

A Dilemma for Obedience

An analysis of Japanese Christian Ethics in *Silence* by Shusaku Endo

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1. Introduction

Freedom of religion had been assured since World War II in Japan. This entails that people have rights to select their own religion without any political pressure and that their faith and practices should be esteemed. It is indeed true that they are liberated from any religious restriction. There are, however, still some limitations or challenges Christians experience in the Japanese context today due to the challenging, customs, and practices of Shinto or Buddhism. Japanese Christians are sometimes forced to follow such traditions which may lead to disobey God.

Silence, written by Shusaku Endo, [1] illustrates a dilemma of the last Catholic priest, Rodrigues, to Japan during the Edo period. [2] He is urged to choose either obedience to governmental regulation, thereby apostatizing from his faith but saving his Japanese Christian fellows. Or to disobedience to that commandment and in doing so to be killed. This paper will deal with his ultimate decision as one example of many impasses Japanese Christians experience. It is significant to examine Rodrigues' conflict because it will lead us to the point of how Christians in Japan need to respond in order to understand what it really means to obey and glorify God in difficult circumstances. This paper will discuss the following questions: (1) What are the significant Christian issues between human authority and God, in *Silence* by Shusaku Endo? (2) What is true living God to Christians in Japan?

The paper will first outline the historical background of the *Edo* period and the setting in *Silence*, and sketch the overview of that literature. An analysis of the Rodrigues' predicament will then follow. After examining his conflict, applications to modern Japanese Christianity will be investigated from the point of biblical teaching.

2. Historical background

A. Christianity in Japan

Francis Xavier, the first Roman Catholic priest from the Jesuit, came to Japan and delivered the gospel in 1549. Despite difficulty in communicating and bringing Christianity, the Western thought, the seed of Christianity began to spread over Japan. Many of the Japanese people believed in Christianity after Xavier's coming. [3] Nevertheless, the Japanese government was afraid that the Roman Catholic power would affect its political situation negatively. Hideyoshi Toyotomi, [4] the most powerful leader in Japan during the last quarter of the fifteenth century, considered Christianity "as a kind of potential spiritual force for speeding up the unification process." [5] As a result, he promulgated anti-Christian edicts.

After the union of the nation of Japan by Ieyasu Tokugawa [6] in 1603, persecution erupted more rigorously. Christians and priests were tortured and threatened to deny their faith, if not, they were killed. [7] Tokugawa decided to exile all priests in 1614. In spite of this proclamation, it is reported that forty-seven priests remained in Japan. [8] Since Japanese Christians were not able to practice their beliefs in public, they continued to keep their belief personal and practiced worship in secret. These people were known as crypto-Christians. [9]

In addition, Tokugawa started national seclusion [10] in order to control the nation's stability, as well as to avoid Christian impact in 1639.

B. Overview of *Silence*

The setting of *Silence* is in the early seventeenth century, when the rejection of Christianity was very stringent. The main character is Sebastian Rodrigues, a young Jesuit, from Portugal. The story starts when Rodrigues hears the news that his mentor, Christovao Ferreira, who inspired Rodrigues to spread the gospel, apostatizes his faith under severe torture in Japan. Being unable to believe the information, Rodrigues makes a decision to travel to Japan to confirm this impossible report. [11] Garrpe and Sebastian meet a Japanese man, Kichijirō, [12] in Macao while they are still heading to Japan. Kichijirō becomes a guide for the two priests.

The three finally arrive in Japan. Rodrigues sees the reality of terrible persecution against Christians. Christians were urged to reject Christianity; otherwise, they would be murdered. The government uses an approach, called *fumie*, [13] to determine whether they are Christians or not and to promote disloyalty toward God. The governor of Chikugo [14] thought that the most effective method to eradicate Christianity was to subvert Christians and priests' faith.

Rodrigues was arrested by the Japanese government on account of the treachery of Kichijirō for three hundred pieces of silver. Rodrigues sees Ferreira being turned into a *bonze*, [15] wearing traditional clothes of a Buddhist bonze, and having a wife under the persecution. Rodrigues was then urged to stamp on *fumie*. He had to choose either to keep his faith, which would cause his fellow Japanese Christians to suffer under torture, or to deny his faith in his Father in order to free his Christian companions. After enduring severe anguish, he eventually performs *fumie*. The narrative ends with Rodrigues' completely different person. Like Ferreira, he was forced to live in a Buddhist temple, wear the bonze clothing and marry and have children.

