

## Silence as a Sign of God's Transformative Encounter with Those Who Suffer

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### Introduction

Last Holy Week, when the number of new COVID-19 cases in Canada was rising toward its peak, congregants of my small Korean immigrant church in Toronto asked me: “Where is God in the agony of coronavirus?” “Why is God so silent?” One said, “This is like the deathly silence of Saturday after the crucifixion of Jesus.” People feel as if God is silent amidst this time of suffering, and when people experience God’s silence, they tend to interpret it as God’s absence from the world or God’s indifference toward their suffering. Thus, the experience of God’s silence in suffering is closely related to a question about the nature of God: namely, “not only ‘Where is God?’ but no less importantly ‘Who is God?’”<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I take an intertextual approach to the problem of God’s silence in suffering through an exploration of Shusaku Endo’s novel *Silence* and the prose poem, “The Grand Inquisitor,” found in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. I examine, in a critical and creative way, the meaning of Christ’s silence during the Grand Inquisitor’s critique, and the symbolic meaning of Christ’s enigmatic kiss on the Inquisitor’s lips. Then, using the paradoxical concept of silence introduced in Endo’s novel *Silence*, I look at silence as a sign of God’s transformative encounter with sufferers. The paper will show that, paradoxically, the silence of God tells us something about human suffering and the nature of God and reveals how such silence can give us hope for a future of healing and transformative growth.

I will argue that, while not all silence experienced in human suffering is a sign of a transcendent experience, some of the silences of God do lead to God’s transformative encounter with those struggling in unbearable and brutal situations.

### Silence in Dostoevsky’s “Grand Inquisitor” and Endo’s *Silence*

Silence on the part of characters in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s works as a crucial “method of interacting with others and the world through wordless communication.”<sup>2</sup> In “The Grand Inquisitor” (a narrative poem told by the character, Ivan, in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*), the silence of Christ draws attention to itself, forcing the reader to ponder its meaning in the context of character development through dialogue.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Pramuk, “Theodicy and the Feminine Divine: Thomas Merton’s ‘Hagia Sophia’ in Dialogue with Western Theology,” *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (March 2019): 49, <https://doi-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.1177/0040563915619983>.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Jens, “Silence and Confession in *The Brothers Karamazov*,” *The Russia Review* 75, no. 1 (January 2016): 51, <https://doi-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.1111/russ.12061>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 52, 57.

In Ivan's prose poem, Christ arrives in the sixteenth century in a town in Spain, where hundreds of "wicked heretics" have been judged and burned in public. Christ is himself soon arrested by the holy guards of a powerful cardinal, the Grand Inquisitor. Late that night, the cardinal visits Christ's cell and explains why he has taken him prisoner, why he cannot allow Christ to perform his works, and why he will have him executed in the morning. The Grand Inquisitor contends that human freedom is far too difficult for people, who are weak and evil, and accuses Christ of not providing the concrete direction and compassionate support that people need to participate in his redemptive ideal. Throughout the Inquisitor's interrogation, Christ remains silent.

"When the Inquisitor ceased speaking, he waited some time for his Prisoner to answer him. His silence weighed down upon him. He saw that the Prisoner had listened intently all the time, looking gently in his face and evidently not wishing to reply. The old man longed for Him to say something, however bitter and terrible. But He suddenly approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on his bloodless, aged lips. That was all his answer."<sup>4</sup>

The cardinal then suddenly and surprisingly sets Christ free, telling him never to return again. The silence of Christ in Ivan's poem raises questions both about the problem of evil and the status of Christ: Why does Christ stay silent? What does the silence of Christ in suffering mean? What should Christ's response be to the Inquisitor? How should Christ respond to the problem of evil and suffering in the world?

