

# Book & Film Reviews

---

## **First Reformed**

An American drama film written and directed by Paul Schrader

Killer Films 2017 113 mins

Released August 2017 at the Cannes Film Festival

Released on DVD November 2018

In the chapter 'Humility against despair' in *New Seeds of Contemplation* Thomas Merton writes: 'Despair is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that He is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves.'

This quote from Merton lies at the heart of this film which tells the story of the mental and physical unravelling of a depressed middle-aged pastor of a historic Reformed Protestant church in upstate New York. The Reverend Toller (played brilliantly by the actor Ethan Hawke who himself has been greatly influenced by Merton's writings) uses this quote from Merton, as he writes up his journal after a meeting counselling a troubled environmentalist whose young wife attends the church. The pastor urges the environmentalist not to surrender to despair in the horror and panic of the reality of environmental collapse.

Following the suicide of the young man, his pregnant widow Mary asks Toller to help her pack up her husband's things, and as he does so, he begins to read up about the state of God's creation. Horrified by what he learns, he finds it impossible to sanction the financial support for his church from a conservative oil man, and as a proud man himself, Toller

also loses hope and gives in to despair.

Toller begins to keep a journal as a form of prayer which he writes with a bottle of whisky readily to hand. We learn of his past pride as a military veteran, the death of his son in Iraq whom he had encouraged to enlist, and of his subsequent marriage breakdown. Despair over these losses, and later shame (only hinted at) over a sexual encounter with a choir director at the Ministries Centre, have led to heavy drinking. We also see symptoms of cancer.

Beside the pastor's bed we see a copy of *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*. Later in a discussion with a pastor colleague at the nearby huge and successful evangelical Abundant Life Ministries Centre, Merton's views are discussed, and Toller refutes the suggestions that Merton was protected and shut away from the world, and that the denial of climate change, or thinking that this is somehow God's will, is a viable stance.

The film, through the character of Toller, a troubled spiritual seeker no longer able to pray in a conventional way, confronts explicitly a number of spiritual questions with the themes of pride and despair as the main obstacles to humility, prayer, and transcendence of the self. Thomas Merton writes at the start of 'Humility against despair' that despair separates us from God, as it is the extreme of self-love: 'It is reached when a man deliberately turns his back on all help from anyone else in order to taste the rotten luxury of knowing himself to be lost.' Humility lessens self-love, and leaves space for God.

Toller's pride and resulting despair increase as he becomes ever more aware of the environmental crisis until, in a state of self-righteousness, he begins to believe that the only action he can take is to participate in further destruction. He justifies his planned actions by quoting from Scripture including from Revelations 11:18: 'The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth.' He puts up a notice using the same words with which he had confronted the powerful oil man: 'Will God forgive us for what we're doing to his creation?' In his belief that violence can effect change, a logical outcome of pride and despair, Toller moves far away from Merton's firm belief in non-violence. It is also an acting-out of his destructive mental state, and we see how caught up in himself Toller is when he viciously attacks the choir director who expresses her concern about his health: 'You are a constant reminder of my own personal inadequacies and failings. You want something that never was and never will be. I despise you. I despise what you bring out in me. Your concerns are petty. You are a stumbling block.'

The pride and despair central to the film is also, as Merton already knew in the 1960s, part of our collective damaged and damaging relationship to God's creation. In our pride and lack of humility we continue to exploit and destroy our planet; this brings many of us to despair. Can God forgive us?

As with both personal and collective despair there is through grace always the possibility of redemption which comes in the film (as it has before) through the presence of the feminine – the pregnant Mary. This gives Toller and the viewer a fleeting experience of euphoric hope and joy, which, although still alongside grief, is unconstrained by the world.

This is a powerful and important film where matters of faith are dealt with in a serious and unflinching way.

**Fiona Gardner** is a spiritual director and writer. She was chair of the Thomas Merton Society 2004-2008, and co-editor of *The Merton Journal* 2008-2014.

---

### **A Course in Christian Mysticism**

Thomas Merton

Edited by Jon M. Sweeney

Liturgical Press Collegeville, Minnesota, 2017

ISBN 9780814645086 (pbk) 236 pages

\$19.95 / £14.99

This is a wonderful book. Straight from Merton himself, it brings us a thorough introduction to, and survey of, the range and depth of Christian mysticism. There are times when we can almost hear Merton giving his lectures, and yet the book is readable and well-edited. The lectures have been selected from three of the volumes of the Monastic Wisdom Series, originally edited by Patrick O'Connell and published by Cistercian Publications—*An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, *The Cistercian Fathers and their Monastic Theology*, and *Cassian and the Fathers*. I certainly learnt a great deal about Christian spirituality with the bonus of knowing that I was somehow being taught alongside those students at Gethsemani in the early 1960s when Merton gave these lectures.

At the start Merton sets out his foundational conviction: 'Some think it is sufficient to come to the monastery to live the Rule. More is required – we must live our theology, fully, deeply, in its totality. The separation of theology from "spirituality" is a disaster.' (p. 1) Merton proceeds to offer us helpful definitions of asceticism and mysticism, and points to the extremes which are to be avoided.