



Nature through God's Eyes: Eco-theological Perspectives in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed*

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Abstract

Environmental crisis is one of the major issues that humankind is facing today. The crisis can be discussed through a Christian perspective, as the relationship between Christianity and environment has been long discussed for its complexities. Eco-theology is one of the ways for Christianity to bridge its teaching to the environmental crisis. First Reformed, a 2017 film directed by Paul Schrader, is one of the films depicting the interplay between Christianity and environmentalism. This paper examines how First Reformed portrays the process of reconciling Christianity and environmentalism. Using Jürgen Moltmann's eco-theological concept and Kierkegaard's concept of despair, this article discovers that while First Reformed demonstrates the ways Christianity could be both an ally and an enemy of environmentalism, the film's final message leans more towards the way the church can respond to the crisis through embracing insights and values beyond Christianity's core doctrine that are more in line with environmental concerns, such as seeing nature as a female figure and the idea of harmony illustrated through a yin-yang symbolism.

Keywords: *First Reformed; eco-theology; environmental crisis; Christianity; despair*

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Introduction

The environmental crisis is one of the world's most prominent problems that require much attention. This crisis takes many forms, such as climate change, global warming, animal extinction, and pollution. The complexity of this crisis has generated mixed responses, as some perceive this as a global issue, and others regard it as the elephant in the room.

Nevertheless, the discussion on the connection between humans and the deteriorating planet is still popular amongst people in different parts of the world.

One of the ways to view the environmental crisis is from a religious perspective. The intersectionality between religion and environment has become an ongoing

discussion ever since Lynn White wrote an article titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” in 1967. In the article, White examined how our current environmental crisis is deeply rooted in technological advancement, which stems from the Christian dogma that nature’s purpose is to serve man. White further claimed that a religious approach is needed to overcome the threatening crisis that we are currently facing (p. 1207). This has resulted in the emergence of various new thoughts and paradigms regarding the issue, one of which is eco-theology. Eco-theology springs from the incorporation of the contemporary scientific view of the natural world into traditional theological ideas (Troster, 2013). Troster further managed to formulate several possible characteristics of eco-theology, one of which is closely related to eco-feminism (2013).

While the relationship between environmentalism and religion is quite odd on the surface level, many things could be explored, particularly concerning Christianity as one of the major religions in the world. There have been many discussions about how Christianity could be seen as the primary reason for natural exploitation as it promotes human domination over nature. Another group of people say that many aspects of Christianity could be regarded as environment-friendly, therefore creating room for solutions to the environmental crisis. Despite the different perspectives, it cannot be denied that environment and religion are interrelated to one another.

As the perception of environmental crisis within Christianity has been an ongoing debate for quite some time, it is interesting to see how this debate is manifested in a film by Paul Schrader titled *First Reformed* (2017). *First Reformed*'s plot revolves around Reverend Ernst Toller’s character, a minister of a small church called First Reformed in New York. Toller’s character undergoes a major shift of belief after meeting and counselling a radical environmentalist named Michael Mensana. As his interest in environmental issues deepens, Toller faces other problems related to his religious institutions and his health condition. Albeit the unclear resolution, *First Reformed* offers an interesting yet complex discussion

regarding the relationship between the environment and Christianity.

Although it is a relatively new film, there have been many academic reviews on *First Reformed*. These academic reviews and journals have proved that *First Reformed* is a rich text that could be explored from several angles. Many reviewers regarded *First Reformed* as a film about the human and self, meaning that it is deeply self-explorative (Blizek, 2018) and meditative (Clark, 2018). Carew (2019) also highlighted how *First Reformed* presents the feeling of hopelessness amidst a global crisis. The film is also discussed based on its similarities with other films. Lorenz (2019) highlighted the intertextuality of *First Reformed* with two other works that are said to be Schrader’s inspirations in making the film, i.e., *Diary of a Country Priest* (Robert Bresson, 1951) and *Winter Light* (Ingmar Bergman, 1963). On the other hand, Scranton (2019) compared *First Reformed* to Marvel’s *Infinity War*, saying that despite the stylistic differences, both films’ endings attempt to address the current catastrophic issue that humanity is facing, which is global warming. Lastly, *First Reformed* also contains elements of Buddhist-Christian vision that is emphasized by Ng (2019). There have been lots of reviews discussing *First Reformed*. However, only a few academic research has been conducted on the film as a means to explore the intersectionality between environmentalism and Christianity. Therefore, this research aims to find out how the movie *First Reformed* represents the position of environmental concerns within the Christian theological discourse. The main argument of this research is that *First Reformed* offers the concept of eco-theology as the solution to the conflict between environment and Christianity.

