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Speaking the Unspeakable: The Assassination and Martyrdom of Thomas Merton

in Book Review — by Edward Curtin — April 27, 2018

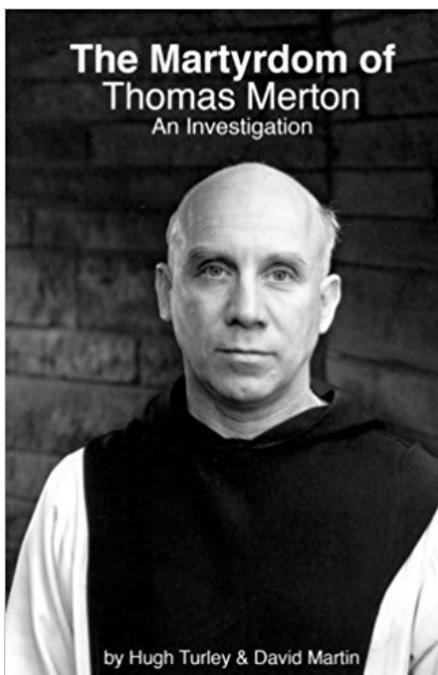
A Quasi-Review of *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton* by Hugh Turley & David Martin

“Killing a man who says ‘No!’ is a risky business,” the priest replied, “because even a corpse can go on whispering ‘No! No! No!’ with a persistence and obstinacy that only certain corpses are capable of. And how can you silence a corpse?” Ignazio Silone, *Bread and Wine*

Fifty years have elapsed since Thomas Merton died under mysterious circumstances in a cottage at a Red Cross Conference Center outside Bangkok, Thailand where he was attending an international inter-faith monastic conference. The truth behind his death has been concealed until now through the lies and deceptions of a cast of characters, religious, secular, and U.S. governmental, whose actions chill one to the bone. But he has finally found his voice through Hugh Turley and David Martin, who tell the suppressed truth of Merton’s last minutes on earth on December 10, 1968.

This is an extraordinary book in so many ways. First, because the authors prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Trappist monk and anti-war writer Thomas Merton was assassinated and did not die in a fabricated accident, as has been claimed for all these years.

Second, because it is so meticulously researched, sourced, documented, and logically argued that it puts to shame and the lie to so many works, including academic ones, that purport to be profound but fall apart once carefully inspected, especially all those that have been written about Merton and his alleged accidental death. These false accounts of his death, obviously presented purposely by the key players – that he was electrocuted by a fan while wet from a shower – have been repeated *ad nauseam* over fifty years as if curiosity were reserved for cats and a writer’s job were to repeat commonplace absurdities. And of course the mainstream media, the prime organs of propaganda dissemination, have carried



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out their function by repeating these lies at every turn. The transparency of Turley and Martin's presentation is greatly enhanced by the presence of footnotes, not endnotes, which allow readers to easily check sources as they read. Most footnotes refer to primary documents – letters, police reports, etc. – that are reproduced in an appendix that is, however, in need of enlargement, but whose contents have, for some odd or not so odd reasons, escaped the thousands of writers who've penned words about Merton.

Third, because it greatly expands our understanding of that fateful year – 1968 – by adding the prophetic Merton's name to the list of well-known anti-war leaders – MLK and RFK – who were slain that year by U.S. government operatives intent on crushing the growing opposition to their genocidal war waged on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The links between these assassinations are made manifest as one follows the authors' brilliant analysis that allows an informed reader to see the template common to them all and one that clearly leads to intelligence agencies practiced in the arts of murder and cover-up.

Fourth, because it proves that in the long run the pen is mightier than the sword, and the spiritually powerful poetic words of a God-entranced man living in seclusion can rattle the cages of men who embrace the void of violence while rejecting the spiritual essence of all religions – that non-violence and love are the laws of existence. Merton may be dead for his killers, but not for those who hear his voice whispering on every page: "The very thoughts of a person like me are crimes against the state. All I have to do is think: and immediately I become guilty," Merton wrote in "A Signed Confession of Crimes Against the State."

