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# Seeds of the Church? *Silence* and the Relevance of 2 Maccabees 6:18–7:42

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## ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to understand the significance of the Scorsese film *Silence* in comparison to what could be considered to be a traditional Roman Catholic dogma of martyrdom as found in 2 Macc 6:18 to 7:42. The contribution made by this article is in line with the religio-narrative approach. Different dynamics within the narratives, like resistance, movement and bodies, are explored to come to an understanding of each narrative and how they respond to one another. In this vein, the unique contribution of Martin Scorsese's film *Silence* was scrutinised. This article supports the interpretation that *Silence* may be a form of apology—one that exonerates what would normally be viewed as a Catholic failure. Scorsese uses *Silence* to suggest that the actual historical events are somehow evidence of God's will and, by default, of the superiority of Catholicism as a religious belief system.

**Keywords:** *Silence*; Scorsese; Japan; 2 Maccabees; martyrs; blood; seeds; Catholic Church

## Introduction

This article is an attempt to understand the significance of the Martin Scorsese film *Silence* in the context of traditional Roman Catholic dogma. Due to this well-known phenomenon, a closer look at the traditional martyr narrative of 2 Macc 6:18–7:42 is imperative. The foundations of the early Christian concept of glorious martyrdom and noble death are found there. This ancient text is then compared with a modern text, namely the film *Silence* by Scorsese. The congruence and incongruence between these two texts are examined. This research attempts to answer various questions apropos these two texts, such as: Considering that 2 Macc 6:18–7:42 is the genesis of Catholic Christian notions regarding, inter alia, martyrdom, why does Scorsese seem to defend Catholicism with an alternative text that is also antithetical to traditional dogma? Why

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are the two texts so different; what does Scorsese want to say in his film about Roman Catholicism and its 17th-century Jesuit missionaries; why did they fail; and/or what can we ultimately learn from the comparison of the two texts?

## Background to the Scorsese Narrative (*Silence*)

The long-awaited film *Silence* was released in December 2016.<sup>1</sup> This could be considered one of the major achievements of the world-renowned director Martin Scorsese. Scorsese is no newcomer to the film industry, not to mention his interest in the theological domain. *Silence* is the third film in his “trilogy of faith”, the other two films in this series being the highly controversial *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and the Buddhist film *Kundun* (1997). The latter film dealt extensively with suffering. *Silence* is based on a book written by Japanese author Shusaku Endo in 1966.<sup>2</sup> Endo is a highly regarded author and was the runner-up to the Nobel literary prize-winner in 1996.<sup>3</sup>

If the term “factitious” means a mixture of fact and fiction, then, in this sense, both narratives were created after the fact to convey certain messages. Briefly, the factitious film *Silence* is the story of two 17th-century Portuguese Jesuit priests: Father Rodrigues and Father Garrpe.<sup>4</sup> They enter Japan during the time of intense persecution of the faithful (i.e. members of the Catholic Church between 1565 and 1867).<sup>5</sup> The avowed goal of the two priests is to find their mentor, Father Christovão Ferreira,<sup>6</sup> who has disappeared and apparently converted to Buddhism. Once in Japan, Rodrigues and Garrpe begin to secretly minister to a remnant Catholic community. The two priests and their congregants are soon discovered by the Tokugawa Shogunate of Japan and forced to do the unthinkable: They are forced to become apostates and renounce their

1 “Martin Scorsese’s Long-Awaited ‘Silence’ Finally Has Its First Trailer.” Digital Trends, November 23rd, 2016. <https://www.digitaltrends.com/movies/silence-trailer-martin-scorsese/>. Unfortunately, due to the fact that *Silence* was released in December 2016, not much scholarly commentary has emerged thus far. In this context, this article might well be one of the first to discuss it. Therefore I will rely predominantly on so-called “grey sources” e.g. popular internet-based film reviews. However, this approach should not be seen as in any way compromising academic rigour and integrity.

2 The Japanese title is transcribed in English as *Chinmoku*. Cf. Masamichi Inoue, “Reclaiming the Universal: Intercultural Subjectivity in the Life and Work of Endo Shusaku,” *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 34 (2012): 153.

3 Flanagan Damian. “Jesus Christ, the Nobel Prize and Shusaku Endo.” Japan Times, September 12, 2015. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2015/09/12/books/jesus-christ-nobel-prize-shusaku-endo/#.Wz4jvDozZkh>.

4 Rodrigues is based on an historical figure, Guiseppe Chiara (1602–1685). Cf. Inoue, “Reclaiming the Universal,” 159.

5 The first edict against Catholicism was promulgated in 1565 and a ban on Christianity generally was only lifted in 1867.

6 Christovão Ferreira (c. 1580–1652) is also based on a historical figure. Cf. Inoue, “Reclaiming the Universal,” 159.

faith by trampling on *fumi-e* (normally bronze relief images of Christ and/or the Virgin Mary).<sup>7</sup> The suspected Christians (*Kirishitan*) who refuse to do this are then hung upside down over a pit with a small cut behind the ear, and allowed to slowly bleed to death. Father Garrpe is subsequently drowned by the Japanese authorities with Rodrigues as an onlooker. Father Rodrigues is eventually introduced to his former mentor, Father Ferreira. Rodrigues learns that Ferreira has indeed renounced his faith, become a Buddhist, has married, and is writing a book disproving Christianity. Consequently, Rodrigues is subjected to everything that his mentor has previously experienced. He is forced to watch Christians (his own flock) being savagely tortured by the Japanese. Rodrigues is told that the only way to end this brutality and their suffering is if he also tramples on a *fumi-e*. Rodrigues realises that he has their collective lives in his hands. As Rodrigues hesitates to renounce his faith, a voice speaks to him (apparently the voice of Christ) which persuades him to trample on a *fumi-e*. Rodrigues then complies and as a consequence, he experiences everything that his mentor suffered. He subsequently becomes a Buddhist, marries, and even acts as an informant for the Shogunate.