Methodology

This analysis mainly uses Jürgen Moltmann’s theory regarding the ecological doctrine of creation. This research also uses the concept of the Trinitarian God. According to this concept, God could manifest Himself through three forms: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Moltmann stated that the Spirit particularly stays within God’s creation, emphasising the idea of God’s immanence on earth. In his book titled *God in Creation* (1985),

Moltmann elaborated on the Trinitarian God's concept in relation to creation. Moltmann emphasised the Trinitarian God's concept by saying, "Creation exists in the Spirit, is moulded by the Son and is created by the Father. It is, therefore, from God, through God and in God" (p. 98). This statement implies that the world, which is God's creation, is divine, for the world exists within God, and God also exists within His creations. The discussion about nature's sacredness and divinity could only be done through the Trinitarian concept (Moltmann, 1985). The Trinitarian concept perceives God's nature as both transcendent and immanent (Moltmann, 1985). This combination further suggests that when humans only define God as a transcendent being, it would lead to the mindset that God does not exist within nature and, eventually, to the merciless exploitation of nature by humans (Moltmann, 1985).

This research is done through a textual analysis. First, readings on related journals, reviews, and interviews are conducted to gather more information surrounding the film, and the topic of environment and Christianity. Then, primary data gathering is done through watching the film multiple times. This research is done through a textual analysis. First, readings on related journals, reviews, and interviews are conducted to gather more information surrounding the film, and the topic of environment and Christianity. Then, primary data gathering is done through watching the film multiple times. The chosen data consists of the film's cinematic elements, such as dialogue, plot, and *mise-en-scène*. The chosen cinematic elements are those deemed able to support the thesis statement of this paper. Next, the data are categorized into three main sections. Lastly, a close examination on the cinematic elements are done by exploring the way in which those elements reflect Moltmann's and Kierkegaard's concepts. Additional supporting literatures are added along the way to help strengthen the arguments.

Result and Discussion

The Eco-theological Concept in First Reformed

First Reformed depicts a clash between the environmental crisis and a capitalism-based

religious institution. Reverend Ernst Toller, the minister of a small tourist church called First Reformed, is the character who tries to bring environmentalism into his religious institution. As suggested by his last name, which means a person who rings church bells to summon the congregation, Reverend Toller tries to be the person who reminds the church to come together and take action on environmental crisis. At the beginning of the film, Toller is introduced to environmentalism through Michael and Mary Mensana, a married couple who are parishioners of the First Reformed church. Michael, a passionate environmental activist, displays a strong concern regarding the current state of the earth.

This concern is manifested into the feeling of guilt over having to bring a child into a damaged world, and the thought of aborting the 20-week old baby of the currently-pregnant Mary. Another manifestation of this concern is a suicide vest, which he secretly assembles in his garage. Later on, Michael decides to commit suicide by shooting himself in the head despite having been counselled by Reverend Toller. He leaves Toller with a laptop, a suicide vest, a mourning wife, and an environmentalist mission. This occurrence inflicts a major change of perspective in Reverend Toller, which unfolds throughout the film.

Reverend Toller's change is very subtle yet consistent. This change is slowly building up after he met with the Mensana couple, all the way through the end. In the beginning, we are exposed to Reverend Toller's dull, quiet, and stagnant environment through the static camera work, the film's sombre tone, and the minimalist soundtrack. Paul Schrader, the director, appears to be adapting the style of Robert Bresson, one of the filmmakers that he examined in his book *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972/1988). Bresson is said to use only "natural sounds," and the purpose of this is to "reinforce cold reality" (Schrader, 1972/1988, p. 69). Bresson is also known to often limit his camera work to certain angles and movements. In his writing about Bresson, Schrader stated, "When each action is handled in essentially the same non-expressive manner, the viewer no longer looks to the angle and composition for 'clues' to the

action” (p. 67). We can find the aspects mentioned above in *First Reformed*.

There is no prominent non-diegetic sound (sounds which come from outside of the film and act as background music), and the only sounds that can be heard are the ones made by the characters (diegetic sounds). Similarly, the camerawork in this film is restricted, creating a static world where the characters have to move in and out of the frame by themselves. The absence of camera movement implies that Reverend Toller is living his life with a go-with-the-flow attitude, not leading or taking a significant initiative in his life. The reality has been established, Toller comes around, does his business, and then leaves. Toller’s life remains monotonous as the colour of the clothes he consistently wears. If we count in the static and quiet world as the reality of Reverend Toller’s life, it can be said that even the slightest shift in camera movements and sound can indicate a shift of reality.

The moving camera is a starting point of Reverend Toller’s change. There is a shift in the camerawork during the second time Reverend Toller visits Mensana’s residence, in which the camera uses the tracking technique as it follows both Toller and Mary Mensana on their way to Mensana’s garage, where they find Michael’s suicide vest.



Source: First Reformed (Schrader, 2017, 00:34:26 - 00:34:39)

Figure 1. Mary (front) and Toller (back), and the camera follows as they head towards the garage.

