text that generates texts. The spiritual director offers a text to the exercitant in the form of a presentation of the exercise to be performed, then the exercitant writes another text, “an acted text made up of the meditation, gestures, and practices given him by his director.” This acted and embodied text, then, is directed toward God in the prayers, colloquia, and meditations in the hope that God will respond, speaking in some way through the images to reveal some spiritual truth. The text understood in this sense is dramatic, active and dialogic. Throughout the *Exercises*, which are divided into four weeks, the aim is to elect a path that best fulfills the purpose of praising and serving God in the process of saving one’s soul.<sup>28</sup> While the first week is purgative, focusing on the way one’s wrongdoing has alienated one from God, the rest of the weeks largely focus on contemplating moments in the life, passion and resurrection of Jesus with a view to attaining love.

Ultimately, the exercitant seeks, through identification with Christ, to imitate Christ in whatever vocation he or she should choose.

Rodrigues's entire outlook on the world might be understood as an outgrowth of the practices of the *Exercises*. His constant lapsing into colloquy, identification of his experiences with moments in the life of Christ, his passion in particular, are the most obvious connections. An excellent example of the way the exercises shape Rodrigues's experience and outlook comes when he is fleeing Tomogi, after the Kakure Kirishitans have been crucified. In their fraught conversation before they leave, Garupe suggests these Christians have died for them, that they are responsible for their deaths, something Rodrigues vehemently rejects. But, aboard the tiny boat that moves quietly over the night dark sea, as Rodrigues trails his hand in the water, sucking the salty drops from his fingers, he prays, "I imagine your son nailed to the cross, and my mouth tastes like vinegar" (1:02-1:03). This image is precisely the one used in the colloquy that concludes the first exercise. And, just as that exercise prompts the exercitant to consider their wrongdoing and alienation from God, Rodrigues struggles with his own mission, reflecting, "I am just a foreigner who brought disaster. That's what they think of me now . . ." He is at sea, over dark waters, in the mists, as Scorsese presents the scene. Shame, sorrow and bewilderment envelope Rodrigues as he walks through a devastated and abandoned village he had only recently found so joyfully receiving the gospel and the sacraments. He leans, exhausted, against a building and prays.

We see him from the back and hear him in voiceover ask exactly the questions one is to consider in the colloquy at the end of the first exercise: “What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What will I do for Christ?” (1:04)<sup>29</sup> This scene may be read as an enactment of this part of the exercises in which one imagines oneself “as bound, helpless, [and] alienated.”<sup>30</sup> Rodrigues, feeling the horror of being the harbinger of disaster, prays, “The weight of your silence is terrible. I pray, but I am lost. Or, am I just praying to nothing. Nothing, because you are not there” (1:05-1:06). As in the exercises, this alienation prompts a desire to accompany Jesus and feel the true depths of divine love. This is a moment of purgation in the exercises. In the film, the scene acts as a bridge to the path that more and more resembles Christ’s passion in Rodrigues’s eyes, a path that notably leads through the experience of divine absence.

Focusing on the way Rodrigues reads his life as an imitation of Christ suggests a response to Nagasawa’s problem of divine absence that might make the cosmic optimism he recommends available for devout believers. When exercitants consider the passion, they are to “ask for grief with Christ in grief, anguish with Christ in anguish, tears and interior pain at such great pain which Christ suffered for [them].”<sup>31</sup> They are to consider the sufferings of Christ at the time of the Passion, not simply as a bystanders, but as Christ himself felt them. As one commentary on this meditation suggests, they are to “pay special attention to how the divinity hides itself so that Jesus seems so utterly human and helpless [and]

should make every effort to get inside the Passion, not just staying with external sufferings, but entering the loneliness, the interior pain of rejection and feeling hated, the anguish within Jesus.”<sup>32</sup> This exercise prompts reflection on what Christ’s kenosis and sacrifice entailed, and in particular, what it felt like for Jesus to experience the hiddenness of God at the moment of his greatest suffering. As Gerard Hughes, S.J., reminds exercitants, “Whenever and whatever we read of Christ in the Gospels, we are also reading our own self-portrait, for Christ is what we are called to be.”<sup>33</sup>