Martin Scorsese's work is the second attempt to film *Silence*. The first version was produced in 1971 by Japanese director Masahiro Shinoda.<sup>8</sup> However, Shinoda's attempt was disapproved of by both Scorsese and Endo.<sup>9</sup> They argued, as will be detailed later, that the scene of the priest Rodrigues trampling on the *fumi-e* in Shinoda's version was not dramatic enough. Furthermore, Scorsese made an all-important addition to the end of his film,<sup>10</sup> featuring the deceased priest Rodrigues gently cradling a crucifix in his hands. With these alterations in mind, Scorsese contracted actors of the calibre of Liam Neeson, Adam Driver and Andrew Garfield. In this regard, all the vital elements are present: the right director, a dramatic narrative and prolific actors.

*Silence* had all the ingredients to make it a bestseller at the box office.<sup>11</sup> However, I argue that the real value of this film lies in the fact that it is highly provocative and intimidating. This is not a film for the faint-hearted. A senior editor and the principal film critic of the *Atlantic*, Christopher Orr, openly states: "Silence is not an easy film to watch, its 160-minute running time awash in images of pain and cruelty."<sup>12</sup> Again,

7 In the film, the *fumi-e* employed depict both Christ and the Virgin Mary.

8 Cf. Hitomi Omata Rappa, "Silence, Directed by Martin Scorsese: On the Crossroads of History and Fiction," *Histoire@Politique* May 23, 2017, [https://www.histoire-politique.fr/documents/comptesRendus/pdf/HP2017\\_CRfilm\\_HitomiOmataRapposurSilencedeScorcese\\_def.pdf](https://www.histoire-politique.fr/documents/comptesRendus/pdf/HP2017_CRfilm_HitomiOmataRapposurSilencedeScorcese_def.pdf).

9 Mark Williams, "Martin Scorsese's Silence: He Has Been Faithful to Shusaku Endo's Text and to the Deep Questions within It," *Independent*, January 9, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/martin-scorsese-silence-film-end-sh-saku-novel-adaptation-a7518086.html>.

10 This addition is referred to as an "auteur decision" by Scorsese. It is his own invention and not part of the original text. "Silence (2016 film)," *Alchetron*, accessed February 24, 2018, [https://alchetron.com/Silence-\(2016-film\)](https://alchetron.com/Silence-(2016-film)).

11 Contrary to expectations, the film did not do well at the box office, perhaps due to its extreme violence.

12 Christopher Orr, "Silence Is Easier to Admire Than to Love," *Atlantic*, January 6, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/01/silence-martin-scorsese-review/512324/>.

Thomas S. Hibbs, the Dean of Honors College at Baylor University, says: “The world of Silence is not gray; it is surreal and nightmarish, and its dramatic depiction at the hands of Scorsese moves the film precariously close to the genre of horror.<sup>13</sup> In the same vein, Matt Zoller Seitz notes: “You’re paralyzed. You want to act, or you want the movie to act, to stop the suffering, but the suffering continues until finally it doesn’t.”<sup>14</sup>

The book *Silence*, as portrayed by Scorsese in his film version, leaves the audience with real theological dilemmas. Why was the blood of the Japanese martyrs not the “seed of the church,”<sup>15</sup> as the church father Tertullian proclaimed back in the third century CE? In Japan, the exact opposite happened: the blood of the martyrs was not “the seed for the church,” in fact the church died along with the martyrs! Plinio Correa de Oliveira apologetically remarks that the church was “drowned in blood.”<sup>16</sup> Another theological dilemma is the question: Why the silence, as the title suggests; why does God not hear the prayers of his faithful? Why does he not intervene? Furthermore, is it acceptable to renounce God, even though you do not really mean it? The notion that Christ would pardon apostasy to end someone else’s suffering is profoundly challenging. These theological dilemmas naturally lead to “why” questions.

As an example, why must the priests adhere to their man-made vows in the face of extreme inhuman adversity; why would Christ not pardon a priest who becomes an apostate in such an extreme set of circumstances? Before questions of this kind may be answered satisfactorily, it will first be necessary to examine the original martyrdom text (dominant narrative) which inspired the traditional Roman Catholic stance on Christian martyrdom.

## The Dominant Narrative (2 Macc 6:18–7:42)<sup>17</sup>

As is well-known, White and Epston have formulated a theory concerning dominant and challenging narratives. A dominant narrative is the master ideology in the narrative. The challenging narrative is a secondary narrative which opposes the dominant narrative. In this sense of the term, the first martyr story (in 2 Macc 6:18–7:42) is the dominant

13 Thomas S. Hibbs, “Religious Speech and Action *Silenced*,” *National Review*, February 25, 2017, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/02/silence-movie-martin-scorsese-shusaku-endo-novel-christianity-japan-statism-review/>.

14 Matt Zoller Seitz, “Silence,” *RogerEbert.com*, December 23, 2016, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/silence-2016>.