3. Analysis of Rodrigues' dilemma

A. Rodrigues' Vacillation

Rodrigues' dilemma can be tracked with the expression of his image of Jesus Christ in the text. It is his usual custom to think about Christ as he images of Christ in the entire writing. At the beginning, he lifts his faith up and has no doubt of encouraging the Japanese people to convert to Christianity. For him, Christ is "the most beautiful and powerful being to be praised and glorified" in his life at that moment. [16] This face was rooted in his education and training in his childhood and as a seminary student. He has brought his Western Christian values to Japan.

While Rodrigues is preaching and sharing the gospel with the Japanese citizens, he imagined himself to be reflecting by describing Christ with a pure picture:

From childhood I have clasped that face to my breast just like the person who romantically idealizes the countenance of one he loves. While I was still a student,...his beautiful face would rise up in my heart. [17]

However, as Rodrigues confronts the awful reality of martyred Japanese Christians and the atrocious tactics by the government. Against his will, his attitude toward justice and faith gradually erodes away. One day, he went to the pond. In the water, he saw the face of

Jesus. What he saw was a face that was “tired,...heavy with mud and with stubble; it was thin and dirty...” [18] Rodrigues himself is physically, spiritually, and extremely tired under the severe proclamation of anti-Christianity by the government. His mind continues to waver to seek the ultimate answer of an apostate or a martyr. His Christian values and convictions regarding Christianity have gradually been distorted. To some degree, his pure decisive belief brought from his home has been transformed to the sadness of lost faith. Thus, this transformed picture of Christ’s face depicts this personal transformation. This is his turning point where his image of Christ becomes not one that is perfectly beautiful.

After having been arrested, Rodrigues becomes mentally unstable. He sometimes tries to bolster his faith and by imaging Christ’s face watching him gently. [19] On the other hand, at one point, he visualizes Jesus as an “ugly face...crowned with thorns and the thin, outstretched arms.” [20] His churning mind is identified with his images of Christ. From his experience, he learns Christianity is not been lived in the way people in its country. He first realizes there is another value and image of Jesus in a different culture and struggles with this disparity. His evolving representation of Christ illustrates his transforming worldview. Elimination of Christianity and its harmful image are unconsciously and gradually insinuated into his mind.

B. Silence of God

Rodrigues asserts that God never speaks to him even when he himself experiences extreme torture or when he witnesses the horrible scenes of suffering in his Christian circles. He continues to pray and ask God to guide him. Even in prison, he prays to God, “Lord, why are you silent? Why are you always silent....?” [21]

When Rodrigues is guided to another prison, he observes from the boat a village that used to be a Christian village. He perceives the cruel scene of that village; it has been burned and destroyed and all its residents have been expelled. He is so disconsolate and questions God, “Why have you abandoned us so completely? ...Even when the people are cast out of their homes, have you not given them courage? Have you just remained silent...?” [22]

In one instance, Rodrigues is forced to witness the torment of three Christians, who have denied their faith. But they have not been forgiven because Garrpe, a priest company of Rodrigues, has not relinquished his loyalty to the Father. They have no way of being saved from being thrown into the sea and their hands and feet are tied. Garrpe himself dies as a result of trying to rescue his friends. Having seen this event, Rodrigues passionately asks the Lord. “You are silent. Even in this moment are you silent?” [23] All through this, Rodrigues has been suffering and seeking God’s voice, guidance, or consolation, which he never hears until the moment he is finally urged to step on fumie.

Rodrigues entreats God to answer him immediately. He can not withstand his harsh suffering and witness of the torture of his Christian friends. This silence to him means that the Lord will not take any action to rescue the anguished Christians. Instead of seeing His victory, he only receives “the awful silence of God.” [24]

C. Fumie

After the long and painful maltreatment, Inoue, the governor of Chikugo, places Rodrigues in the most appalling condition. He has Rodrigues suffer continually. He demands that Rodrigues deny his faith. The alternative is that his Christian companies would also suffer [25] in front of him. Rodrigues’ mind oscillates between the two options. Should he renounce his commitment to Christ even if it means that he would deny his faith? [26] Or should he give his body only to the Lord? The destiny of his Christian friends depended upon his decision, which makes him undergo the grimmest agony.