In the film, we watch Rodrigues enacts this exercise, explicitly coming to read his own self-portrait as Christ. Early in the film, just before he sets out from Macao, Rodrigues recalls an image of Christ’s face he had first encountered as a novice, reflecting

He looks as he must have when He commanded Peter, ‘Feed my lambs, feed my lambs, feed my sheep.’ . . . It’s a face filled with vigor and strength. It fascinates me. I feel such great love for it.  
(12:46)

As we hear these words, Scorsese cuts to the image itself, one chosen to communicate the deep compassion that must have been in Christ’s eyes as he caringly restores Peter after his denial.<sup>34</sup> Scorsese’s inspired choice to use a painting by El Greco in which Christ, crowned with thorns, looks out from the cross with openly loving eyes captures Rodrigues’s own shifting picture of Christ. Early in Endo’s book, the image of Christ’s face that rises in his mind is Piero della

Francesca's painting of the resurrection.<sup>35</sup> There, Christ stands strong and triumphant with one foot on the sepulcher, the Roman guards struck unconscious in the foreground. As Rodrigues more closely identifies with Christ's passion, he sees the humiliated, compassionate face of Christ suffering on the cross. This shift has implications for what imitating Christ means for Rodrigues. Whereas he formerly hoped for a glorious martyrdom, perhaps seeing himself eventually standing in triumph upon his own grave, he now sees the crown of thorns. Just before Rodrigues is betrayed into the hands of the Shogun's guards, Rodrigues, delirious from thirst, drinks from a stream and sees his own reflected face literally become this image of Christ for an instant (1:11-1:12). Scorsese uses this moment to communicate Rodrigues's entry into what he (and we viewers with him) will experience as a version of the passion. This identification with Christ is essential for understanding how Rodrigues deals with the problem of divine absence, since it is in his solidarity with Christ's suffering that he finds himself able to bear God's silence. The *Exercises* have primed Rodrigues to find God in all things, even the horror he encounters after his arrest. Attending to the stations on Rodrigues's way of the cross and their connection to Ignatius's *Exercises* both in content and practice shows how Scorsese's *Silence* indicates a way to achieve the cosmic optimism in the face of divine absence that Nagasawa recommends.

## **V. Rodrigues's Passion: Spiritual Practice as Practical Theodicy**

In what follows, I walk through these stations along Rodrigues's way in order to demonstrate that his practice of engaging his suffering, specifically his experience of divine absence, as an extended meditation on Christ's passion is what enables him to find his way to cosmic optimism. This practice, I will argue, constitutes a practical theodicy.

After his arrest, Rodrigues undergoes severe psychological torture. He is forced at one point to witness his beloved fellow priest Garupe—who would not apostatize to save several Christians from being drowned at sea—himself drown in an effort to keep them from going under. He has seen another Christian he was imprisoned with decapitated, because he refused to apostatize. Scorsese at this point shows Rodrigues agonizing over Christ's cry of dereliction. In the scene, Rodrigues is huddled in his cell at night, while a festival remembering the dead goes on in the background. Scorsese uses a montage sequence that cuts to Garupe's corpse floating in the sea and to the beheaded man being dragged across the courtyard, as Rodrigues utters in a loud weeping whisper:

My God, my god, why have you forsaken me? Why have you forsaken me? It's your son. Your son's words on the cross. . . . You were silent. Even to Him. Silent. Cold. Silent. . . . No. no. Ludicrous. Ludicrous. Stupid. Stupid. (1:55)

In this moment, Rodrigues realizes that Jesus experienced God's silence, God's absence, and momentarily enters the words he utters, joining in the first-person



pronoun Jesus and every other person who used those words to express their lamentation at God's absence. The thought is ludicrous to him: how could God be hidden from the incarnate? This scene suggests a way for Rodrigues to deal with the silence, but it is one that, at first, he finds most difficult to enter, though he is gaining what Ignatius calls interior knowledge of Christ's suffering. In terms of the *Exercises*, he is being invited to stand with Jesus in the moment of god-forsakenness in order to truly understand Christ's love. As he later reads his situation, he is identifying with Christ in Gethsemane, praying that this cup of suffering be taken from him (Matthew 26.39).