15 Tertullian, *Apol.* 50, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”

16 Plinio Correa de Oliveira, “The Martyrs of Japan—February 5,” *Tradition in Action*, accessed February 24, 2018. [http://www.traditioninaction.org/SOD/j211sd\\_MartyrsJapan\\_02\\_05.html](http://www.traditioninaction.org/SOD/j211sd_MartyrsJapan_02_05.html).

17 This is mainly the work of Pierre J. Jordaan, “A Narrative-Therapeutic Reading of the Martyr Narrative in 2 Maccabees 6 and 7: The Formation of a New Type of Theology,” in *Various Aspects of Worship in Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature*, edited by Géza G. Xeravits, József Zsengellér and Ibolya Balla (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 181–196, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110467406-012>.

narrative. It starts with the outstanding example of the Jewish elder, Eleazar. He is portrayed as being exemplary in every respect. Although he is already old, he has a beautiful face and high moral standards confirmed by good behaviour since childhood. However, Eleazar is faced by a severe challenge from the Jewish oppressor Antiochus IV Epiphanes. He can either eat the flesh of swine and stay alive, or refuse and suffer torment and lose his life. The eating of the flesh of swine is of course illegal according to the Law of Moses. Eleazar is now in a real predicament. In short, he is going to lose either his life or his belief system. He cannot have both. Keeping his belief system would mean the loss of his body. On the other hand, giving up his belief system would lead to preserving his body (life).

In addition, the narrative makes it explicit that martyrdom leads to immediate reward in heaven. Lost body parts will be replaced and death is but a gateway to eternal Paradise. Nevertheless, Eleazar is so popular with his persecutors that he is given the opportunity by them to pretend (*ὑποκριθῆναι*), 2 Macc 6:24, to eat swine flesh. Amidst all these challenges, Eleazar stubbornly refuses to eat the swine flesh. More importantly, he despises the idea of pretending in order to escape torment. He does this for various reasons:

- Eleazar (2 Macc 6:19) says that he would (*ὁ δὲ τὸν μετ' εὐκλείας θάνατον μᾶλλον ἢ τὸν μετὰ μύσους βίον ἀναδεξάμενος*) rather accept death with honour than live a shameful life.
- Furthermore, according to 2 Macc 6:28, he wants to (*τοῖς δὲ νέοις ὑπόδειγμα*) set an example for the youth.
- He (2 Macc 6:26) also states that (*εἰ γὰρ καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ παρόντος ἐξελοῦμαι τὴν ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τιμωρίαν ἀλλὰ τὰς τοῦ παντοκράτορος χεῖρας οὔτε ζῶν οὔτε ἀποθανῶν ἐκφεύξομαι*), which translated reads “even if I am able to avoid punishment by humans—whether I am dead or alive I will not escape the hand of the almighty”.

The consequence of all of this is that Eleazar dies a vicious, agonising death rather than reject the Law of Moses. The word that is used for dying in 2 Macc 6:27 is *διαλλάξας* which in this context implies that death is part of a process and not a finality. The text further states that Eleazar dies a good death that is to the benefit of others. However, he does not die before delivering his final speech in 2 Macc 6:30, saying that the Lord knows that he chose bodily suffering out of fear for the Lord. The death of Eleazar ultimately leaves a powerful legacy.

The martyr narrative continues in 2 Macc 7:1 with a mother and her seven sons. Schwartz does not hesitate to say that this chapter is the most famous chapter of 2 Maccabees, as it not only had an immense influence on Jewish culture but more importantly formed

the blueprint for martyrology from a Catholic Christian perspective.<sup>18</sup> This narrative links to the martyr narrative of Eleazar as he wanted to influence the youth positively. The seven brothers and their mother follow his example. However, their speeches are more elaborate than Eleazar's apropos certain theological issues. Their discourses make inroads into previously unknown territories, as will be explained later. Their challenge is the same as Eleazar's. If they give in to the ideological views of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and eat swine flesh, they will keep their lives (bodies). On the other hand, if they stay faithful to the Law of Moses and do not eat the flesh of swine, they will certainly suffer the terrible mutilation of their bodies and loss of life. However, the speeches of the sons and their mother are different as "life after death" now surfaces as a major theme in most of the martyrs' speeches. Indeed, the second, third, fourth and sixth son as well as their mother each speak about life after death. They all say that they will be rewarded for giving up their bodies and their body parts for their just cause. They will receive new ones in a new dispensation. One reason for this state of affairs is stated by the mother as a logical argument in 2 Macc 7:28: If God was able to create something out of nothing (giving life), then He will also be able to recreate something out of nothing (giving back life; 2 Macc 7:30). None of the martyrs is scared of death; (cf. 2 Macc 7:11–12) when each one's turn comes to be martyred; they almost mechanically hand themselves over to their antagonists. The brothers and their mother gladly suffer in order that God may stop punishing the nation. This is why Schwartz states that the martyrdom of the seven brothers and their mother is not the problem but the solution.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, Schwartz stresses the reconciliatory effect of their martyrdom.

The king also plays his part in this; in his ideological violence, he severely maims and mistreats the seven brothers. Obviously their ideology and their bodies were seen as inferior and even disposable as compared to the king's body. However in reality, the body of the righteous martyr may be more correctly viewed as being sacrosanct.