The next camera movement happens when Toller and Mary cycle around a park. The scene is shot at a low angle and uses the tracking technique as well.



Source: First Reformed (Schrader, 2017, 01:00:37-01:00:38)

Figure 2. Toller (top) and Mary (bottom), shot in low angle using tracking technique.

After this scene, the camera pans, following Toller and Mary, as they exit the garage and enter Mensana's house.



Source: First Reformed (Schrader, 2017, 01:01:51 – 01:02:22)

Figure 3. Mary (front) and Toller (back), walking back from the garage to the house. Shot using panning technique.



The most apparent camera movements are during the magical mystery tour scene (01:22:49 – 01:25:20) and when Toller and Mary kiss (01:48:11 – 01:49:11), in which the camera circles both characters in both scenes. The description above shows that the camera mostly moves during moments shared between Reverend Toller and Mary Mensana. Even though it uses different techniques, it is certain that the camera is following the two characters and making them the centre of attention.

The movements serve as a clear contrast to the static world that is discussed in the previous paragraph. Those scenes show that Reverend Toller is starting to take a lead of his life and making life follow him instead of the other way around. Furthermore, Toller's life is starting to take turns when Mary Mensana comes into picture. This is a crucial point because as a woman and a mother-to-be, Mary could be considered as a symbolization of nature, as the figure of woman and mother has been considered to symbolise the world through the term 'the great world mother' and 'the mother earth' (Moltmann, 1985). Hence, moving the camera during moments with Mary could signify that Reverend Toller is leaning and immersing himself more into nature and, consequently, environmentalism. However, at the same time Toller and Mary's relationship is a form of adultery in Christian doctrine, as they are building their relationship out of marriage. This could also represent the complicated relationship between Christianity and environmentalism as there are various

rejections of environmentalism by the church, one of which is based on the idea that worshipping nature is regarded as pagan worshipping (Pitetti, 2015).

Reverend Toller's gradual change becomes more evident through the film's narrative. His meeting with Ed Balq, the leader of local paper industries, seems to trigger bigger changes inside Toller. The meeting, which initially conducted to discuss the 250th Reconsecration ceremony of First Reformed, turns sour when Toller and Balq get into a heated argument over a web article regarding Michael Mensana's memorial, which is performed on a toxic waste site and serenaded by an environmental protest song sung by the Abundant Life choir. Balq, displeased by the fact that the article states both Abundant Life and First Reformed churches' names, condemns the memorial as a political act, while Toller deems it as just a nice gesture to respect the wishes of the deceased. The argument expands when the topic of environmental collapse is mentioned. Balq says it is a "complicated subject," while Toller says it is just a plain and straightforward fact. A few scenes after that, through Michael Mensana's laptop, Toller discovers the fact that BALQ Industries ranks fifth on the World's Top Polluters published by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and also the fact that BALQ Industries gives its biggest donation to Abundant Life Church (01:06:02 – 01:06:42).



Source: First Reformed (Schrader, 2017, 00:52:40 – 00:55:18)

Figure 4. Reverend Toller, leading Michael Mensana's memorial at a toxic waste site.

This seems to be Toller's turning point, indicated by his claim that he has not lost his faith while changing the words on the board in front of First Reformed with the question '*Will God forgive us?*' the next morning (01:06:50 – 01:06:58). From that moment onwards, Toller also shows a sense of responsibility towards his health and other living beings' welfare, shown by him going to the hospital (01:07:35 – 01:08:11) and removing the barbed wire in the First Reformed's yard after seeing that a dead rabbit got caught on it (01:16:50 – 01:17:22). His concern with environmental crisis provokes his concern about his own well-being and others. Toller is starting to recognize the relation between the environment, animals, and himself, which Moltmann referred to as "integrating and integral thinking" (1985, p. 3). The realization of the interconnectedness of things can strengthen the human-nature relationship and encourage life (Moltmann, 1985, p. 3).

Moltmann further elaborated that 'nature' does not only mean our surroundings but that our body also counts as nature (1985, p. 3). Toller's growing interest in nature is also followed by his strong refusal of capitalism, indicated through the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-23) which he reads during the Sunday mass, only a few scenes after the shocking discovery about the relationship between BALQ Industries and Abundant Life Church. This parable is about how humans shall not be greedy like the rich man who hoards his crops. This verse also contains an important quote: Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes" (Luke 12: 22-23). Quoting these verses, Toller is emphasising his refusal of materials possessions, which have a strong association with capitalism, and eventually his objection to industries that destroy the environment.