Not until the night of his final ordeal does Rodrigues seem to submit fully to the humiliation of Christ's own passion. Just before the meditations on the passion, the *Exercises* invite the exercitant to beg Jesus to be chosen for the most perfect humility, namely, to "want and choose poverty with Christ poor rather than wealth; contempt with Christ laden with it rather than honors. Even further ... to be regarded as a useless fool for Christ, who before me was regarded as such, rather than as a wise or prudent person in this world."<sup>36</sup> The point is "to evoke a desire to be as like to Christ as possible in an attitude of loving humility, no matter what the cost."<sup>37</sup> While Rodrigues had always desired to imitate Christ, he had formerly seen only the glory and triumph of this imitation, not the suffering and humiliation. At this point, as he approaches his final trial, the true cost of the latter comes sharply into focus.

As Scorsese sets the climactic scene, Rodrigues, in a state of anguish, is forced to choose to renounce his faith to save five Kakure Kirishitans who are hanging upside down in pits of offal and filth before his eyes. They had already apostatized many times, but their torture continues. Having heard their groans all night, Rodrigues is in agony. Ferreira is there, prodding him to apostatize, telling him:

A priest should act in imitation of Christ. If Christ were here. . . . If Christ were here He would have acted. Apostatized. For their sake. Christ would certainly have done at least that to help men. (2:15)<sup>38</sup>

Ferreira's lines highlight the fact that for Rodrigues the imitation of Christ involves something more difficult than the sacrifice of his body in a martyr's death, namely, the sacrifice of his religious identity. Christ's own death, motivated by his compassion for those rejected, alienated and humiliated, rendered him ritually accursed, an exile and infidel according to his religion. It is this imitation of Christ's love that Ferreira urges. In the end, Rodrigues can bear their suffering no longer. As he stands before the *fumie*, looking upon the face of Christ worn smooth by all who had forsaken their faith, he hears:

Come ahead now. It's all right. Step on Me. I understand your pain. I was born into this world to share men's pain. I carried this cross for your pain. Step. Your life is with Me now. Show Me your love. (2:17)

In response to the voice, he steps. In the script, Scorsese writes, "His foot touches the *fumie*. . . . the beautiful face he loved . . . the face he loved most in the world."<sup>39</sup>

The moment is shot in slow motion, close up on his foot, Rodrigues stepping and crumpling to the ground, humiliated by the act of love. There is no sound and the viewer feels the devastation as Rodrigues rejects what he had understood to be the meaning of his life, paradoxically entering through this rejection into Christ's mercy more deeply than ever before. Years later, after having lived as a Japanese serving his inquisitor Inoue, an exile from his native land and church, Rodrigues's betrayer approaches him and asks for absolution, an act whereby a priest releases a person from their sin in the sacrament of penance. After he protests that he cannot perform the sacrament of penance, having apostatized, we hear him pray, "Lord, I fought against Your silence" and hear Jesus answer, "I suffered beside you. I was never silent" (2:27). He then whispers the following:

I know. . . . But even if God had been silent, my life . . . to this very day . . . everything I do . . . everything I've done . . . speaks of Him. It was in the silence that I heard Your voice.