Eventually all seven brothers as well as their mother (her martyrdom is only alluded to) die violently after having stated their motivation clearly: They will be compensated for their glorious martyrdom. In this sense, they are not victims but rather the victors. However, the king and his accomplices will not be so fortunate because they will be punished for their evil deeds.

This narrative of 2 Macc 6:18–7:42 will act as the dominant narrative. This being the *locus classicus* of Catholic martyrdom must have created great expectations with the Portuguese priests Rodriques and Garrpe in tracking down their mentor, Ferreira.

Regardless, this dominant text of Eleazar, the mother and the seven sons is filled with discourses of heroism, noble death and glorious martyrdom. Further, their deaths are seen as reconciliatory. Their deaths stop the persecutions. Interestingly, this narrative

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18 Daniel R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 298, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110211207>.

19 Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 272–273.

also plays out within a very short time span. All the persecutions seem to have taken place within a few hours. This dominant narrative actually makes martyrdom appear to be trite.

The narrative of 2 Macc 6:18–7:42 also seems to imply that God expects and welcomes martyrdom, especially of truly righteous people. The martyrs of 2 Macc 6:18–7:42 are not only rewarded for their willingness to suffer the unbearable but the oppressor is seen as failing to undermine the sacrosanct iconography of the martyr's bodies.

Finally, a few remarks about this dominant narrative. There is no reliable historical account which underscores this martyr narrative. Doran rightly states that these are stories with hallmarks of noble death found in the Greco-Roman tradition.<sup>20</sup> Schwartz, again, considers them as fabricated didactic narratives.<sup>21</sup> Thus, this narrative reveals a deity that expects martyrdom from his worshippers. The faithful should not surrender when they encounter resistance, even if this costs them their lives. However, this divine bargain offers rich rewards for righteous martyrs. They will receive new bodies and even new body parts in exchange for those that have been lost in suffering. However, there are a few conditions for this dispensation. The martyr must be virtuous and immovable in his/her conviction. From a theological perspective, the “few” hours of pain experienced by the martyr do not compare with the divine, exemplary vindication. Further, the oppressor, in this case Antiochus IV Epiphanes, is vilified. He justly receives punishment for his oppressive actions. Ultimately, he is made to look irrational or stupid.

## Possible Reasons for the Making of *Silence*

Why was this film made? What is Scorsese trying to say with his version of *Silence*? There is no shortage of attempted answers. The following possible motives for making this film emerged:

- Religio-psychological reasons: the priests were on an “ego trip” and were ultimately chasing glorious martyrdom. The priests acted in arrogance thinking that they had the ability to conquer Japan religiously. However, their expectations were completely out of touch with reality, resulting in disillusionment and resentment.<sup>22</sup> As an example of this tendency, in the film *Silence*, both priests (i.e. Rodriguez and Garrpe) naively believe that they can bring the apostate priest Ferreira back to the faith.

20 Robert Doran, *2 Maccabees* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012). 15.

21 Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 299

22 Blake Goble, “Film Review: *Silence*,” *Consequence of Sound*, January 2, 2017, <https://consequenceofsound.net/2017/01/film-review-silence/>.



- Religio-ideological reasons, focusing on the differences between Buddhism and Catholicism. How can a non-Japanese religion survive in a totalitarian Japan?<sup>23</sup> As an example, in the film, Roman Catholicism is portrayed as being cowardly when in the face of suffering the priests apostatise.
- Religio-confrontational reasons: the fact that Dutch merchants working in Japan were threatened should they try to smuggle a Roman Catholic into Japan.<sup>24</sup> As an example, in the film, the Japanese inspect all goods coming into the country in an attempt to confiscate Catholic religious artifacts.
- Religio-pragmatic reasons: *Silence* wants to show that religion is not always a black-and-white affair. Sometimes, as in *Silence*, it is a “grey situation.”<sup>25</sup> Decisions are governed by circumstances. Rodrigues could have kept his sacred vows but at the expense of his own life and the lives of his congregants.
- Religio-historical reasons: The resistance in Japan may also be attributed to the aggressive, imperialistic drive of Spain, which had just colonised the Philippines. Therefore, the Japanese authorities feared that they might well be the next country to be targeted by the European powers who were clearly employing Christian teachings as a mechanism for colonial domination.<sup>26</sup> *Silence* showcases the Japanese resistance to such endeavours.
- Religio-dramatic reasons: According to Daniel McNery,<sup>27</sup> one cannot clearly distinguish between the voices of Christ and Satan. According to him, Satan (rather than Christ), told Rodrigues to trample the *fumi-e*. This is a highly dramatic reading of *Silence*. One cannot serve Christ and betray him. These two opposites exclude each other mutually.
- Religio-salvific reasons, focusing on what the mercy of God means.<sup>28</sup> This approach is the opposite of the religio-dramatic approach. Christ’s mercy extends beyond human weakness, even apostasy.
- Religio-narrative reasons, which see the film as part of a larger group of narratives. The first obvious narrative is that of 17th-century Japan and the challenges it posed to the Catholic Church. However, Martin Scorsese himself, in his foreword to Endo’s

23 Michael Hoffman, “Christian Missionaries Find Japan a Tough Nut to Crack,” *Japan Times*, December 20, 2014, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/12/20/national/history/christian-missionaries-find-japan-tough-nut-crack/#.WpGAMPluamU>.

24 Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston (London: Picador Press, 2016). 242–244.