After building up through changes in camera work and narrative, Toller's immersion into environmentalism peaks near the end of the film. During this period, Reverend Toller is the most vocal when it comes to his newfound belief about the relationship between the environment and religion, and his words evidently contain eco-theological ideas. The first noteworthy words to be discussed are Toller's monologue at Hanstown Kills. After a series of unusual events, including joining a tour at BALQ Industries and having dinner at the same place and time with Ed Balq and his colleagues, Reverend Toller drives to Hanstown Kills, a polluted river site over which Michael Mensana's ashes were scattered. Toller stands before the river, with the night sky as the background, and says the following sentences through voice-over, "Every act of preservation is an act of creation. Everything preserved renews creation. It is how we participate in creation. **I have found another form of prayer.**"

There are elements of nature preservation in Toller's monologue. He puts emphasis on creation's preservation, and that humans have to actively partake in the process of creation. Moreover, by saying that he "has found another form of prayer," Reverend Toller indicates that

the act of preserving the earth is essentially also an act of praying. Reverend Toller's perspective is supported by Jürgen Moltmann's theory on the Trinitarian God. According to Moltmann, Christians have the concept of three but one God, who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Moltmann believes that the Holy Spirit stays within God's creation on earth. This means that within all creatures lies the Spirit of God. This does not mean that the Spirit is merely God's power that He distributed to this world. Instead, it implies that "the Spirit is God" (p. 102). This whole concept suggests that Reverend Toller's perspective regarding preservation and his new way of praying have a firm basis in Christianity. In *Laudato si'* (2015), Pope Francis discussed humans' responsibilities over nature based on biblical scriptures:

The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to "till and keep" the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). "Tilling" refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while "keeping" means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. (p. 49)

The excerpt above provides the basis for natural preservation. When humans preserve nature, they also preserve the Spirit within, which equals the act of praying to God. Even though *First Reformed* does not explicitly show scenes in which Reverend Toller actively works in preserving nature, we can see that Toller has grasped the idea of environmental preservation through the subtle camera movements and the narrative that have been discussed in the previous paragraphs.

The second time Reverend Toller brings up the topic of nature and God is during the talk between him and Reverend Jeffers of Abundant Life. Reverend Jeffers is addressing Toller's failing health and his profound interest in environmentalism. "Jesus doesn't want our suffering. He suffered for us. He wants our commitment and our obedience," Reverend Jeffers says, to which Toller replies:

And what of His creation? The Heavens declare the glory of God. God is present everywhere, in every plant, every river, every tiny insect. The whole world is a manifestation of His Holy presence. I think this is the issue where the church can lead....

Toller is emphasising what Jürgen Moltmann calls “the immanence of God.” In *God in Creation* (1985), Moltmann discusses God’s presence in every living being on earth through the Spirit. This differs from the Christian view that separates God from His creations; in other words, God is a transcendent deity. According to Magee (as cited in Van Dyk, 2009, p. 197), this view is influenced by Plato’s hierarchical dualism, which becomes the basis of the division between the material world and the spiritual world in the Christian religion. This also differs from the common view on nature from the perspective of economic and technological growth, which sees nature as merely a resource for humans to use in order to maximise the quality of human life. By bringing up the idea of God’s immanence in our natural world, Reverend Toller is calling us into extending a similar mindset of sacredness that humans usually have towards God, to nature and the environment as well.

Despair as the Obstacle of Eco-theological Doctrine

During his mission to create room for discussion of environmental crisis, Reverend Toller is faced with his own despair. The topic of despair is discussed based on Kierkegaard’s definition of despair and Moltmann’s thoughts on the ecological crisis. Kierkegaard’s concept, *Sickness unto Death*, is briefly mentioned by Reverend Toller in the counselling session with Michael Mensana (00:15:37). Kierkegaard has long proclaimed the concept of human as a synthesis, namely “a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and eternal, and of freedom and necessity” (1980, p. 13). All these elements constitute the self, or spirit, which grants a higher position for humans as “conscious beings in relation to the divine” (Walsh, 2018, p. 8). Kierkegaard further explains that despair is “the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself” (1980, p. 15). In the words of Grunthaler

(2013), despair occurs when the self is unable to properly relate itself to God. Kierkegaard’s thoughts on despair can be related to Moltmann’s idea of the crisis of domination. In *God in Creation* (1985), Moltmann discussed how human-nature relationship has been destroyed by technology, an invention that derived from human values and convictions (Moltmann, 1985).

When we talk about the ecological crisis of modern civilisation, we can only mean a crisis of the whole system with all its part-systems, from the dying of the forests to the spread of neuroses, from the pollution of the seas and rivers to the nihilistic feeling about life which dominates so many people in our mass cities (Moltmann, 1985, p. 23).

The crisis of values could be seen as a form of despair. As despair occurs due to a misrelation between the self and God, and here God is understood as both transcendent and immanent, it can be concluded that humans could experience despair due to a misrelation between them and nature. This section is going to show how Toller’s despair causes alterations in the course of his eco-theological mission.