Facing the ultimate decision, Ferreira and a Japanese interpreter tempts Rodrigo to trample on fumie, saying “now you are going to perform the most painful act of love that has ever been performed.” [27] They suggest Rodrigues that to stamp on fumie is just a formality. Rodrigues pondered Christ’s face, which he has done thousands of times. He raises his feet above the picture of Jesus and at the same time he feels a heavy pain. He finally hears Jesus’ voice:

Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample!
It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share
men’s pain that I carried my cross. [28]

He ends up with performing fumie. There was some motivation behind his action of fumie. He has seen the suffering of Christians before his eyes and heard their groans, along with Ferreira’s allurements to disobey God.

4. Applications of the biblical principles

A. Biblical Principles

In the first commandment of the Decalogue, God declared that “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). This is “the foundation for all morality.” [29] In the case of *Silence*, Rodrigues ultimately does not worship the transcendent God, but the human god. He conforms himself to the secular authority that decrees anti-Christ. Is his decision correct in terms of biblical principles? It is not biblical to bend the knee before an oppressive government, an emblematic human god. It is only God that has the supreme authority. [30] God created this world and ordained the governments. There is no supreme existence above Him.

Like Rodrigues, ancient people experienced similar situations to follow either God or a human god. For example, Naaman (2 Ki.5: 18-19) had to bow down to a pagan idol, the god of Rimmon, in order to do his duty to his human king. Naaman asked the Lord to forgive his behavior, and He, as Elisha, answered, “Go in peace.” Does this entail God forgave Naaman? It can be superficially understood that Elisha gave Naaman permission to bow down to an idol for a formality. Leithart explains that “Elisha gives permission to continue to fulfill this part of his service to the king of Aram” because God is gentle to handle conflicts and “tricky moral and political circumstances.” [31]

However, Slotki insists the counter perspective on God’s response to Naaman. Slotki points out the words, “Go in peace,” do not connote that Elisha approved Naaman’s pardon because these words mean “nothing more than ‘good-bye’”. [32] It demonstrates that Elisha entrusted Naaman to consider how he should act.

Another model dealing with authorities over the Lord and human king is in the Book of Daniel (Da.3). King Nebuchadnezzar commanded three Jews, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, to worship the gold statue made by the King. They resisted deferring his fiat, for they knew there is only God they could trust and obey. As a consequence, they were thrown into the blazing furnace. The result, however, was that not only were they saved from the fire but also the king was converted. If these men had not trusted in God, but had placed a more emphasis upon the human king, they would have disobeyed the God and would not have directed the king as well as his citizens to convert to Christianity. Their decision was a model of the complete submission to the Father.

Returning to Rodrigues’ example, the key aspect of his selection is not performance of fumie itself, but the essence of its meaning. Stepping on fumie demonstrates a submission to

human authority, and denies his faith. This was seen as the complete negation, profanation, and desecration toward the Almighty God.

God's authority should be above anything else. [33] The law of human kings cannot be identified with the law of God if the former possesses some evil elements that the latter does not teach. In other words, if the human laws contrast God's law, nations need to disobey their human magistrates. [34] "[T]he basic premise of civil government and, therefore, law, must be based on God's Law as given in the Bible." [35] The submission to the human government is proper only within the law of God. [36] The true law is only God's law (Rom. 8:7; I Cor.7:19). [37]

Another biblical principle is the second demand in the Decalogue: "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them..." (Ex.20:4). Conducting *fumie* is a sign of infidelity to the loyalty to a human authority since the Japanese government proclaimed to identify Christians and compelled them to deny their obedience to God.

Rodrigues serves the human magistrates, which are sinful in terms of God's law. After suffering, Rodrigues does not see God in the heaven, but he rather considers and cares to free his Japanese Christians who are under torment in front of him. Applying the first two commandments in the Decalogue to Rodrigues' *fumie*, he should not have conformed himself to governmental rule because it contradicts God's law. Obedience should be only to the Almighty God. He should have first believed in the Lord, and through that, he should have thought about what and how he was to respond to human power.