25 Hibbs, “Religious Speech and Action *Silenced*.”

26 Justin McCurry, “Martin Scorsese Film Recalls Martyrdom of Japan’s Hidden Christians,” *Guardian*, December 24, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/24/martin-scorcese-film-silence-martyrdom-japan-hidden-christians>.

27 Daniel McNery, “The Sinister Theology of Endo’s *Silence*,” *Catholic Thing*, July 14, 2014, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2014/07/14/the-sinister-theology-of-endos-silence/>.

28 Doris Yu, “‘Silence’: The True Story of the Jesuits in Japan,” *Jesuits*, accessed February 24, 2018, <http://jesuits.org/story?TN=PROJECT-20161220114257>.

*Silence* also acknowledges other narratives.<sup>29</sup> He clearly distinguishes the narrative of Jesus and Judas, and he refers to the latter as Christianity's greatest villain. However, Scorsese also implicitly acknowledges other (Catholic) narratives when he mentions being tested by a foreign hostile culture, steadfastness, and glorious martyrdom. This is the dominant narrative that emanates from the deuterocanonical book 2 Maccabees, specifically chapters 6:18 to 7:42. This is the *locus classicus* of Catholic martyrdom.<sup>30</sup> Martyrdom, as well as its origin, is thus not unknown to Catholics. Thus, Scorsese's *Silence* may be termed the challenging narrative.

## Research Gap

The contribution made by this article is in line with the religio-narrative approach. This has scarcely featured in any research until now. A closer look will be taken at how the narrative of 17th-century Japanese Catholic Jesuit missionaries and that of Jesus Christ and Judas Iscariot are interpreted by Martin Scorsese. In this respect, the narrative of the martyrs in 2 Macc 6:18–7:42 as the original model for martyrdom in the Catholic tradition cannot be underestimated (dominant narrative). All of these narratives are implicit and explicit in Scorsese's film *Silence*.<sup>31</sup> More specifically, the question needs to be addressed as to how the one narrative might have responded to the other. Is there any progression in interpretation of the different narratives? In other words, what are the dynamics that sparked the different narratives in relation to each other? In this vein, what was Martin Scorsese's unique contribution in the context of his film *Silence*? What is Scorsese's challenging narrative in relation to the dominant narrative of 2 Macc 6:18–7:42?

In order to answer these questions the following steps will be followed:

1. To determine an acceptable method for interpreting the various identified narratives. This method should also scrutinise the dynamics between the various narratives.
2. To record the above-mentioned narratives and their influence upon each other.
3. In the light of (2), to critically analyse the unique contribution made by Martin Scorsese.

29 Martin Scorsese, foreword to *Silence*, by Shusaku Endo, trans. William Johnston (London: Picador Press, 2016), viii.

30 Werner Dommershausen states that by 1520–27 this tradition was already established in Europe with a Makkabäer-Schrein in Cologne. Cf. Dommershausen, *1 Makkabäer 2 Makkabäer* (Leipzig: St. Benno, 1988), 141.

31 Scorsese, foreword, viii.

## Methodological Considerations

In order to scrutinise the two different narratives, aspects of the method employed by White and Epston, described in their book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*,<sup>32</sup> will be used. This approach has already proven invaluable for critically scrutinising narratives.<sup>33</sup> However, the emphasis of the article will be on the dynamics between “in sequence” narratives. This means the classification (as proffered by White and Epston, as dominant and challenging narratives), will be applied in terms of, inter alia, resistance, the human body, and movement (dynamics) between narratives.<sup>34</sup> A short discussion of this method and terms will follow.

### Narrative

A narrative is recorded to make sense of a person or entity’s history.<sup>35</sup> For instance, in both 2 Macc 6–7 and the film *Silence*, narratives are told to make sense of the faithful’s history. Logically, events are ordered in such a way that they create order and understanding for a society of the environment around them.<sup>36</sup> The narratives of 2 Macc 6 and 7 and the historical narrative of the Catholic Jesuit missionaries in 17th-century in Japan as depicted by Scorsese in *Silence* were all created to give meaning to what would otherwise be unintelligible situations. The one narrative follows the other chronologically and endeavours to make sense of the previous narrative.

### Resistance

A narrative becomes disorganised when resistance is encountered. This resistance flares up as another narrative is forced upon it. This creates a problem-saturated narrative. This problem-saturated narrative needs to be addressed in a way that will restore sense to an entity’s history.<sup>37</sup> Although Scorsese does not seem to realise it, the martyr narrative of *Silence* resists and opposes the dominant martyr narrative of 2 Macc 6 and 7. Indeed, there is nothing glorious about the type of martyrdom experienced in 17th-century Japan. Scorsese has the difficult task of trying to make sense of the horrific realities that faced the Catholic Jesuit martyrs in Japan. Unlike the meaningful deaths portrayed in 2 Macc 6 and 7 which have until now served as the very model for Catholic Christian

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32 Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic End*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990).

33 Cf. Pierre J. Jordaan, “An Interdisciplinary Approach: Reading of Ruth as Therapeutic Narrative,” *Theologia Viatorum* 30, no. 1 (2006): 1–24, and Jordaan, “A Narrative-Therapeutic Reading.”

34 White and Epston, *Narrative Means*, 11, 18, 27–28.

35 An entity may be an institution such as a church or an organisation.

36 White and Epston, *Narrative Means*, 10.

37 White and Epston, *Narrative Means*, 11.

martyrdom, the horrific, realistic events in 17th-century Japan seem to depict a deity that is now totally unresponsive.

