

# Martin Scorsese's *Silence* and Ben Affleck's *Live by Night*: Punishment and crime

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*Silence*, directed by Martin Scorsese, screenplay by Jay Cocks and Scorsese, based on the novel by Shūsaku Endō; *Live by Night*, directed and written by Ben Affleck, based on the novel by Dennis Lehane

## *Silence*

"[Director Martin] Scorsese met Pope Francis at the Vatican's Apostolic Palace on Wednesday to discuss his upcoming film *Silence* ... 'He [the pope] was the most disarming ... everything was fine,' said Scorsese. 'He was smiling and thanked us for being there.' ... After meeting the pope, Scorsese attended a screening of *Silence* in a Vatican chapel. The director said the film was shown on a screen near a large crucifix. 'So the whole film played on this crucifix, it was quite stunning,' said Scorsese. 'It was quite an experience.'"—*USA Today*, December 5, 2016

A nearly three-hour carnival of torture and cruelty, Martin Scorsese's *Silence* aims to dramatize the persecution of Catholics in mid-17th century Japan. Based on the 1966 novel by Japanese Catholic author Shūsaku Endō, the film opens in 1633 with horrific scenes of the crucifixion and execution of Christians at the hands of a sadistic and barbaric Japanese elite, apparently hell-bent on vanquishing once and for all a "civilizing" force.

In Macau, at the time a Portuguese colonial enclave in China, Jesuit priests Sebastião Rodrigues (Andrew Garfield) and Francisco Garupe (Adam Driver) are informed by their superior, Father Valignano (Ciarán Hinds), that their spiritual mentor Father Christovao Ferreira (Liam Neeson), a Catholic missionary in Japan, has renounced his faith after being tortured.

Refusing to believe that such a devout man would succumb in this fashion, Rodrigues and Garupe embark on a hazardous journey—since Christianity has been banned in Japan—to locate the missing priest.

Brushing aside rumors that Ferreira has "apostatized" (trampled upon a *fumie*, an image of Christ, and thus renounced his Catholicism), the duo are smuggled into Japan on a Chinese vessel. Their guide is the dissolute, unreliable Kichijiro (Yōsuke Kubozuka), a Japanese Christian in exile and also a kind of Judas, who alternately betrays and begs for absolution. As they search for Ferreira, Rodrigues and Garupe secretly minister to the "hidden Christians," desperate and starving, but possessing abundant inner fortitude.

Once in the clutches of the main Inquisitor, Inoue (Issey Ogata), Garupe soon meets a violent death, leaving Rodrigues to apostasize or

watch his flock suffer a gruesome end, a choice that leads to uncovering the mystery of Ferreira's fate.

*Silence* is a dreadful film from beginning to end. It promotes religious obscurantist views and the rehabilitation of the Catholic Church, one of the most blood-soaked institutions on the face of the earth, with a hysteria that is both unconvincing and tedious. Scorsese has been making feature films for more than 40 years. Like the rest of us, he lives under contemporary economic and social conditions. What would possess him to produce a disoriented and misanthropic work like this? Presumably, those same contemporary conditions.

Unperturbed by any of this, including the film's extreme and gratuitous violence, the majority of movie critics have circled the wagons and come to Scorsese's defense. One argues, for instance, that *Silence* is "a timely reminder that most human life is the long-form Stations of the Cross," and another writes that "the elevated subject matter to the director's august reputation, everything about *Silence* shouts the importance of the film."

Scorsese's considerations of truth and faith are not interesting because they are rooted in mythology and irrationality. The film poses a series of false questions, including: why does God permit the suffering that the Portuguese priests are forced to watch? Because He does not exist. The suffering in 17th-century Japan did not emanate from unchanging human nature or the eternal human condition, or the encounter of Good and Evil, but from the low level of the productive forces and the correspondingly low level of social relationships. It had economic and geopolitical roots.

Along the way, Scorsese's preoccupation with official Japanese brutality seems meant to reinforce the notion that Jesuit missionaries in Japan represented a higher form of human species and were bringing light to a dark world.

To counterbalance *Silence*'s silence on the historical front, a few points need to be made.

The activities of Christian missionaries in Japan and elsewhere, whatever the individuals involved may have thought, were bound up with very earthly and even grimy affairs. They were always associated with the trading and commercial operations and aspirations of the countries that sponsored the various missions.

In the 17th century, the Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch in particular were engaged in fierce competition in Asia over global trade. There were vested economic and political interests involved in the attempted great power penetration of Japan.

One historian notes that missionaries "first arrived in Japan on Spanish and Portuguese ships, and it was the Portuguese who established and maintained a strong trading and Christian base in the Japanese archipelago. Christianity spread rapidly through Japan in the

17th century and at one point Japan had the largest population of Christians outside of European rule.”

