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Man on Fire

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Man on Fire* (2018) directed by Joel Fendelman.

Keywords

Racism, Suicide, Self immolation

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Man on Fire (2018), dir. Joel Fendelman

On June 23, 2014, the Rev. Charles Moore drove from his home in Allen, Texas to a shopping center parking lot in his home town of Grand Saline, Texas, where he doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire. He died as a result of the fire. The Rev. Moore did leave a note on the windshield of his car in which he said among other things that the people of Grand Saline should repent for their racism.

Man on Fire is the story of how the people of Grand Saline responded to the self-immolation of Charles Moore. Many people agreed with Charles Moore—Grand Saline was a racist community where blacks were unwelcome, indeed, sometimes killed and sometimes just beaten and told to stay out of town. Some citizens claimed that while Grand Saline had a long history of racism, it was no longer a racist community. It was now a community where everyone was welcome—well, at least, where every good person was welcome. Many of these people wanted to “move on.” They didn’t want to talk about the past. They wanted to ignore the history

of the town. Obviously this was not the way that Charles Moore thought you could deal with the town's long history of racism. And, then, other citizens claimed that there had never been any racism in the town. These people referred to the talk of racism as mythology or simply rumors handed down from one generation to the next. And they referred to Charles Moore as someone who was mentally unstable or as someone who had gone off the rails. (It is interesting to see in the film that the logo for the local school is still an Indian in full headdress.)

There are a few people who are genuinely hurt by Moore's action and they are left asking the question "Why?" But the movie includes a quote from the Rev. Moore that may help to answer the question. "This decision to sacrifice myself was not impulsive: I have struggled all my life with what it means to take Dietrich Bonhoeffer's insistence that 'Christ calls a person to come and die' seriously." Maybe religion is something more serious than a Sunday sermon and a pot luck dinner? It surely was for the Rev. Charles Moore.