In his novel *Silence*, Shusaku Endo poses similar questions when introducing the topic of the silence of God amidst suffering.<sup>5</sup> Endo's main character, Fr. Sebastian Rodrigues, suffers from a conflict of faith in the face of the Japanese peasants' torturous deaths and eventually renounces his faith by stepping on a wooden image of Christ's face. In fact, because of its title, many readers interpret the novel as the agonized cry of a suffering human that God has remained silent through his trials. However, in another book, *Voice of Silence* (1992), Endo indicates that his intention in writing *Silence* was not to show that God is silent, but to reveal that God is speaking in suffering.<sup>6</sup> Endo's paradoxical concept of silence is crucial for understanding and interpreting both novels.

While in Ivan's poem the wordless Christ is described as absolutely still, tranquil and even peaceful, the silence of God in Endo's *Silence* appears more graphically in the wretched, miserable and painful reality of the martyrdom of the Japanese peasants.

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<sup>4</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor: With Related Chapters from the Brothers Karamazov*, ed. Charles B. Guignon and trans. Constance Garnett (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1993), 36.

<sup>5</sup> Shusaku Endo (1923-1996) is one of the most prominent Christian writers in Japan. A work of historical fiction, *Silence* seeks to understand the meaning of the silence of God in human suffering. Endo set the novel in seventeenth-century Japan, a time when Christians were persecuted and suffered under deliberate violation of the anti-Christian edicts.

<sup>6</sup> In the last four or five years of his life, it appears Endo grew increasingly frustrated with the misreading of his novel *Silence*. Despite the book's tremendous success and worldwide fame, both in Japan and in the West, Endo went out of his way to try to correct what he saw as serious misapprehensions about the novel's fundamental meaning by publishing *Ch'immugüi Sori [Voice of Silence]*. Unfortunately, since an English translation of the second book is not available, its Korean translation is used for this paper. Shusaku Endo, *Ch'immugüi Sori* 침묵의 소리 [Voice of Silence], trans. Kim Sung Cheol (Seoul: Dong-Yeon, 2016), 66.

“What do I want to say? I myself do not quite understand. Only that today, when for the glory of God Mokichi and Ichizo moaned, suffered and died, I cannot bear the monotonous sound of the dark sea gnawing at the shore. Behind the depressing silence of this sea, the silence of God . . . the feeling that while men raise their voices in anguish God remains with folded arms, silent.”<sup>7</sup>

When, after his arrest and imprisonment, Father Rodrigues witnesses the death and suffering of a number of Japanese Christians, God’s silence gradually intensifies in his mind. Indeed, Rodrigues is repeatedly disturbed by the peasants’ slow, torturous deaths, and more importantly, by the utter silence of God at these deaths which are for God’s sake. He calls upon God to break the silence and intervene, but to no avail. At the climax of the novel, when Rodrigues is urged by the official to step on the *fumie*, a wooden image of Christ’s face, a symbolic act of apostasy, in order to save other Japanese Christians, the silence is finally broken by the unexpected voice of Christ inviting Rodrigues to trample on him.

“The priest [Rodrigues] raises his foot. In it he feels a dull, heavy pain. This is no mere formality. He will now trample on what he has considered the most beautiful thing in his life, on what he has believed most pure, on what is filled with the ideals and the dreams of man. How his foot aches! And then the Christ in bronze speaks to the priest: “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.” The priest placed his foot on the *fumie*. Dawn broke. And far in the distance the cock crowed.”<sup>8</sup>

Endo concludes the main part of the novel by stating that Rodrigues now is confident that his God is not silent. Even when it seems that God is silent in face of inescapable and horrendous suffering, Rodrigue realized that God is still speaking.<sup>9</sup>

In Endo’s *Silence*, it is apparent that Rodrigues is a sufferer who undergoes not only physical exhaustion due to continuous escapes, but also an inner conflict of faith in the face of the peasants’ deaths. God remains silent through Rodrigues’s bitter struggle until he renounces his faith—later he denies the apostasy—by stepping on the *fumie*.

