

Modeling a New Paradigm

Review of

No Abiding Place: Thomas Merton and the Search for God

By Fred Herron

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Reviewed by **Paul R. Dekar**

Fred Herron highlights Thomas Merton's role in helping bring about a "new paradigm" (Part I). Herron identifies this shift in terms of the move Merton anticipated, especially in the 1960s, from Christian triumphalism to greater inclusivism, especially regarding Christian ecumenism and respect for other religions; from withdrawal to engagement with the world; from dogmatic religion to spirituality, a transformation evident in the revisions Merton made to *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949) in the final edition of *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961). Especially after his famous experience at Fourth and Walnut, Louisville, Merton affirmed monastic spirituality is less about finding a place of refuge from the world, and more a place of entry into the heart of God and of transformation. As Merton wrote in his preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "the monastery is not an 'escape' from the world . . . [but] by being in the monastery I take my true part in all the struggles and sufferings of the world" (*Honorable Reader* 65).

In Part II of this book, Herron explores Merton's appeal, especially to adolescent students he teaches at Fontbonne Hall Academy and St. John's University in New York, and as Director of Adult Faith Formation at St. Clare's parish in Great Kills, NY. Herron explains that Thomas Merton can be quite appealing to students because he embodies and articulates the dynamic activity of God's call on one's life (63). Merton is of help in a number of ways, notably his ability to evoke a sense of the transcendent in one's experience, his ability to challenge readers to grapple with tough faith issues and his unflinching honesty as he shared his own struggles in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and other autobiographical writings.

In Part III, Herron explores Merton's search for God, God Alone (as affirms the gate that opens into the monastic quarters at the Abbey of Gethsemani). Herron summarizes Merton's insights on how to unencumber our lives of all that detracts from knowing God and self. Our other gods can get the best of us and prevent us from living into our truest self and finding God, God alone.

Having discovered Merton after his death in 1968, Herron has journeyed with Merton ever since. Using a word Merton disparaged for himself, Herron writes that Merton became for him an "icon of the divine, pointing constantly to an end to our journey" (vii). The personal engagement with Merton as companion in Herron's diverse roles as teacher, spiritual director, father and spiritual

seeker makes this an enjoyable book to read. However, it added neither to my understanding of Merton, nor to my own journey as teacher, spiritual director, father and spiritual seeker. Many good ideas are presented too briefly and need to be fleshed out. For example, I would have appreciated far more attention to adolescent spirituality and how precisely Herron uses Merton in his formative work with young people. At times I wished Herron had cited the seven volumes of Merton's journal, rather than Mott's biography.