

A Challenge to the Standard Account

Review of

The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation

By Hugh Turley and David Martin

Hyattsville, MD: McCabe Publishing, 2018

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Reviewed by **Paul R. Dekar**

Hugh Turley, volunteer columnist for the *Hyattsville Life and Times*, and David Martin, who works for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, argue in their new book that Thomas Merton did not die by accidental electrocution. Rather, they propose that Merton was murdered on orders from the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States. This review summarizes and critiques their case.

Turley and Martin begin by presenting the generally accepted account of Merton's death. In December 1968 at a monastic gathering near Bangkok, Thailand, Merton gave a talk, "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives." After lunch, he retired to his room. Sometime later, a participant heard what he thought was a cry and the sound of something falling. Somewhat later again, Merton was found on his back with a fan lying across his body. A local doctor concluded that Merton died of cardiac failure from electrical shock. Without reason to suspect criminal cause, authorities deemed Merton's death was from "a natural cause" (63) and allowed the body to be returned to the United States. No autopsy was performed.

In his authorized biography, Michael Mott wrote that the evidence overwhelmingly pointed to accidental electrocution as the cause of Merton's death. Mott offered a "most likely reconstruction of events" according to which, after a shower, Merton may have slipped while gripping a faulty fan that gave Merton a shock sufficient in itself to kill him as he cried out, or which induced a massive heart attack. Mott acknowledged that there were a number of unanswered questions and that it was a matter of "real regret" that Merton's death was investigated in a bungled and amateurish fashion and that there was no autopsy. Mott discounted suicide or murder.

Turley and Martin build an alternative hypothesis regarding Merton's death from eye-witness accounts, interviews, "curiosities" (19) and documentation, such as letters from conference participant Celestine Say, a Benedictine from the Philippines, to Abbot Flavian Burns and to John Howard Griffin. Discounting Mott's version, Turley and Martin write that the first accounts of Merton's death did not mention that Merton had taken a shower.

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The official reports from the Thai authorities said nothing about a bath or a shower. The popular story that water was involved in Merton's electrocution was likely invented because it is common knowledge that touching an electric appliance while in a bath or shower can be fatal. On the other hand, a fatal electrocution from simply touching a household appliance is virtually unheard of. The story that Merton was electrocuted from touching a fan while wet from a shower is particularly vile and insidious because it manages to blame a likely assassination victim of killing himself through his own carelessness. (109)

In Part 3, entitled "The Enemies of the Truth," Turley and Martin accuse Mott and other biographers as well as Merton's monastic colleagues for selling Merton short. They contend that the United States government deemed Merton sufficiently dangerous that they plotted and carried out Merton's death to silence his voice against war and for social justice. They conclude:

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 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 they had the means. (267)

In terms of motive, the authors cite a letter from Matthew Kelty, a monastic colleague of Merton, to the effect that Merton had been a problem to many at the abbey (216). A wider motivation for Merton's executioners was that they saw Merton as a threat. Merton "was completely independent and thoroughly incorruptible, and . . . was reaching a large and influential audience. One might well imagine how much greater influence he might have had if he had lived out a natural life. The only way to shut him up was to kill him" (268).

As for means, the authors cite a CIA manual as follows: "For secret assassination . . . the contrived accident is the most effective technique" (202). The authors write that the CIA had, in 1958, illegally opened and re-sealed a letter from Merton to Russian writer Boris Pasternak. The CIA carried Merton on a watch list to intercept his mail to the Soviet Union. "The CIA is particularly adept at killing people, and . . . use a wide assortment of methods" (207). The authors do not, however, indicate which method the CIA allegedly used to take Merton out.

Turley and Martin provide fresh documentation regarding Merton's death. They also set Merton's death in the social and political climate in the United States in the 1960s. Sociologist Todd Gitlin characterized the decade as "Years of Hope, Days of Rage" (title of his 1987 book). In *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008) James W. Douglass sets the death of President Kennedy in a wider social context. Tim Tate and Brad Johnson similarly raise questions in *The Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy: Crime, Conspiracy and Cover-Up – A New Investigation* (London: Thistle, 2018). As well, a number of books have explored the wider context of the deaths of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

However, the authors fail, for me, to satisfy a criterion operating when I have served on juries, namely, to establish beyond reasonable doubt that Merton was murdered. Barring access to CIA documents, I am not clear what new evidence may strengthen the authors' case. More disconcerting

is the author's claim that Brother Patrick Hart and Abbot Flavian Burns played a crucial role in a cover-up. In effect the authors charge that Merton's brothers were complicit in concealing the facts of his death. Over the years, during visits to the Abbey of Gethsemani, I have talked with many of Merton's fellow monks, including Patrick Hart, and I have heard nothing inconsistent with understanding that Merton could have died by accidental electrocution, per the generally accepted account of his death.

Another question in my mind concerns a key word in the title. Why "martyrdom"? The word means witness. Those who, in the first, second and third centuries of the modern era, refused to abandon their faith, and twentieth-century figures like the recently canonized Oscar Romero or Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, along with Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan, who were also killed in 1980 in El Salvador, warrant the title. The death of the most important Roman Catholic spiritual writer of his day was tragic. But the authors of the book under review do not make the case Merton was a martyr.

The authors rightly argue that Merton's purported murderer(s) did not achieve their supposed end, namely to silence Merton. Successive generations of readers around the world have found wisdom for living from reading Merton. The authors of the book under review do raise important questions that should engender more-than-usual comment and further research.