## Dominant Narrative

The dominant narrative is the accepted narrative of an entity's history (i.e. the Roman Catholic Church). It has supremacy as it is accepted as "fact" and an "independent truth." This narrative is typically passed down from generation to generation and is largely undisputed.<sup>38</sup> Dominant narratives are dogmatically inscribed.

Dominant narratives are generally handed down in simple statements such as: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" or "Judas Iscariot is always nearby to betray Christ." This dominant narrative is now challenged by Scorsese's *Silence*.

## Alternative Narrative (Challenging Narrative)

The dominant narrative is challenged by another narrative, also known as the alternative or challenging narrative. This alternative narrative questions the control and understanding of the dominant narrative.<sup>39</sup> The alternative narrative is created to restore sense to an entity's history.

## Body

In 2 Macc 6 and 7, the bodies of the martyrs were righteous, beautiful and exemplary. The martyrs felt no pain, and accepted what was happening because they knew that they would be immediately rewarded. Their bodies were temporary, disposable and unimportant given the fact that God was going to reward them with new bodies and eternal life. This idea was later adapted by the early Christians, who believed that martyrdom for their belief in Christ earned them immediate reward in heaven.

The human body is the place where discrimination takes place in a narrative. The body of a Japanese peasant in 17th-century Japan was reckoned as inferior and "docile." The body of a peasant was thus disposable and easily replaceable. On the other hand, the bodies of Catholic Jesuit priests like Rodrigues or Ferreira were seen as more valuable and important. The bodies of priests were ideologically loaded. They were the literal embodiment of the Catholic religion. The Japanese successes in undermining the intrinsic, sacrosanct, and iconographical qualities of the priests' bodies had a profoundly debilitating effect on the Catholic community. The status of a body is just a matter of what the "objective reality" states.<sup>40</sup> This means that if you understand a community's

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38 White and Epston, *Narrative Means*, 20–22.

39 White and Epston, *Narrative Means*, 27–28.

40 White and Epston, *Narrative Means*, 20.

specific interpretation of a body, you will also understand that body's worth within that community.

## Dynamics between Narratives

Dynamics between narratives spark the re-establishment of personal agency. These dynamics cause the dominant narrative to be effectively challenged and thereby create an alternative narrative. There can be no movement between narratives if the dominant narrative is not challenged and dealt with.

Thus, we have sequential narratives that are not static but are moving towards the better understanding of an entity's history. This began with a narrative (*Silence*) that had gone awry due to the dominant narrative (i.e. 2 Macc 6 and 7). Then, a "challenging" narrative became evident. This should especially be the case in narrative biblical texts (or even extra-biblical texts) as there is almost always an interpretation of a "dominant narrative" that needs to be corrected by a "challenging narrative." The text of 2 Macc 6:18 to 7:42 as dominant narrative will now be examined in this way. The much younger text of the Catholic missionaries in 17th-century Japan as depicted by Shusaku Endo and Martin Scorsese will be considered as the challenging narrative.

## Analysis

### Challenging Narrative: The Catholic Missionaries in Japan

This section is an attempt to present the experiences of Ferreira, Garrpe and Rodrigues in Japan as depicted by Scorsese in *Silence*. There are, however, various problems in articulating these experiences. First, all of the film *Silence* cannot be simply retold in its entirety in an article of this length. Therefore, only select aspects will be reviewed. Second, the point of view of Rodrigues will be explicated as portrayed in Scorsese's film specifically as the challenging narrative for 2 Macc 6:18–7:42.

The film starts with a letter read to the two young Jesuit priests, Garrpe and Rodrigues, concerning their mentor Ferreira. He has apparently disappeared in Japan and is believed to have renounced Christ. They egotistically refuse to believe what they consider to be insulting reports about their much-loved mentor and promise to find him. Their superior finally agrees to this arduous journey and reminds them of the extreme danger they will face the instant they set foot in Japan. Garrpe and Rodrigues are subsequently smuggled into Japan by a vagabond drunk called Kichijiro. Kichijiro turns out to be a character based loosely on Judas Iscariot.<sup>41</sup> Like Judas, he betrays his dearest friends for money. Kichijiro, who denies that he is a Christian, nevertheless alerts the priests about

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41 Kichijiro ultimately betrays the priests as Judas betrayed Jesus.

atrocities committed against Christians in Japan. Despite this warning, Rodrigues and Garrpe remain steadfast in their conviction to find Ferreira.

In Japan, Kichijiro points them towards villages and then goes his own way. Garrpe and Rodrigues encounter a town populated by clandestine Christians. They become diverted from their initial mission to find Ferreira as they now take on the immediate responsibility of ministering to the needy congregants. In their new role, they administer the sacraments e.g. hear confessions, baptise children and celebrate Holy Mass. Nonetheless, these priests live in constant fear of being discovered by the Japanese authorities. Eventually, official “inquisitors” come to the town, and they are forced to split up to avoid detection. They know that they will inevitably be caught but they do not know when. They also do not know how badly they will ultimately have to suffer. They realise that they may well be tortured and even martyred. *Silence* is predominantly concerned with the issue of fearful waiting with all the nervousness, impatience and anger that the title suggests. Scorsese succeeds in keeping the audience in suspense with fearful anticipation. He maintains the tension around these two priests. Regardless, they continue in their divine duties with unreserved vigour. Rodrigues devotes all his energies to his task of missionising the Japanese. For him, there is too much at stake.