In contrast, in Ivan’s tale, there is ambiguity about who is suffering when Christ remains silent. It is arguable that the Grand Inquisitor plays the role, not only of the accuser who harshly criticizes the return of Christ, but also of a sufferer who experiences utter confusion from what is called “a mistake of identity or a wild fantasy.”<sup>10</sup> The Inquisitor also suffers from the fact that he no longer believes in God, but is instead working with the One who is called “the wise and dread spirit, the spirit of self-destruction and non-existence.”<sup>11</sup> Thus the Inquisitor suffers psychologically from the inner chaos caused by his lack of faith and overweening pride, whether he distinctly perceives his suffering or not. Moreover, his encounter with Christ in the prison itself demonstrates this. In fact, in Ivan’s description, the returning Christ has a mysterious and ultimate power to heal the sick, to make the blind see, to bring a little girl back to life, and even

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<sup>7</sup> Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston (London: Peter Owen, 2007), 105.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>10</sup> The Inquisitor is convinced that, by following “the wise spirit, the dread spirit of death and destruction,” he has made people—“the poor blind creatures”—believe that they can gain what they want and has therefore made them feel happy on earth in the name of Christ. In fact, he consciously leads people to death and destruction, deceiving them all the way. Alyosha calls Ivan’s poem “a mistake of identity or a wild fantasy,” and Ivan to some extent acknowledges this. Dostoevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor*, 23, 35.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-5, 30.

to refuse his arrest. And yet Christ does not exert his power over the guards when they attempt to arrest him; perhaps he chooses to be arrested and placed in the prison because he wants to meet the Inquisitor, who in his eyes is the sufferer. Presumably Christ can see the cardinal's inner suffering caused by the conflict between what he really wants and what he merely pretends: a desire for power versus a love for humanity. As Charles Guignon rightly and precisely remarks: the Inquisitor is one of those "isolated individuals" who, at the deepest level, have "no real bonds to one another, living in an essentially meaningless, value-neutral mechanistic universe, motivated solely by self-interest."<sup>12</sup> Such people pretend to give others a sense of shared purpose and community of worship in order to control them, by superimposing on their lives the religious delusions of "miracle, mystery, and authority."<sup>13</sup> If people accept Ivan's extremely polarized claim, which is manifest in the Inquisitor's indictment,<sup>14</sup> they must suffer from the selection between two options—"either freedom in misery or happiness as slaves"—throughout their lives.<sup>15</sup> There is no other alternative. Christ sees the Inquisitor has suffered, is suffering, and will endlessly suffer, not only from a desire to be the person he really wants to be and to have what he truly wants to have, but also from his "either/or" way of thinking. His suffering is not merely because of what he will neither be nor have; it is also because he is not able to escape from the dilemma of his "either/or."

In *Silence*, despite the different cause, Rodrigues is also described as suffering from a struggle over an "either/or" choice, no less than Ivan's Inquisitor. He has been coerced into choosing *either* to apostatize, by trampling on the wooden face of Christ, in order to save Japanese peasants from torturous suffering and death, *or* to let them die, by refusing to recant his faith. At the end of the desperate struggle, Rodrigues suddenly hears the voice of Christ in the silence and then drops his foot on the face of Christ. The peasants are removed from the torture chamber, and Rodrigues, now an apostate in a sense, is no longer condemned to die and is permitted to live. As the voice of Christ comes to him, he feels completely liberated from terrible, but seemingly endless, suffering, the suffering of the either/or way of thinking. He finally becomes aware that God, though silent, is suffering alongside him and is speaking through him.

"[B]ut even if [Rodrigues] was betraying [his fellow priest], he was not betraying his Lord. He loved him now in a different way from before. Everything that had taken place until now had been necessary to bring him to this love. "Even now I am the last priest in this land. But our Lord was not silent. Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him."<sup>16</sup>

Endo implies that not only has the priest found a new perspective on his faith, but also that his attitude toward suffering has entirely changed. Rodrigues develops a "growing understanding of reality as 'both/and' rather than 'either/or.'"<sup>17</sup> Unlike Rodrigues, the Inquisitor

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<sup>12</sup> Charles B. Guignon, "Introduction," in *The Grand Inquisitor: With Related Chapters from the Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1993), xxxix.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> According to Guignon, both the Grand Inquisitor and the figure of Christ in the story represent aspects of Ivan's own ideals and aspirations. Guignon, "Introduction," xxxiv.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxix-xl.

