

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Confident to serve; humble enough to understand and accept

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What does it mean for a person of faith to act out that faith in today's world? Does it mean seeking to change the other person's belief and practice to be in line with one's own? How do the cultural differences complicate the effort? While some religions do not seek to convert others, these have been the challenges throughout history for the religions who seek to win new converts.

The recently released movie "Silence," directed by Martin Scorsese, tells the story of 17th century Jesuit missionaries to Japan, but has implications for what it means to live in the diverse world of today. Based on the book of the same name by 20th century Japanese novelist Shusako Endo, the story is set at a time in history when the fairly young Christian community in that area was considered a threat to the Japanese culture. Sys-

tematic and violent persecution was pursued against missionaries and believers with the goal of eliminating Christianity from the nation.

The specific goal of the Japanese warlords was to get the Portuguese missionaries to deny their faith. Apostasy or the denial of a person's religious belief or inherited religious identity is prohibited by many religions and has grave consequence. In some religious traditions and in a number of countries today it is punishable by death. On the other hand, being martyred for one's faith historically has been highly revered as the ultimate affirmation of one's faith.

Persecution and martyrdom have a long history and still prevail in many parts of the world today. The dilemma in the book and movie, however, is not the challenge of giving up one's life for the sake of one's belief. Rather, what if one's belief is the direct cause of another's suffering? If one's faith is in a God of love, what happens when that belief has as a direct consequence the torture and

death of others?

This raises other questions: When does one's religious certainty lead to results that are contrary to the values of one's religion? Can pride and certainty actually lead to great suffering on the part of others? Can one be confident of one's faith while at the same time being humble enough to not insist that others see the world in the same manner?

Historically, mission work also has been motivated by the call to be of service, rather than primarily motivated by proselytizing. Throughout the world, this aspect of mission has been felt and respected.

Amy Peterson, author of the book "Dangerous Territory: My Misguided Quest to Save the World," reflected in a recent blog on the film. She writes, "The missionary biographies I had read as a child had not prepared me for the realities of adult faith, for a world filled with suffering, for the complexity of communicating cross-culturally, or for a God who sometimes seems hidden."

Peterson goes on to recount how as a child

she had read the biographies of missionaries who seemed heroic in their accomplishments. They built hospitals, orphanages and schools; brought medicine and healing to the sick; and taught many to read. These stories led her to the mission field as an adult. Yet she goes on to reflect:

"We all remain stuck with a simplistic view of God and the world, limited by our own cultural biases. We live with only one version of what it means to be faithful, what it means to be persecuted, and what it means to be an apostate. Stories like 'Silence' complicate those ideas in important ways. Serving God isn't about being a hero. It's about acknowledging that I will never save the world, that in fact I am one of the ones who needs to be saved. I can never save the world, but I can learn to love it."

No matter our own religious belief and practice, could it be that our challenge in today's world is to understand, accept and love without insisting that the other person's belief and practice be the same as our own?