B. God's Authority

Human authority is "the objective correlate of freedom." [38] Humans have a sinful nature and have been created by God. They sometimes commit sin and establish their own laws, which is not according to inside God's commands. Political authority is the authority of man's will over themselves. [39] When political might and power surpass the limitations of liberty established by God, it entails disobedience to Him. In other words, their law turns out to be a tyrannical government. [40] Tyranny is defined as "ruling without the sanction of God." [41] Tyrannical government does not have an absolute power because tyranny means they contradict God's regulation. The power "to tyrannise over the people and to destroy them is not a power from God." [42] All power is God's power (Ps.62:11; Ps.68:35; 1 Ch.29:11). [43] The Creator has given "no absolute and unlimited power a king above the law." [44] All human authority resides "within the framework of God's will." [45] In *Silence*, the Japanese government goes beyond the boundaries set by the Lord because they promulgate anti-Christian dogma and coerce their citizens to obey human magistrate. Rodrigues steps on *fumie* and submits himself to human power, which he should not have done as a Christian.

C. The Continuity of the Bible

It is God alone who rules over human authorities. It should be noted that God's law is always supreme and that He continuously teaches the same principles. God reminds us that there are no other gods before Him in Exodus 20:3. Jesus teaches, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only" (Mt.4:10).

For the Second Commandment, God says, "You shall not make for yourself an idol" (Ex. 20:4). In the New Testament, Jesus says, "No servant can serve two masters" (Lk. 16:13). The norms of the Bible are always in accordance with the law of the Lord. God's teaching from the Old Testament ethics is the foundation "principle running through the moral teaching of the whole Bible." [46]

More importantly, God's moral teachings in the Old Testament have not been abrogated; rather, they are reinforced by Jesus Christ in the New Testament. [47] Moral laws given by God continue to "function as one of Scripture's formal teachers on what is right and wrong in conduct." [48] It is Jesus Christ that ends and fulfills the goal of the law (Rom.10:4). [49] In this regard, the biblical principles can be and should be applied to today's contexts.

When human magistrates compel Christians to submit themselves to a tyrannical government, Christians need to act on the biblical norms, not human principles. Ethics refers to "how we ought to think," [50] and we must behave biblically in the light of God's law.

D. Missiological Implications

How are Christians supposed to respond to tyrannical rule? When they are urged to follow despotic authority or laws, they may wisely ignore them. The term, "wisely," means that they do not revolt against tyrannical government. They can flee it (Ex.12; Mt.12). They should not rebel against unjust human authority. [51] Based on Rutherford's support, Schaeffer insists that "since tyranny is satanic,...to resist civic tyranny is to honor God." [52] Another response to immoral magistrates is that Christian disobey commands or laws that disagree with God's principles. Again, as Christians, they ought not to "actively work to overcome oppression." [53] They simply must not follow tyrannical regulation.

In addition to these two responses, Geisler argues that Christians need to accept its punishment as Peter wrote in his letter to believers (1 Pe.4:12-13) because they decline to take its immoral authority. [54] In short, being challenged to respond to a tyrannical government, they should profoundly judge whether it is within God's boundaries or not to answer with (1), disobedience to unjust rules; (2), its avoidance; and/or (3), acceptance of penalty.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined Rodrigues' fumble in *Silence* as a case of dilemma to obey human authority that indicates to disobey God. Rodrigues was in that he had to make a choice either to refuse the fiat, deny the Christian faith, or to bow down to tyrannical ruling that promulgates anti-Christ. Like Rodrigues, Christians sometimes encounter situations where they have to make the right decision.

The key answer to the questions proposed at the beginning are apparent. What are the significant Christian issues between human authority and God, in *Silence* by Shusaku Endo? What is true living God to Christians in Japan? The most essential Christian values are the biblical principles. Since the Creator has the absolute authority, His law is the ultimate rule of life. Christians should determine if human authority is aligned with the edict of God, and if it is comparable with His framework. The true living God is the Father who can save His people (Acts 4:12). He is the only one they can trust. When they are challenged to respond to ethics that are inconsistent with God's rule, they should obey God, not men (Acts 5:29). In other words, Christians must not obey human kings when those kings do not biblically follow God, but they should obey only King of kings, Lord of lords, Jesus Christ.

Notes

[1] *Silence* was written by Shusaku Endo (1923-1996) in 1969. It is a story dealing with Japanese Christianity and priests from Portuguese during the seventeenth century. It is grounded on the real historical background and true existent priests during the early nineteenth century in Japan. See Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1980).

Shusaku Endo is a Catholic novelist in Japan. He was baptized at the age of 11. His literature mainly deals with Christian issues.

[2] The Edo period is from 1603 through 1867.