<sup>16</sup> Endo, *Silence*, 298.

<sup>17</sup> Jacqueline Aileen Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2007), 95.

seems neither to recognize fully the meaning of the presence of Christ nor to understand the meaning of Christ's kiss, a kiss that manifests Christ's genuine compassion for the Inquisitor's suffering.

### **Silence as A Testimony of God's Transformative Encounter with Sufferers**

This intertextual exploration of the silence of Christ in Ivan's poem and the silence of God in Endo's novel, opens up a new understanding of silence as God's transformative encounter with sufferers. In this section, I explore the meaning of silence in suffering, responding to questions such as "What does the silence of God really tell us about the problem of suffering and the nature of God?" and "What implications for ministry might we glean from an understanding of silence?"

First, when we understand silence in suffering as a sign of God's transformative encounter with sufferers, we should be able to hear through silence a new, distinctive voice of God—a voice that is totally different from the one that we have heard before. Although the divine voice from the *fumie* seems to suddenly penetrate the climax of the novel, Endo implies that God has been continuously speaking through Rodrigues throughout the story. It seems that the priest has been accustomed to hearing the loud, stern and paternal voice of a powerful and judgmental God through his fundamental religious tenets, which might be the reason he is not able to hear God's voice until the climax of the story. However, the voice from the wooden face of Christ is not an impatient, authoritative and decisive voice, as if echoing from the summit of Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:20-25); instead, it is "a voice filled with compassion and offering forgiveness."<sup>18</sup> In his wholly new, transformative encounter with God, Rodrigues can hear a voice that he has never heard before: "[T]he voice is, then, a maternal one, not the stern voice of a judgmental Father but the merciful, accepting whisper of a deity willing to forgive."<sup>19</sup> The voice is the paradoxical symbol of God's silent compassion for sufferers.

In Ivan's description, and breaking his long silence, Christ suddenly kisses the Inquisitor on his lips. As we take up the idea that the silence of God does not mean God's indifference toward human suffering, but God's presence in suffering, this enigmatic kiss is then interpreted as a symbol of Christ's deep compassion for suffering—Christ suffers with sufferers. We can also find this concept in Elie Wiesel's *Night*, the memoir of his concentration camp experience. Wiesel recalls a little boy who was hanged in the camp at Buna. The other prisoners, including Wiesel, were forced to watch the child die. "Total silence in camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting."<sup>20</sup> One of the inmates says, "For God's sake, where is God?"<sup>21</sup> Wiesel says, "And from within me, I heard a voice answer: Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows."<sup>22</sup> Many have interpreted Wiesel's comments as he watched this little boy die—God is "hanging here from this gallows"—to mean that God, like this delicate silent child, is dead, or dying. But in his autobiography, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, Wiesel strongly refutes this

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<sup>18</sup> C. Van Gessel, "Hearing God in Silence: The Fiction of Endo Shusaku," *Christianity and Literature* 48, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 161, <http://search.ebscohost.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0000985125&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 64.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

interpretation, saying, “I have never renounced my faith in God. I have risen against His justice, protested His silence, and sometimes His absence, but my anger rises up within faith and not outside it.”<sup>23</sup> Given this statement, perhaps Wiesel’s suggestion that God is hanging on the gallows should be understood as indicating that God, through silence, is suffering alongside the child. Further, as we grasp more distinctly God’s mystical encounter with sufferers through silence, by opening our spiritual eyes we can see our relationship with others, God, and the world in a new, transformative way.