First Reformed portrays the world as dark and gloomy, as seen through the film’s dark and monochromatic tone. The film is also set during winter to spring time, displaying dormant trees everywhere and consequently reinforcing the film’s depressing aura. Similarly, *First Reformed* presents us with characters that are caught in the middle of despair, Michael Mensana and Reverend Toller. Both characters are overridden by despair, though for different reasons. Michael Mensana is in despair due to the disastrous state of the world, which leads him into feeling guilty for his unborn child. On the other hand, Toller is unable to move on from the loss of his son in a war and the failure of his marriage that follows. Toller’s despair results in a fragile faith, as he is constantly contemplating about prayer and uses his journal to aid with his inability to pray. Toller’s despair intensifies after Michael’s suicide, as he delves deeper into environmental causes. Both characters display the behaviour of an alcoholic, a strong indication that they use the substance to alleviate their stress and anxieties. Toller and Michael’s conditions

illustrate Kierkegaard's concept of despair and Moltmann's thought on the crisis of human values, a form of despair and an existential crisis that seems to have no end or resolution. Any effort to end this despair and crisis will be futile if its roots are not eliminated in the first place, but this elimination is almost impossible to do. The indomitable despair of the two characters has led them to believe that drastic and extreme actions might provide solutions to their problems. At the beginning of the film, Michael Mensana demonstrates his extreme beliefs of environmental martyrdom through the conversation below:

MICHAEL. You believe in martyrdom, Reverend?

REVEREND TOLLER. I'm not sure I know what you mean.

MICHAEL. You know, the Saints of God, the early Christians who wouldn't renounce their faith? The missionaries who were attacked in the fields of the Lord. Do you believe that they died for a purpose?

REVEREND TOLLER. I do.

MICHAEL. Well, every week, activists are killed trying to protect the environment. A hundred and seventeen were killed last year for their beliefs.



Source: First Reformed (Schrader, 2017, 00:17:23)
Figure 5. Michael (standing), showing Reverend Toller (sitting) framed photographs of environmental martyrs.

This belief of environmental martyrdom, along with his looming desperation are what it takes for Michael to inflict death upon himself. On the other hand, Reverend Toller's despair goes deeper following Michael's death. His drinking habit does not falter even the slightest

and he deliberately ignores doctor's warning about the possibility of stomach cancer. Reverend Toller also takes upon himself to pick up where Michael left off and starts to assemble the suicide vest that formerly belongs to Michael. Near the end of the film, Toller wears a suicide vest underneath his cassock, which suggests that his idea of fixing the state of the world is by destroying it.



Source: First Reformed (Schrader, 2017, 01:41:00)
Figure 6. Reverend Toller, wearing a suicide vest underneath his cassock.

In Toller's perspective and interpretation, the vest could be understood as the 'full armour of God' from the verses that Toller quotes in the film in minutes 01:29:47 - 01:30:12:

Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the power of this dark world. (Ephesians 6: 11-12).

Reverend Toller and Michael Mensana bear a strong resemblance to one another, in the sense that their immense despair has altered their perception of solution and made them opt for violence. Their despair also triggers and fuels their religious fanaticism, as suggested by the way they use the concept of martyrdom and biblical verses to justify their terrorist acts.

Toller's surroundings also contribute to the accumulation of his despair, as his eco-theological ideas are strongly opposed by Reverend Jeffers, the leader of Abundant Life Church. The dispute is inevitable, as the outer appearances alone show the inherent

differences of the churches. Abundant Life has an enormous building with a purple interior and a hall that could fit 5,000 people, courtesy of BALQ Industries. It looks “more of a company than a church,” as Michael claims at the beginning of the film (00:06:51). As the name suggests, Abundant Life Church signifies prosperity theology, a theology that believes that good fortunes are what God desires for His believers (Swoboda, 2015). Swoboda (2015) further explains that prosperity theology is focused solely on human prosperity and blindly believes that the earth is able to give endless supply of resources to sustain human lives. Consequently, this theology poses a threat to the efforts of solving environmental crisis through the Christian perspective. Meanwhile, the First Reformed Church represents the traditional church whose mission is centred on salvation and evangelism. This type of church has the bigger potential of adopting ecological doctrine, as the doctrine has been discussed as a new way to fulfil evangelical mission (Josiah & Onyazonwu, 2014). By looking at its white, old Dutch-colonial style building, the deserted Sunday mass with no more than ten parishioners, the leaking pipes, and the broken organ, the First Reformed church evokes a sense of loneliness and gloominess. The church’s physical appearance reflects the spiritually barren condition of the church, as we see that Toller’s despair has shaken his faith and resulted in his inability to pray. The old and desolate building of First Reformed also represents Reverend Toller’s chronic desperation, which keeps piling up each day due to his past traumas, Michael Mensana’s death, and his apprehension towards environmental collapse. Abundant Life’s outstanding building, on the other hand, represents a supposedly ‘good’ relationship between the self and God. This demonstrates how Christians are aiming more at materialistic and worldly promises instead of their true teaching. At the same time, however, its leadership is oblivious to and ignorant of the great calamity surrounding it, that is, environmental collapse.