[3] At the peak, there were approximately 300,000 Christians in Japan in 1614. Johannes Laures, *The Catholic Church in Japan: A Short History* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), 178.

[4] Hideyoshi Toyotomi (1536-1598) received the title of *kampaku*, Regent, in 1585. He could not obtain the position of Shogun due to his humble social background. Richard Henry Drummond, *A History of Christianity in Japan* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 76.

[5] Douglas J. Hall, "Rethinking Christ," *Interpretation* 33 (July 1979), 258.

[6] Ieyasu Tokugawa (1543-1616) obtained the title of *shōgun* from the emperor in 1603. Drummond, *A History of Christianity in Japan*, 105.

[7] It is estimated that between five and six thousand Christians were martyred during the period of 1614-1637. See Drummond, *A History of Christianity in Japan*, 104.

[8] There were "27 Jesuits, 7 Franciscans, 7 Dominicans, 1 Augustinian, and 5 secular clerics." See C.R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan: 1549-1650* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1951), 327.

[9] Crypto-Christians were called *kakure kirishitan* in Japanese.

[10] National seclusion continued until 1853 when the Commodore Matthew C. Perry arrived in Japan and asked to open its gate to foreign countries. However, during this period, Japan maintained trade with the Netherlands. This country was selected because the Japanese government understood the Dutch would not force their Christian faith to the people in Japan.

[11] Juan de Santa Marta, Francis Garpe, and Sebastian Rodrigues traveled to Japan. Marta could not continue his journey because of sickness. Only the other two arrived in Japan.

[12] Kichijirō was a Christian fisherman. He participated in the Shimabara Rebellion, an uprising of Japanese peasants, from 1637 through 1638. Most of the participants were Christians, and they claimed the economic and political oppression. Kichijirō barely escaped punishment and made his way to Macao on a Portuguese ship. He desired to return to his country when he met Rodrigues and Garrpe. For further information on the Simabara Rebellion, see Drummond, *A History of Christianity in Japan*, 105.

[13] *Fumie* literally means to step on a picture. It indicates trampling on the image of Jesus Christ or Mary in bronze in this context.

[14] Chikugo is located in Kyūsyū in Japan today.

[15] Bonze is a Buddhist monk.

[16] Hitoshi Sano, "Transformation of Father Rodrigues in Shusaku Endo's *Silence*," *Christianity and Literature* 48, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 172.

[17] Endo, *Silence*, 44.

[18] *Ibid.*, 67.

[19] *Ibid.*, 161.

[20] *Ibid.*, 170.

[21] *Ibid.*, 92.

[22] *Ibid.*, 96.

[23] *Ibid.*, 133.

[24] Hall, "Rethinking Christ," 261.

[25] One of the tortures is called "ana-tsurushi," hanging in the pit. "The victim was tightly bound around the body...and then hung downwards from a gallows into a pit which usually contained excreta and other filth... In order to give the blood some vent, the forehead was lightly slashed." See Endo, *Silence*, xi-xii.

[26] Junko Endo, "Reflections on Shusaku Endo and *Silence*," *Christianity and Literature* 48, no.2 (Winter 1999): 146.

[27] Endo, *Silence*, 170.

[28] *Ibid.*, 171.

[29] Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House/Academic and Professional Books, 1983), 85.

[30] John M Frame, *Medical Ethics: Principles, Persons, and Problems* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1988), 10.

[31] Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 195.

- [32] Israel W. Slotki, *Kings: Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible, ed. Abraham Cohen (London: The Soncino Press, 1964), 194.
- [33] Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1983), 100.
- [34] Frame, *Medical Ethics*, 10-11.
- [35] Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, 100.
- [36] Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 242; Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, 100.
- [37] Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 309; John Murray explains the characteristics of law itself. For further studies, see John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1957), 184-186.
- [38] O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 122; Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 30.
- [39] O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 31.
- [40] Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, 100.
- [41] Ibid.
- [42] Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, Rex, or the Law and the Prince* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982), 102.
- [43] Ibid.
- [44] Rutherford, *Lex, Rex, or the Law and the Prince*, 101.
- [45] Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 238.
- [46] Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 29.
- [47] Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 311.
- [48] Ibid., 312.
- [49] Ibid., 314.
- [50] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 186.
- [51] Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 247.
- [52] Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, 101.
- [53] Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 247.
- [54] Ibid., 247, 252-253.

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