Lastly, because *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton* markedly forces the reader to face its harsh truths and examine one's soul and complicity in evil as one learns of the perfidy and betrayal of Merton by friends, associates, and biographers whom a naïve person might assume are beyond reproach, until, that is, one reads this book. It is a very hard lesson to accept and understand. But Hugh Turley and David Martin sequentially force the reader to contemplate such matters; to conjecture why some have conspired and abetted in Merton's murder and especially its fifty year cover-up.

Thomas Merton (Fr. Lewis) was a Catholic monk, poet, writer and theologian who became very well-known in 1948 with the publication of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which became a bestseller. Over the next dozen or so years, he published many books on religious themes, mainly avoiding social or political subjects. But although he lived in a monastery, and eventually by himself in a hermitage nearby, he corresponded widely and was tuned in to worldly events. He became a friend and mentor to religious/political activists such as Martin Luther King, Fathers Philip and Daniel Berrigan, James Douglass, among many others. He was a friend of Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker. He corresponded with Boris Pasternak and Ethel Kennedy; wrote about Albert Camus and Eugene Ionesco. During the 1960s his writing turned more overtly political while remaining rooted in a deep mystical and contemplative spirituality. He became a major inspiration for radical activists who opposed nuclear weapons, the Vietnam War, and the materialist way of life fostered by capitalism that relied on the spread of the American empire through world-wide violence. Although living far away from the din and drama of day-to-day politics, his writing, encouragement, and influence were profound, and he became a major impediment to the propaganda and policies of the military-industrial-political-intelligence complex. He was an inspiration whose spirit disturbed church and state in the most radical way. Turley and Martin say of him:

Merton saw clearly that devotion to truth could not help but bring a person into conflict with sinister special interests. The effectiveness of the truth-seeker would, of course, be greater to the extent he could rally others to his cause, but ultimately, he said, the truth seeker's strength lay in trust in God.

Merton died on the afternoon of December 10, 1968 when those sinister special interests snuck up on him. He had just given a talk, had lunch, and returned to his cottage shortly before 2 P.M., accompanied by Fr. Francois de Grunne, O.S.B. (Order of Saint Benedict) from Belgium, who shared the cottage with Merton and two others, Fr. Celestine Say, O.S.B. from the Philippines, whose room was across from Merton's on the first floor, and John Moffit, a journalist editor whose room was directly over Merton's on the second floor adjacent to de Grunne's. The walk from the dining hall to the cottage took 10-15 minutes. Say and Moffit were walking a good distance behind Merton and de



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Grunne and arrived at the cottage about 5-7 minutes after them. When they entered the unlocked building, they did not see Merton and de Grunne and presumed they had gone to their respective rooms.

Shortly after de Grunne and Merton entered the cottage, Merton was killed. The actions of de Grunne, a mysterious figure who, according to the authors, “seems to have fallen off the face of the earth” and whose “abbey will not even respond to our questions about him,” clearly make him a prime suspect in the crime. His actions and story are not believable and are contradicted by the most reliable witness, Fr. Say, whose statements have been absolutely consistent.

Beyond speculation, however, are the facts gathered by the authors that clearly prove that from the start there was a concerted effort to make a crime look like an accident. These efforts were initiated by de Grunne, who was the first to call it an “accident,” but ably assisted by many others, including the Thai police or their surrogates, whose police report was released by the U.S. Embassy seven months after Merton’s death and has no title, author, date, photographs, laboratory reports, or investigators’ memos, and omits the testimony of the first two witnesses on the scene, Fr. Say and Fr. Egbert Donovan, who viewed Merton lying in a position and dressed in shorts totally inconsistent with the accidental death scenario. Most importantly, this “report” omits an autopsy report since no autopsy was conducted, a dead giveaway that a cover-up was underway. When a person is found dead, the first assumption of a competent investigation is that a crime may have been committed, and when the victim is found with a sever gash on the back of his head, is lying in a position inconsistent with an accident, an autopsy becomes essential. But none was performed in Thailand or when Merton’s body arrived back at the Abbey of Gethsemani. That the United States Embassy, at the request of Most Reverend Dom Rembert Weakland, O.S.B., who was presiding over the conference, had the U.S Army take possession of Merton’s body shortly thereafter, embalm it, and five days later fly it back to the U.S. aboard a military plane together with the corpses of American casualties of the Vietnam War is not only supremely ironic but downright suspicious.

