At the climactic moment of Shusaku Endo’s *Silence*, a captured Portuguese priest sees the face of Jesus, the face he adores above all others, for the first time since he stole into Japan. But it is not in an underground church or hidden chapel that he sees this icon. It is the Japanese authorities, trying to stamp out Christian practice, who present him with a “fumie”: an image of Christ, which has nearly been worn smooth by the tread of apostatizing feet. They tell the priest that he can save Japanese Christians from torture if he sets foot on the fumie. With a soul full of conflict, the priest follows in his mentor’s footsteps and stamps on his savior.

*Silence*, originally published in 1966, has come roaring back into popular consciousness thanks to Martin Scorsese’s 2016 film adaptation, a long-gestating passion project of the decorated director. The novel certainly has the ingredients one would expect in a religious epic: priests in hiding, cultures in conflict, faiths in crisis. But it includes a thematic poison that will make it hard to stomach as a theological reflection. Readers in the West obsess over the climactic desecration. They take seriously everything that the captured priest Rodrigues tells himself afterwards to justify his
decision, and what his tempters tell him in the moment: “For love, Christ would have apostatized.” They speculate whether, in denying Christ, he has discovered a new and deeper way of being Christ-like—and in so doing, they twist the novel from a Catholic meditation to a secular travesty of one.

Endo’s novel offers a wrenching depiction of an extended dark night of the soul. The lapping waves, the buzzing flies, the croaking of cicadas—a chorus of natural motifs pound home to the protagonist, Sebastian Rodrigues, that he is in an alien land in which God seems silent. The book transports us to a time of high drama, the persecution of “hidden Christians” in Edo-period Japan. Two young Jesuits covertly enter the closed-off country to seek their onetime mentor, Cristóvão Ferreira, who is rumored to have apostatized. The portrait of the friendship between Rodrigues and his fellow missionary Francisco Garrpe is affecting; Rodrigues later reflects, while fleeing alone by boat, “When I was with Garrpe we could at least share our fear as one shares bread, breaking it in two.” The time the missionaries spend hiding in a hut, surviving on smuggled morsels, and ministering sacraments covertly to a flock of hidden Japanese Christians is oddly idyllic. But once Rodrigues is captured by agents of the inquisitor Inoue, the tale takes a harrowing turn. A little less than half the novel is told in epistolary form by Rodrigues himself. His letter cuts off when he is taken captive, and he believes his story will end imminently in a glorious martyrdom. But the authorities (and the author) have a different plan for him.

The novel has the ingredients of a religious epic, but also a thematic poison that makes it hard to stomach as a theological reflection.
Rodrigues finally meets Ferreira—now a shuffling wreck, “just like a big animal which, with a rope around its neck, is trailed reluctantly along.” Ferreira has renounced his faith and accepted from the Shogunate a Japanese name and a Japanese wife. He tells the younger priest to do the same, claiming that the Christian faith cannot take root in the swampy climate of Japan—even the Christian peasants are really worshipping the sun god, not understanding the missionaries’ message. Rodrigues, though shaken, resists until placed in the very situation that precipitated Ferreira’s apostasy. He is made to listen to the moans of tortured peasants and told he can free them by apostasizing. Ferreira tells him what he doubtless told himself, as they approach the fumie: “You are now going to perform the most painful act of love that has ever been performed.” In Ferreira’s telling, the two Jesuits outdo the Crucifixion itself by dishonoring a crucifix to save their flock (in body if not soul). Rodrigues, with his foot raised, hears the Christ on the fumie speak: “Trample! Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world.” Later he is not sure whether the voice he heard came from heaven or his own fevered head (other Catholics might add the third possibility of hell). The Japanese regime puts its two apostate priests under somewhat comfortable house arrest for the remainder of their days, consulting them regularly to point out contraband Christian items entering the country on Western trade ships so that the forbidden religious paraphernalia can be confiscated.