The play between the second and third person suggest the paradox at the center of the incarnation. God remains third-person and distant, while this whispered prayer addresses Jesus in the intimate second-person. Rodrigues hears Jesus's voice and enters into his passion and exile, and like Jesus his life becomes an image of God's love, and yet there remains a sense in which God is still silent. This is the humility of standing with Christ. The script provocatively quotes from the prologue to the Gospel of John when Rodrigues is first arrested: "And the word was with God, and the word was God" (John 1:1). The prologue goes on to say: "And the word was

made flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Like Christ, Rodrigues’s life has spoken God’s word insofar as he has abandoned everything for the sake of love, God’s true essence. This is how silence speaks.<sup>40</sup>

Nagasawa rejects the possibility that God would break silence as a viable solution to the existential problem of divine absence, because he takes God’s breaking silence to involve explaining why divine help is impossible or to involve the direct relief of suffering. But, *Silence* suggests an alternative path, one of accompaniment in suffering. The inbreaking voice does not come from on high, but from beside as a cry of lamentation. Rodrigues’s story suggests that in the experience of divine absence, in the cry of dereliction itself, devout believers may experience solidarity with Jesus, hearing in their own cries the very human voice of Jesus. In the film, this experience of solidarity is signaled by the voice of Jesus, allowing God both to speak and remain silent, to be present in absence. In Rodrigues’s case, stepping into the self-emptying love by stepping onto the beloved emblem of his faith marks the moment that the Pauline phrase, “I—but not I—Christ”, applies (Galatians 2:20). Rodrigues’s self, abandoned and negated out of love for the suffering, is now one with Christ’s self. This is not a solution; it is a response. In the act of lamentation and sacrificial love, Rodrigues finds Jesus present in divine absence.

## VI. Conclusion: Film as Practical Theodicy

Rodrigues's close identification with Christ, in particular with his suffering and experience of divine absence, provides the experiential grounding necessary for the doubt-infused hope of cosmic optimism to emerge. Unlike Nagasawa's version of cosmic optimism, however, it is not based in a recognition of human cognitive limitations so much as personal identification with the human Christ who suffers with human beings. Rodrigues's example also suggests a path or set of practices that might enable devout believers to make their way to this experience. His ability to use the techniques of Ignatian meditation to imaginatively identify with Christ ultimately enable him to gain interior knowledge of Christ's presence in his experience of divine absence, most notably, in his act of lamentation, the cry of dereliction. Rodrigues, then, offers a practical response to the problem of divine absence, a practical theodicy. I contend, however, that this response is not merely displayed as an illustration for viewers of the film, a kind of how-to guide for dealing with the problem of divine absence; Scorsese's film itself can be a practical theodicy.

Scorsese's *Silence* engages the imagination in the sort of ways Ignatius of Loyola describes, drawing viewers into Rodrigues's experience of divine absence and his response both. As Sergei Eisenstein, whose film theory draws significantly from Ignatius's *Exercises* contends:

A work of art, understood dynamically, is also a process of forming images in the mind of the spectator. Herein lies the peculiar quality of every genuinely vital work of art, which distinguishes it from a lifeless piece of work in which the spectator is presented with a depiction of the results of a certain past creative process instead of being drawn into a permanently occurring process.<sup>41</sup>

We can see *Silence*, then, as a practical theodicy in the sense that it draws viewers into the process Rodrigues himself is drawn into. Paul Fraser, in his discussion of the sacramental aspect of film, connects this mystical experience of union with *The Spiritual Exercises*:

Ignatius was content with art of our pure imagination through the means of contemplation of religious experience and Christian doctrine. Cinema projects the contemplation forward to the screen and then draws the individual to it.<sup>42</sup>

Like a sacrament, cinema can render the imperceptible perceptible. Cinema, understood as a process mediated through the composition of place and the application of the senses—practices upon which the *Exercises* turn—allows viewers vicariously to experience the problem of divine absence and invites them to create their own text, as Barthes suggest, mimetically reflecting the experience of Rodrigues. As a consequence, viewers potentially enter into the knowledge Rodrigues himself enters into, namely, the intimate knowledge that personification of love effects between him and Christ. Even a viewer, then, who has no antecedent opinion about the existence of God, may experience the doubt and despair endured by the characters by means of the simulation the cinematic situation generates. Even if such viewers do not experience the shattering of meaning and identity that the