Rodrigues then again encounters Kichijiro who betrays him into the hands of an old samurai, who tells Rodrigues that other Christians will suffer unless he apostatises. Rodrigues is taken to Nagasaki where various conversations follow. The samurai bluntly tells him that Christianity has no value and will not grow in a swamp like Japan.<sup>42</sup> Rodrigues would spare the Christians much suffering if he would just trample the *fumi-e*. Rodrigues then witnesses various atrocities against Christians: drownings, crucifixions, and even a beheading. All of these torture methods are designed as a sort of a public display to emphasise to the peasants the actual cost of Christianity. Father Garrpe tragically drowns when he tries to save three Christians who are thrown into the sea wrapped in mats. Rodrigues is the one who witnesses all this. He knows that he can put an end to it all if only he is willing to renounce his faith.

Another important incident needs to be highlighted at this juncture. The vagabond Kichijiro approaches Rodrigues for absolution of his sin. This is the man who sold out the Japanese converts to the Shogunate authorities. Despite his extreme reluctance, due to his priestly office, Rodrigues has no choice but to grant absolution to Kichijiro.

The film clearly records how cheap the lives (bodies) of Japanese Christians were for the Japanese Shogunate. It would kill its fellow Japanese off without blinking an eye for its own cause. However, through all of this, Rodrigues is kept alive. Inoue, the chief inquisitor states: “We learned from our mistakes. Killing priests only makes them stronger.” Inoue is playing a cool, calculated game with Rodrigues. He is meticulously planning his next move.

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42 Endo, *Silence*, 146.

Rodrigues, still refusing to apostatise, now meets Ferreira, who tells him that he renounced Christ while being tortured. He even shows him the mark of torture behind his ear. Ferreira further says that after 15 years in the country he believes that Christianity is futile in Japan. He states that the Japanese do not understand the western concept of God and that Christianity will never grow in this swamp. Rodrigues openly rejects his point of view but Ferreira seems immovable. The pressure on Rodrigues is now mounting. The aim of his coming to Japan was to reverse the decision made by Ferreira to renounce his faith. However, Rodrigues has now been in a similar situation. The only way he could keep his belief system was at the expense of his fellow Christians being viciously murdered. The film depicts his immense inner turmoil. Rodrigues never expected such severe challenges. Scorsese also makes it clear that this is a prolonged process. The Shogunate is relentless in its endeavour to make Rodrigues apostatise. Through this all, the deity that he worships is silent. He does not answer prayers and refuses to get involved.

Rodrigues is then informed that according to Inoue, he is to apostatise that very night. Rodrigues does not quite understand why this is said. That night in his prison cell, Rodrigues hears five former Christians being tortured. Ferreira tells him that they have already apostatised but will continue to be persecuted unless Rodrigues renounces Christ. Rodrigues thus bears the burden of their life or death. His renouncement of Christ will make the Japanese stop this unyielding torturing of Christians. Rodrigues stares at a *fumi-e* and hears an inner voice of Christ giving him permission to trample it, which he does. The pressure is just too much for him, he has to give in. He decides to apostatise rather than to see more Christians die.

However, even Rodrigues' renunciation of his faith has not ended the process for the Japanese authorities. Rodrigues is now made a showcase of their achievements. The film then shows Rodrigues and Ferreira working together in seizing Christian contraband from merchant ships. Rodrigues also receives a wife. Rodrigues and Ferreira have both gone full circle: They have renounced their faith, converted to Buddhism, and married. The last scene of the film deals with the death of the apostate priest Rodrigues. In typical Buddhist fashion, he is placed sitting upright in a large, round wooden casket. He however still cradles a tiny crucifix in his hands that was given to him when he first came to Japan. This scene conveys the idea that Rodrigues never really renounced his faith. Why else would he hold onto a crucifix in death? He has held onto his faith, notwithstanding his apparent renouncement.

This last scene incorporated by Scorsese is intended to serve as an apology for the embarrassing Catholic Jesuit missionary failure in the 17th century. Although it could be argued that the film itself is purely fictitious, the catastrophe is presented as factual because it is based on actual historical events whereas the accounts in the dominant narrative (2 Macc 6:18–7:42) are totally factitious. Indeed, if one recounts the noble martyrdom of Eleazar, the mother and her seven sons, it is there that the dominant rules

for glorious martyrdom and noble death are set. In his alternative narrative Scorsese suggests that it is easy to condemn traitors like Kichijiro, Judas Iscariot and the disciple Peter, who each in their own way betrayed Jesus. What is interesting is that it could be argued that Rodrigues did not act like a Judas or a Kichijiro because he obeyed the “voice” of Christ.

However, we should not be too harsh in our condemnation of these characters. There are always circumstances that cannot be fully appreciated, unless an individual experiences them directly. Historically, we know that there were Japanese who actually held onto their faith despite their apparent renouncement. However, they would never have reached this point if there were not a Judas or Kichijiro present. Judas has the ability to test one’s faith on a level that surpasses all normal understanding.

## Conclusion

The fact that the film *Silence* as well as 2 Macc 6:18–7:42 are both factitious needs to be stressed. However, it is obvious that *Silence* can claim slightly more historicity than the narrative in 2 Macc 6:18–7:42. Firstly a comparison of important differences between these two narratives will be given, followed by a conclusion.