In contrast to Toller’s eco-theological thinking, Reverend Jeffers of Abundant Life possesses a strong belief in a human-centric mission. It is apparent from his exclamation when arguing with Reverend Toller (01:36:33

– 01:36:51), “You don’t live in the real world. Do you have any idea what it takes to do God’s work? To maintain the mission of this size? The staffing, the outreach, the amount of people that we touch each day.” Reverend Jeffers implies that “doing something for the real world” means reaching out to as many people as possible, along with “preaching the gospel” and “building houses” for the poor in Nicaragua (01:37:51 – 01:37:53). Moltmann highlighted the important point that modern civilisations are strongly focused on “development, expansion and conquest.” (1985, p. 26). Therefore, Reverend Jeffers’ statement reflects Moltmann’s point about modern civilisation in the sense that Reverend Jeffers focuses on reaching to as many people as possible through material means, hence the strive for development and expansion points, as he emphasises “the size” of the mission. In his argument, Reverend Jeffers speaks in numbers or quantity, as implied in the use of words such as ‘size’ and ‘amount’, which serves as the reason that it is one of the beneficiaries of BALQ Industries’ endowment. The decision to use the hall of the Abundant Life Church for the 250th Reconsecration ceremony of First Reformed so that it can reach to wider audiences as well is another example that demonstrates Reverend Jeffers’ focus on physical or material gain, which puts humans exclusively at the centre of the universe. Putting human causes as the only “real world” things and disregarding environmental concerns as not real have unknowingly become the custom ever since our society started to move towards modernism. This aligns with Moltmann’s concept that the ecological crisis is a reflection of the human’s crisis of values (1985). The relationship between humans and nature has strayed far from the equilibrium and has been greatly focused on human domination instead, which eventually can lead to despair in Kierkegaard’s concept. These opposing views of nature that come from his community has managed to further firming Toller’s grip on the thought of violence as the only way to fix the situation.

Toller’s despair has clouded his judgement and turned him violent. It might be difficult for the audience to sympathise and relate to Toller’s decision, as suicide bombing is not the most sensible solution, let alone coming from a man of God. The factors above add to the film’s

portrayal of the complexities of reconciling environmentalism and Christianity. Reverend Toller's despair demands that he take action as soon as possible, which results in the hasty decision to do suicide bombing because Toller might not see any other solution to escape his despair other than death. However, Kierkegaard has pronounced the inescapable nature of despair, "If a person were to die of despair as one dies of a sickness, then the eternal in him, the self, must be able to die in the same sense as the body dies of sickness. But this is impossible; the dying of despair continually converts itself into a living" (1980, p. 18). Therefore, the choice of ending the despair with an act of terrorism and martyrdom becomes significant. Those who are willing to be 'martyrs' are the ones who escape their "psychic pain" by sacrificing themselves to help their communities or causes (Speckhard, 2005, 2006, as cited in Fierke, 2009, p. 173). Carrying out the act of terrorism could bring attention and influence others to continue the cause, and the death of the terrorists will not be in vain as they will be regarded as martyrs by their communities. Martyrdom also enables people to make meaning and gain agency of their hopelessness (Fierke, 2009). The explanation above illustrates terrorists' thought pattern. Dealing with despair through terrorism shows that Toller has followed terrorist's way of thinking. He refuses to give in to his despair, as he would be able to 'escape' his despair and make meaning out of his death. However, Reverend Toller eventually decides to call off his plan due to the last-minute appearance of Mary Mensana. Despite this cancellation, Toller still refuses to succumb to his despair as he chooses to act upon his despair by abandoning death and welcoming life in the form of Mary and her love to him. The decision to embrace life in the form of Mary could be seen as a form of resolution proposed by the film.

Embracing beyond Christianity as the Resolution

First Reformed is a film with many complexities. It seems like this film does not offer a resolution to the discourse of the environmental crisis due to its abrupt and unexpected ending. However, there are indications that the film attempts to offer a

solution to the problem. This section is aimed at mapping out the resolution that this film offers through two important scenes, which are the magical mystery tour scene and the ending scene. These two scenes suggest that Christianity should try to embrace ideas beyond its traditional teaching, such as philosophy and ecological thinking beyond the Christian doctrine, in order to better understand the problem of environmental crisis.