believers depicted do, they feel what this experience is like for those believers. As Aristotle recognized, mimetic works of art engage emotions and with them beliefs, offering some sort of revelation in return. The central emotion at play in the film is love and its counterpart mercy. Viewers not only feel mercy for Rodrigues: they feel the mercy he feels for the victims being tortured, and are drawn with him into the response that alters and paradoxically affirms his faith. *Silence*, by engaging experience in this way, does not allow viewers to stand aloof, encountering only a cognitive version of this problem to puzzle through. Instead, it arouses some version of the existential problem itself and offers a taste of the strange consolation that Rodrigues seems to attain. In this way, *Silence* can itself be a practical theodicy, providing the grounding experience necessary to live with the problem of divine absence.

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<sup>1</sup> Kentaro Miyazaki, "Roman Catholic Mission in Pre-Modern Japan" in Mark Mullins, *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, Handbuch Der Orientalistik. Fünfte Abteilung Japan; 10. Bd. Leiden; (Boston, MA: Brill, 2003), 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Silence*. Directed by Martin Scorsese (2016; Hollywood, Paramount, 2017), DVD. All subsequent quotations in this paper from the film are taken from this version.

<sup>3</sup> Yujin Nagasawa, "Silence, Evil and Shusaku Endo," in *Hidden Divinity: New Perspectives*. Eds. Adam Green and Eleonore Stump, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 246-59.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1999), 181 ff.; Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5-12.

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<sup>5</sup> This recognition of cognitive and epistemic limitation suggests a kinship between this response and what is known as skeptical theism, a view that argues that our limitations render the project of theodicy impossible. Nagasawa acknowledges this relationship but insists that his cognitive optimism is distinct, implying that it is based somehow in the experience of devout believers not intellectual insight (cf. Nagasawa, 258). Since Nagasawa does not adequately address the nature of this grounding experience, the cosmic optimism he recommends still seems to depend on the intellectual recognition of our limitations along with a conviction of God's goodness.

<sup>6</sup> The literature on Ignatius of Loyola's *The Spiritual Exercises* is vast, and the distinctions between meditation and contemplation as well as the roles that composition of place and the application of the senses play in these modes of prayer are subtle and many. Nevertheless, the fundamental idea that by means of carefully constructing a scene, imagining every perceptible texture of that space, one is able to hear God speak is not in dispute. For the purposes of this essay, the idea that film assists viewers in composition of this space and thereby creates the possibility of revelation is all that I am claiming.

<sup>7</sup> In what follows, I will use silence and absence interchangeably, since God's silence is experienced by Rodrigues as absence as will become apparent in what follows.

<sup>8</sup> J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Cornell University Press 1993). His basic argument is this:

- (1) There are people who are capable of relating personally to God but who, through no fault of their own, fail to believe.
- (2) If there is a personal God who is unsurpassably great, then there are no such people.
- (3) So, there is no such God. (from 1 and 2)

<sup>9</sup> Van Inwagen, 5-12.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Plantinga; Adams; Van Inwagen. Op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, eds., *Divine Hiddenness*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Nagasawa, 249.

<sup>13</sup> Adams, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Jay Cocks and Martin Scorsese, *Silence* (2015), 3, accessed June 28, 2017, <http://www.paramountguilds.com/pdf/silence.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Nagasawa is careful to distance himself from the anti-theodicy position that contends theodicies always fail to respond to the problem of evil. Some, like Terrance Tilley [*The Evils of Theodicy* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1991)], reckon theodicy as an evil itself, while others like Ricoeur argue that theoretical answers to the problem of suffering never completely overcome the suffering itself, because they require complainants—those experiencing existential suffering—to stand silent. The successful defense renders the charges illegitimate and further complaint inappropriate. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Nagasawa thinks the project of theodicy is legitimate and may even have limited value for those suffering existentially. My own view is more in line with Ricoeur's, but that is not directly relevant to the argument here.



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<sup>18</sup> Adams, herself, is insistent on this point. Part of what distinguishes horrendous evils from ordinary evils is that they just cannot be justified by any ends.