Picador Modern Classics publishes the book in a translation by Endo’s acquaintance, the Jesuit mystic and dabbler in Eastern pantheism William Johnston, who is a colorful figure fit for the task of rendering in English this book-length crisis of faith (his original works include Christian Zen). This will be the edition that readers are most likely to pick up after seeing the film adaptation, because it boasts on its cover of its foreword by Martin Scorsese.

Scorsese’s foreword fills one with familiar dread. Here is the voice of mock piety, yet another chin-stroking sophomore speculating that the real sacrifice would be to give up one’s morals. In his discussion of Silence, Scorsese recapitulates the way he portrayed Judas as a collaborator in Jesus’s sacrifice in his own The Last Temptation of Christ (1988)—projecting his particular interpretation of Judas as pseudo-saint onto Endo: “In order for Christianity to live, to adapt itself to other cultures and historical moments, it needs not just the figure of Christ but the figure of Judas as well.” This image of Judas is far afield from the Christian tradition that formed Endo and his protagonists, and instead maps onto the irreverent, speculative fiction of Jorge Luis Borges, who in “Three Versions of Judas” posits Iscariot as the true sacrifice and true Messiah: “The ascetic, for the greater glory of God, degrades and mortifies the flesh; Judas did the same with the spirit. He renounced honour, good, peace, the Kingdom of Heaven, as others, less heroically, renounced pleasure . . . . He thought that happiness, like good, is a divine attribute and not to be
usurped by men.” A Catholic would, of course, say that renouncing “good” for the greater glory of God is incoherent, for God is all-good and seeking good is seeking God. This contrived version of Judas does not emerge from considered theology but rather from an attempt to create a grand-scale mythological “anti-hero”—a very modern character archetype which has been widely read backwards into the Christian story.

Of course, the temptation of Rodrigues to tread on the sacred for the sake of earthly goods is a characteristically modern one. Scorsese’s introduction suggests that he broadly approves of this sort of blasphemy as a kind of fruitful betrayal, as long as it is undertaken with fear and trembling. Perhaps portraying a fallible Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ* was Scorsese’s own fumie.

Other moderns are more gleeful about desecration, Andres Serrano (the creator of *Piss Christ*) most fatuously. And it is not always just for artistic provocation. Eliezer Yudkowsky, a self-proclaimed apostle of rationality and AI ethicist, posted to Facebook the following claim, accompanied by a picture of a small puppy: “Anyone who wouldn’t step on a puppy for $20 billion has ceased to be human. You have a frontal cortex for a reason, and that reason is being able to step on a puppy for twenty billion dollars.” In some circles, the crushing underfoot of innocence is not only permissible but required when enough corporeal good is on the line. A lack of squeamishness, a disregard of taboo, a willingness to lose one’s soul to gain the world—these are the true virtues of the utilitarian.

Yudkowsky is an outlier in following consequentialism all the way to its repugnant conclusions. Most of us are more like Rodrigues, or at least like Scorsese. We can’t muster any glee at our transgressions, but we find ways to justify them as necessary. And so we want to read Rodrigues not as an apostate but as a new kind of saint. The truest faith might be denial of faith, we solemnly equivocate.

Rodrigues in his apostasy must be some grand and tragic figure, because he so resembles us. The internal inquisitor in each of us demands that every holy thing be trampled. Our response to an intuition of sacredness is to devise outlandish hypotheticals where that sacred must be profaned. Then we make art about that profanation, and it receives accolades from critics and audiences—witness the popular television show *24*, about a patriotic (but conflicted) torturer whose violations of human dignity always turn out to be necessary for the safety of our country. Or the 2005 Best Picture–winner *Million Dollar Baby*, in which a paternal (but conflicted) coach mercifully euthanizes his crippled boxing protégée. This is the tribute we moderns pay to sanctity: We wince as we violate it again and again and again.

The religion of *Silence* fascinates moderns because it can be made to encapsulate the modern approach to the sacred. They can only revere it by desecrating it. They can only kiss it in betrayal.
They can only bear to touch it with the soles of their feet.

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