Since Ivan ends his poem with the words, “the old man adheres to his idea,”<sup>24</sup> it cannot be assumed that the Inquisitor will change his worldview and desires later. Nevertheless, what is obvious is that Christ’s kiss changes the Inquisitor’s mind, evidenced physically by the old man’s trembling lips and in his action of releasing Christ from the prison rather than burning him.<sup>25</sup> Ivan seems to emphasize the possibility for renewal by underscoring that the kiss “glows” in the Inquisitor’s heart.<sup>26</sup> It seems obvious that, to some degree, the impression of the silent Christ remains with the Inquisitor, which might lead him to a future regeneration.

Likewise, God’s mystical encounter with sufferers in silence can give them a possibility of seeing themselves, others, the world and God through a new, transformative lens. This argument is illustrated more explicitly in Rodrigues’ monologue after recantation: “I acknowledge this. I am not concealing my weakness. I wonder if there is any difference between Kichijiro and myself. And yet, rather than this I know that my Lord is different from the God that is preached in the churches.”<sup>27</sup> Despite various interpretative controversies, Rodrigues’ inner voice demonstrates adequately that he experiences a mystical and paradoxical encounter with God in the silence of suffering and that he comes to have a new, transformative lens through which he can see himself, other sufferers, and God. His inner voice also shows that he is no longer confined to the either/or way of thinking—*either* “death for faith” *or* “apostasy for survival”—but that he now lives in the “in-between” that echoes his new both/and concept of faith and reality.<sup>28</sup> The spiritual, transformative encounter with God in silence enables him to acknowledge his weakness; it enables him to connect with those who struggle over the weakness of their faith, like Kichijiro, the Judas-like character, and Ferreira, his former mentor and apostate. Finally, it enables him to recognize that, beyond what he has believed, there are different mystical dimensions to the nature of God.

In examining “the intensification of inner life” that helped the prisoners of the concentration camps stay alive, Viktor Frankl argues that, as the inner life of the prisoners tended to become more intense, they also experienced “the beauty of art and nature as never before.”<sup>29</sup> For Frankl, despite inconceivable suffering, the transcendental power of love enables people to find the deepest meaning in their inner selves. For such people, whether or not their beloved is actually present, or even still alive at all, ceases to matter. Likewise, even though we do not know whether or not God actually speaks to us in suffering, we can mystically grasp silence as

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<sup>23</sup> Elie Wiesel, *All River Run to the Sea Memoirs* (Toronto: A.A. Knopf Canada), 84.

<sup>24</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>27</sup> Endo, *Silence*, 275-6.

<sup>28</sup> Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed*, 95.

<sup>29</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, trans. Ilse Lasch (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 49-50.

the symbol of God's transformative encounter with us. Then, we might be able to see, as one prisoner said to another, "How beautiful the world *could* be!"<sup>30</sup>

## **Conclusion**

When she shares her mystical experience of the Lord's Prayer in her spiritual autobiography, *Waiting for God*, Simone Weil describes her contemplation of silence beautifully: "At the same time, filling every part of this infinity of infinity, there is silence, a silence which is not an absence of sound but which is the object of a positive sensation, more positive than that of sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing this silence."<sup>31</sup> For Weil, such silence is not the silence in which we cannot hear, but the silence through which we can experience and encounter God's love, the compassionate love that embraces human suffering.<sup>32</sup>

As I have articulated above, although not all silences are signs of a transcendent experience, the silence of God can lead us to God's mystical presence in suffering. Having an understanding of the silence of God, we, as ordained ministers, pastors, theologians and whosoever, might be able to invite people to see themselves and their connection with others, the world, and God anew, especially during the crisis of the pandemic. Further, we might be able to encourage those who still have a question mark about God's silence to realize that, amid unbearable and incomprehensible suffering, God actually speaks to us in suffering with us in ways that are beyond our perception. Then, within this silence, we finally and paradoxically hear a divine and compassionate voice, not only in our suffering, but also in the suffering of others.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>31</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1973), 72.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 124.