<sup>19</sup> Nagasawa, 256. The 'solution' Nagasawa appears to be rejecting here is constituted both by God's breaking silence and by God's giving an explanation, though he does not distinguish these two moments. In my view, Rodrigues experiences only the first moment, namely, God's voice, not the second, God's explanation.

<sup>20</sup> Nagasawa's rejection is based in part on the view that God's breaking silence would involve explaining why assistance is not possible or direct relief of the suffering. But, as I will argue, God might break silence without offering an explanation or direct relief of the suffering.

<sup>21</sup> Shusaku Endo, *Watashi No Iesu (My Jesus)*, (Tokyo: Kombusha, 1988/1983), 71-2, as cited in Nagasawa, 256. The translation is Nagasawa's.

<sup>22</sup> Endo, *Watashi No Iesu (My Jesus)*, 200-1, as cited in Nagasawa, 257. The translation is Nagasawa's.

<sup>23</sup> Nagasawa, 258.

<sup>24</sup> Nagasawa, 257.

<sup>25</sup> Nagasawa, 258.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> It is worth mentioning that Andrew Garfield (who plays Rodrigues) spent a year going through the *Exercises* with Father James Martin, S.J. Garfield found the experience life altering: "the *Exercises* changed me and transformed me ... showed me who I was ... and where I believe God wants me to be" (Brendan Busse, Film, *America Magazine*, January 10, 2017, <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2017/01/10/andrew-garfield-played-jesuit-silence-he-didnt-expect-fall-love-jesus>). According to Martin, himself a consultant for the film, "Andrew got to the point where he could out-Jesuit a Jesuit. ... There were places in the script where he would stop and say, 'A Jesuit wouldn't say that,' and we would come up with something else." (Paul Elie, "The Passion of Martin Scorsese," *New York Times Magazine*, November 21, 2016, <https://nyti.ms/2ffEpPV>). Both Garfield's and Martin's input helped to make the film bear not only the marks of Jesuit tradition but also reflect the spiritual practice of Ignatius of Loyola.

<sup>28</sup> George E. Ganss, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary*, (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1992), 169.

<sup>29</sup> Ganss, 42, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Fleming, David L., *Draw Me into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of The Spiritual Exercises*. (St. Louis, MO.: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 42-3.

<sup>31</sup> Ganss, 83; Fleming, David L., *Draw Me into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of The Spiritual Exercises*. (St. Louis, MO.: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 152.

<sup>32</sup> Fleming, 152.

<sup>33</sup> Gerard Hughes, *God of Surprises*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 113, quoted in Ernest C. Ferlita, "The Road to Bethlehem—Is it Level or Winding?" *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 29/5 (November, 1997), 21.

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<sup>34</sup> Antonio Spadaro S.I., "Silence Interview with Martin Scorsese," *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3996 (2016), 15. Scorsese says, "I chose the face of Christ painted by El Greco, because I thought it was more compassionate than the one painted by Pietro."

<sup>35</sup> Shusaku Endo, *Silence*. (New York: Picador, 2016, 1969), 21. Endo argues elsewhere that Western Christianity has overemphasized the triumphant Christ, failing to appreciate Christ's defeat, failure, and humiliation [cf. Shusaku Endo, *A Life of Jesus*, trans. Richard Schuchert (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1973/1978), 84].

<sup>36</sup> Ganss, 73.

<sup>37</sup> Ganss, 7.

<sup>38</sup> While Ferreira's words ring true for Rodrigues, it is never clear whether Ferreira is able to understand his own apostasy this way. He seems to maintain a bitterness regarding God's absence. Even as he speaks these lines, it is as if he is saying "There is no Christ, so you need to step up and be Christ."

<sup>39</sup> Jay Cocks and Martin Scorsese, *Silence* (2015), 112.

<sup>40</sup> Jay Cocks and Martin Scorsese, *Silence* (2015), 63.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Lefebvre, "Eisenstein, rhetoric and imaginicity: towards a revolutionary *memoria*," *Screen* 41/4 (2000), 360.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Fraser, *Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 5.

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