The Japanese authorities alternately encouraged and resisted the foreign intrusion. A decree in 1587 banned Christianity and ordered the missionaries to leave, but it was not enforced. One of the stated reasons for the ban was the “involvement of Portuguese traders and sailors in selling Japanese people as slaves in other parts of Asia.” However, the “missionaries were still regarded [by the Japanese] as vital intermediaries in Macao and Chinese trade,” and thus, in practice, allowed to remain.

One of the major factors in the initial success of missionary activities in western Japan was apparently the considerable interest of the Japanese in maritime trade and gunnery. Another historian comments, “The discovery of Japan opened a promising new market to Portuguese traders; during that time, there was a keen demand for foreign goods, particularly high-quality Chinese raw silk, war materials, and gold in Japan, and a need for Japanese silver in China.”

As the WWSWS noted some years ago: “In 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu defeated his major rivals in the battle of Sekigahara and in 1603 assumed the title of shogun or supreme military leader. For the next 265 years, the Tokugawa shogunate based in Edo, its vassals, retainers and armies of samurai held political predominance over a unified Japan.

“To control foreign trade and to forestall the political threat posed by Christian missionaries and the European powers which stood behind them, a policy of total seclusion was adopted. By the 1640s, foreign trade was restricted to the Dutch and the Chinese through the southern port of Nagasaki. No Japanese was permitted to travel abroad, severely limiting the influence of European ideas, science and culture.”

The suppression of the Japanese Christians was undoubtedly savage, but these were barbaric times. The Thirty Years War (1618–1648), occurring at the same time, laid waste to much of central Europe. That conflict resulted in an estimated 8,000,000 deaths, including civilians.

Scorsese omits to mention the role of the Catholic Church at the time, the global center of superstition and reaction. By a remarkable coincidence, *Silence* opens in 1633, the year that astronomer Galileo Galilei was tried for and found guilty of heresy by the Roman Catholic Inquisition.

Tens of thousands were tortured and put to death by the Roman, Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions, as well as in witch trials that continued through the end of the 17th century. The Inquisition was not abolished in Spain until 1808, during the brief reign of Joseph Bonaparte.

Scorsese, who once considered the priesthood, has never taken the trouble to trace human relationships and events to their economic and social origins. As the WWSWS wrote regarding his 2006 film, *The Departed*: “He prefers, self-servingly, to see violence as a part of fallen human nature, which both enthralls and disgusts him. Scorsese has a fixed, frozen view of life and human character that has not evolved or deepened in more than three [now four] decades of making films.”

With *Silence*, Scorsese has come nearly full circle. His 1988 film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, was denounced as “morally offensive” by the Catholic hierarchy over a dream sequence in which Christ has sex with Mary Magdalene. Today, he is the Vatican’s prodigal son.

The filmmaker told an interviewer that “*Silence* is just something I’m drawn to in that way. It’s been an obsession, it has to be done and now is the time to do it. It’s a strong, wonderful true story, a thriller in

a way, but it deals with those questions.”

Scorsese hired Jesuit priest James Martin as a consultant, and his stars prepared themselves for their roles by undertaking a seven-day silent retreat at a Jesuit center. Said Martin about Scorsese: “He was very engaged and energetic and really impressed the Jesuits in the audience with the depth of his spirituality.”

According to *Indiewire*, when Scorsese was once discussing *The Last Temptation of Christ*, he disclosed that my “whole life has been movies and religion. That’s it. Nothing else.” *Silence* makes clear once again that the latter is one of the elements fatally weakening his work in the former.

### ***Live by Night***

Ben Affleck’s *Live by Night* is a crime drama set in the 1920s. The movie’s central character Joe Coughlin (Affleck) “went away a soldier”—in World War I—and “came home an outlaw.”

Giving himself all the best lines, Affleck starts off in Boston as a bank-robber. Coughlin is approached by Irish mobster Albert White (Robert Glenister) to assist in his war against the Italians, headed by Maso Pescatore (Remo Girone). However, Joe makes the grievous mistake of having an affair with White’s mistress, Emma (Sienna Miller).

Numerous scores are settled, after which Joe becomes the kingpin of the Tampa, Florida crime scene, distributing “demon rum” during Prohibition. But far from being a garden-variety thug, he is enlightened and politically progressive: a friend of the “colored” population of Tampa’s Ybor City, mate of the Cuban beauty, Graciela (Zoe Saldana)—who wants nothing more than to shelter the homeless—and destroyer of the city’s Ku Klux Klan.

Despite a few setbacks, involving failed efforts to have gambling legalized in Florida (all for the best, anyway), Affleck’s Joe overcomes great odds with his moral compass intact. In other words, Affleck has created a fantasy version of the gangster (a slightly more down to earth superhero) as the righter of the world’s wrongs.



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