Considering the film *Silence* in this way has hopefully shone a new light on how the failure of Catholicism and therefore Christianity in Japan should be viewed. From the discussion (cf. Table 1), it transpires that the central characters in *Silence* are not in fact martyrs in the strict sense of the word. They are psychologically “tortured” by having to witness the physical torture and martyrdom of others. Garrpe is not martyred; he dies as a consequence of his own actions. On the other hand, Eleazar, the mother and her seven sons are depicted as true martyrs. They themselves endure bodily suffering and do not just witness the agonies of other people.

Further, the respective time spans of the narrative of 2 Macc 6:18–7:42 and *Silence* are also significant. The Maccabean martyrdom seems to be concluded in a very short time. However, in *Silence*, the suffering of the priests as well as their congregants has a much longer duration. The length of time is an important contributor to the priests’ renouncement of their faith. A “once-off,” short event most probably would have had another result. The “duration of suffering time” in *Silence* is a mitigating factor.

In *Silence*, the central characters are not martyrs but witnesses in a foreign land. It is the “nation” of recent Christian converts that is made to suffer. In 2 Macc 6:18–7:42, the central characters are the martyrs and the witnesses are the longstanding Jewish nation. In *Silence* the oppressor is local; in 2 Macc 6:18–7:42 the oppressor is foreign.



**Table 1:** Overview of dominant and challenging narratives

| <b>Topic</b>                        | <b>2 Macc 6 and 7</b>                      | <b><i>Silence</i></b>          |
|-------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| historicity                         | low  | higher                         |
| qualities of the central characters | righteous                                  | arrogant                       |
| quality of the populace             | traditional believers                      | recent converts                |
| faithfulness to God                 | constant                                   | after thought                  |
| source of antagonism                | foreign                                    | local                          |
| duration of martyrdom               | a few hours                                | many months                    |
| nature of torture                   | physical                                   | psychological                  |
| models                              | Eleazar and the mother are good models     | priests are bad models         |
| role of God (1)                     | rewards martyrdom                          | silence                        |
| role of God (2)                     | encourages martyrdom                       | allows for renunciation        |
| location of torture                 | homeland                                   | foreign land                   |
| hypocrisy                           | none                                       | present                        |
| levels of conviction                | mother mentors the martyrs                 | priests allow renunciation     |
| consequence of narrative (1)        | blood of martyrs is the seed of the church | church drowns in blood         |
| consequence of the narrative (2)    | praising of the Jews                       | embarrassment of the Catholics |
| consequence of the narrative (3)    | oppressor embarrassed                      | oppressor victorious           |
| purpose                             | politically correct                        | apologetic                     |

The location of the suffering is also important. The Jews were martyrs in their own country. However, the Jesuit priests travelled to a foreign country and had to witness largely illiterate foreigners suffering due to a religious belief being forced upon them. In addition, the Jesuit priests did not display exemplary behaviour like the Maccabean martyrs. One can rightly ask the question, Why did they do it in the first place? In a way, the whole missionary attempt by the Jesuits could be seriously questioned. The irony here is that the missionaries were actually trying to undermine a society and its traditions that had a long and respectable standing. We should also not lose sight of the historical fact that despite the possible good intentions of the missionaries involved, ultimately they were being used by their western governments to effect the colonisation of a foreign power.

In *Silence*, the central characters often act as being arrogantly. In 2 Macc 6:18–7:42, the central characters are righteous and accept martyrdom because they have no choice. The

central characters of *Silence* are not exemplary. They are portrayed as typical human beings with normal weaknesses. Rodrigues is shown as egocentric and overconfident, desiring glorious martyrdom at all costs.

In 2 Macc 6:18–7:42, the elder Eleazar refuses to deny his faith even when given an “acceptable” way out. In *Silence*, the “elder,” Ferreira, renounces his God and even assists the oppressor in his task. Specifically, Eleazar (2 Macc 6:21) is offered the opportunity, like Rodrigues (*Silence*), to stop the horror but elects (due to his righteousness) to face death happily. Furthermore, Rodrigues is offered a way out by what is possibly Christ speaking to him directly, whereas Eleazar relies solely on his personal strength and faith in his God to know what is the correct route to follow.

Here we are reminded that a character like Kichijiro betrays his supposed friend for money, exactly as Judas betrayed Christ for 30 pieces of silver. Judas is depicted here as the stereotypical fallen man, susceptible to temptation but ultimately forgiven by Christ’s sacrifice. In *Silence*, Kichijiro is “forgiven” by a priest who doubts his own faith. In 2 Macc 6:18–7:42, there is no Judas, no fallen state, etc.

In conclusion, Scorsese employs the film to severely criticise Japanese culture whilst trying to find some way to redeem the Catholic Church’s obvious embarrassment over its handling of Japan. If one compares the two narratives, Scorsese’s *Silence* ironically employs an almost antithetical text to counter the dominant traditional narrative that is normally employed to serve as the foundation for its longstanding dogma which is dependent on the martyrdom texts of 2 Maccabees.

Thus, *Silence* may be viewed as a form of apology—one that exonerates what would normally be viewed as a Catholic failure. Scorsese uses *Silence* to suggest that the actual historical events are somehow evidence of God’s will and by default the superiority of Catholicism as a religious belief system. However, by the same token, his apologetic employs a symbolism that flies in the face of the very model that the Catholic Church has held up for nearly two millennia, viz. the martyrdom of Eleazar, the mother and her seven sons (2 Macc 6:18–7:42).

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