The first public report of Merton’s death was delivered on December 11, as Turley and Martin report:

On December 11, 1968, the Associated Press reported that Merton had been electrocuted when he touched a short in a cord while moving an electrical fan, according to **anonymous** [my emphasis] Catholic sources. The initial news reports did not include any important details such as who found Merton, the names of any witnesses or officials at the scene, or who determined it was an accident.

The Thai doctor’s cause-of-death certificate and the official death certificate said Merton died of sudden cardiac failure, but failed to mention the bleeding rear head wound seen by witnesses.

Most importantly, when Say and Donovan first saw Merton lying on the floor on his back, his legs straight, and his arms straight down by his side with palms to the floor as if placed in a coffin, with a floor fan lying across a thigh to the opposite lower waist, Donovan urged Say to take photographs of Merton before the crime scene was subsequently disturbed. They were very suspicious. Through great detective work, Turley and Martin have acquired a copy of these two photos, but they have been prohibited by the current abbot of Gethsemani from publishing them or even an artist’s rendering of them. The authors say:

The photographs taken by Say are the best available evidence of the actual scene of Merton’s death....The reason the monks took the photographs, as we have emphasized, was to document exactly how they found the body. As we have seen, people whom they would hardly have ever suspected, have consistently done their best to suppress those images. The photographs are an essential resource to anyone interested in knowing the truth about how Merton was killed.

But it is clear that many people would like to suppress that truth and have been hard at work doing so for half a century. But since this is intentionally a quasi-review because one must read this book from beginning to end to grasp the intricacies of this murder mystery and the cast of characters that comprise it (no review can do justice to such a detailed and brilliant investigation, and, even so, attempting one would spoil the book), I will end with the authors’ words:

Contrary to the common view, there is really no mystery about how Merton died. The best evidence indicates beyond any serious doubt that Merton was murdered. It’s a simple fact that the average person is far more likely to be murdered than to be killed by an electric fan, and



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[June 2018](#)
[May 2018](#)
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[January 2018](#)
[December 2017](#)
[November 2017](#)
[October 2017](#)
[September 2017](#)
[August 2017](#)
[July 2017](#)
[June 2017](#)
[May 2017](#)
[April 2017](#)
[March 2017](#)
[February 2017](#)
[January 2017](#)
[December 2016](#)
[November 2016](#)
[October 2016](#)
[September 2016](#)
[August 2016](#)
[July 2016](#)
[June 2016](#)

Merton was no average person. The story that a fan killed Merton is so preposterous that a series of fantastic stories have had to be invented to make it believable....Who did it and why? The CIA had the motive and the means." 1968: It was a very dark year: MLK, RFK, and Thomas Merton – martyrs all.

If we want to see clearly and revive hope, the time has come to face the faces of the ghastly gallery of liars and deceivers guilty of these crimes. Only then can we live the truths their victims suffered and died for.

Then we too can confess with Merton that we have thought "Crimes Against the State."

Edward Curtin is a writer whose work has appeared widely. He teaches sociology at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. His website is <http://edwardcurtin.com/>

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What we can infer from the death of Merton (who, although famous, was much less famous than MLK or RFK) is that the Deep State had decided by then that such obvious assassinations of major political figures were too messy and difficult to cover up. Since that decision the goal has been to identify potential leaders earlier in their activism and get rid of them before they are as widely listened to as an MLK. The more recent ambush assassination of Lavoy Finnicum in Oregon or the draconian 30-year prison term on fake terrorism charges of young father and husband Schaffer Cox in Alaska are examples. We will never know how many young leaders have been killed or put behind bars for no more reason than that they were articulate, knowledgeable, pro-freedom, or pro-peace. And as we know, nothing would cost the Military-Industrial-Security Complex more profits than peace and freedom.

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