The first scene to be discussed is the magical mystery tour scene (01:23:02 – 01:25:19). During her surprise visit to Toller's parsonage due to sleeping difficulties, Mary Mensana is half-telling and half-persuading Toller to join an activity that she and Michael used to do called the magical mystery tour, in which they would lie on top of each other, facing each other, with full clothes on. They then would try to get as much body-to-body contact as possible while breathing in the same rhythm. Toller eventually agrees to do that with Mary, so he lies on the ground while Mary lies on top of him. As soon as their breathing is in sync, they start to levitate from the ground.



Source: *First Reformed* (Schrader, 2017, 01:22:49)
Figure 7. Mary (top) and Toller (bottom) are levitating.

Toller and Mary, still in a perfectly aligned position, are 'flying' above several images of beautiful, uncorrupted nature, such as the blue sea and forests.



Source: First Reformed (Schrader, 2017, 01:23:22 – 01:24:05)

Figure 8. Mary and Toller, flying above beautiful sceneries.

However, when Toller moves his head slightly to his right and is no longer aligned with Mary, the images start to change into those of environmental destruction (01:24:19 – 01:25:19). Toller and Mary slowly exit the frame as the camera moves forward, and the horrendous images come into full display. The images then end in a place that looks similar to Hanstown Kills, the place where Michael’s ashes are scattered.



Source: First Reformed (Schrader, 2017, 01:24:13– 01:25:20)

Figure 9. Mary and Toller, flying above scenes of environmental destruction.

The magical mystery tour scene is pivotal in the film because it illustrates the ‘combination’ of Christianity and nature and the resulting harmony. The idea that Mary Mensana embodies nature in this film has been discussed in the earlier section of this paper. The relationship between Mary Mensana and nature could also be linked with Mary the Mother of Jesus, as her figure is seen as “Queen of all creation” according to Pope Francis’ *Laudato si’* (2015, p. 175). Mother Mary cares and mourns for nature as she does for her son Jesus, and “in her glorified body, together with the Risen Christ, part of creation has reached the fullness of its beauty” (Francis, 2015, p. 175). Hence, in this scene, Mary plays the role of nature, while Reverend Toller represents Christianity. During this scene, Toller is wearing a black outfit, whereas Mary is wearing white clothing. As they lie on top of each other, white on top of black, we can see an image of *yin* and *yang*, which is a famous concept of equilibrium from the Eastern religion.



Source: First Reformed (Schrader, 2017, 01:22:20)
Figure 10. Mary in white outfit and Toller in black outfit.

Yin and *yang* are known to complement each other, and they often represent the opposites (Brazal, 2019). The combination of *yin* and *yang*, also known as *Taiji*, results in harmony, which consequently supports the notion that God is both transcendent and immanent (Jung Young Lee, 1979, as cited in Brazal, 2019, pp. 427-428). In her writing about the church and the concept of *yin-yang* harmony, Brazal further stated that the church that is in harmonious *yin-yang* is a church that also encourages the restoration of nature to its state of harmony because “the *yin* and *yang* forces within humans interact with those in the environment” (2019, p. 432). The explanation above matches perfectly with the magical mystery tour scene because the scene showcases that, if the *yin* (Toller, representing Christianity) and the *yang* (Mary, representing nature) are aligned, they will result in the restoration of nature to its harmonious state, as seen through the images of clean and flourishing nature. It also shows how misalignment of the two could cause horrible consequences, as seen through the images of environmental collapse.

Even though the ending (01:40:05 – 01:49:14) may be puzzling, it contains the element of resolution. *First Reformed* finishes off with the ending that is probably unexpected by the audience. The film shows several scenes that lead us to assume that the film will end with a bang. However, this assumption is completely blown over during the last scenes. In the morning of the reconsecration day, Reverend Toller puts on

the suicide vest, which has already been equipped with the components necessary to set off an explosion. Toller wears the vest underneath his black cassock, creating a complete disguise of the vest and covering his intention of blowing up the church and its congregation.

However, things take a major turn when Toller finds out that Mary Mensana has arrived in the church, despite Toller’s plea to her not to come to the reconsecration ceremony a few scenes before. Enraged by this, Toller strips out of the suicide vest, and unexpectedly wraps barbed wire around his body. Toller then wears a white robe, throws away the whiskey in his cup, and pours Drano, a drain cleaner, into the cup. As he lifts the cup to his mouth, Toller hears someone call him, and the person turns out to be Mary. Toller then discards the cup, walks into the front room, and starts embracing and kissing Mary. The kiss lasts for quite some time until the screen cuts into black to mark the end of the film.

There are many things that happen during the ending scene. Reverend Toller has to cancel out his plan of blowing up the church when he discovers that Mary is in there. He opts for putting on the barbed wire and drinking Drano instead. It is known that Christianity is familiar with blood sacrifice ceremony, as Jesus Himself has to suffer in order to cleanse humans from sins. Toller wrapping himself with barbed wire can be seen as an attempt of self-flagellation to repent himself from his sins. The white robes that he wears afterward can be a further indication of purity and cleanness. The next moment, in which Toller pours a cup of Drano, can be interpreted as his willingness to drink his’ cup of misery.’

In the scenes prior to the ending, Reverend Jeffers says that Toller is “always in the garden” (01:35:00 – 01:35:20). Paul Schrader has mentioned the significance of “the garden,” which refers to the Garden of Gethsemane, as the place where Jesus prays to ask His Father to take the cup of misery away from Him (Schrader & Hawke, 2018). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39).

The glass of drain cleaner may symbolise his cup of misery. Schrader also mentions that Toller does the same thing as Jesus, begging for the cup to be taken away from him (Schrader & Hawke, 2018). As if answering Toller's silent plea, the cup is taken away from Toller, literally by the presence of Mary Mensana. The way Mary brings out clarity in Toller can be associated with her last name, Mensana, which is similar to the Latin phrase '*mens sana in corpore sano*' (*mens sana* means healthy mind). Mary's presence creates further implication as God's way to take away Toller's despair, as significant changes occur in the scene that follows. Toller, draped in a white robe, walks out to the front room and approaches Mary, who is wearing a dark outfit. Once again, we see the *yin* and *yang* allusions here, reinforcing the message that Christianity and nature are complementary to each other.



Source: First Reformed (Schrader, 2017, 01:48:16)
Figure 11. Mary, in black outfit, and Toller, in white outfit.

When Toller and Mary kiss, the camera circles them. The room is also visibly brighter than Toller's bedroom, probably the brightest that we have ever seen in this movie. This scene gives an image that the world could be a brighter place when Christianity and nature start to recognise that they are inseparable, and together they can make a significant change to the current environmental crisis. The idea of positive relationship between Christianity and nature has been discussed under the term of environmental stewardship, which believes that humans are responsible to take care of nature. According to Josiah and Onyazonwu (2014), environmental stewardship also sees the connection between environmental crisis

and moral crisis, similar to Moltmann's thought about crisis of domination. Kipkemboi (2017) has also noted that stewardship acknowledges the importance of "harmony, unity, purity, and integrity" in order to respect God and His creation (p. 14). Thus, the *yin-yang* allusion could also serve as a reminder that Christianity also has a concept that emphasizes harmony between humans and nature in the form of environmental stewardship.

Based on the discussion above, it appears that the magical mystery tour and the ending scenes serve as Schrader's way of weaving in his idea of resolution to the difficulty of reconciling environmentalism and the Christian doctrine. Through the moving camera, choice of clothing, and *mise-en-scene*, Schrader expresses that one of the ways in which Christianity could help solve the problem of environmental crisis is through embracing other branches of thought which promotes harmony and equality such as *yin* and *yang* from the Eastern religion, as well as the philosophy that considers women as the representation of mother nature from eco-feminism. Through contextualising and opening itself to the current situation, Christianity can contribute more to solving the environmental crisis.

Conclusion

First Reformed manages to shed new light on the interplay between Christianity and environmentalism in the form of eco-theological concepts reflected through Reverend Toller's character development. The character development is indicated through the moving camera during moments with Mary, the way Toller pays more attention to his health and surroundings, and the way his words contain ideas that God is both a transcendent and immanent being. Despite showing a good start, Reverend Toller's stance is greatly challenged by the despair he experiences, which is caused by his unresolved guilt over his son's death and his wife who left, and the rejection of his eco-theological ideas by his church and its leaders. This despair, which Kierkegaard called as the "Sickness unto Death," has altered Toller's perception of things, and resulted in his desire to do suicide bombing in the name of environmental

martyrdom. However, through the yin and yang symbolism shown by the colours of Toller's and Mary's outfit, *First Reformed* eventually calls for the church's openness towards embracing other worldviews which value harmony and equality.

First Reformed has managed to open room for discussion regarding various aspects of human life during a time of crisis. Further discussions about the role of the church in modern society can be done by looking at the contrasting portrayal of the First Reformed church on a regular Sunday mass and the reconsecration ceremony, which suggests how modern society perceives spiritual celebration in comparison to physical celebration. The role of the church is also challenged through the portrayal of fragile church leadership amidst a capitalistic society, an insightful topic for another research project in the intersection between theology and political economy.

Moreover, as many reviewers have emphasised the meditative quality of this film, it would also be interesting to delve deeper into the psychological side of unresolved guilt depicted by this film, highlighting the role of both personal trauma as well as despair caused by a fatalistic view of the world in the face of acute environmental crisis. It would be inspiring to explore how religious doctrines such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Eastern and Indigenous spirituality, and their intersection with philosophy, may offer useful resolutions to various problems faced by the world today.

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