

THOMAS MERTON: He wasn't electrocuted and he didn't take a shower

Book Review By
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THE MARTYRDOM OF THOMAS MERTON *An Investigation*

By Hugh Turley and David Martin

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Maryland
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This book is truly ambitious. Its title is more far-reaching than might be first assumed. It wishes to alter the way we see the death of Thomas Merton; from almost a romantic fairytale ending to a political assassination and a coverup of that fact by religious authorities.

A great deal rides on whether the authors succeed. The title refers to the idea that Christians should expect to have to pay for their religious convictions the same way the early martyrs did when they challenged the mores of the Roman Empire in its decline.

Thomas Merton, everyone's favourite spiritual writer from the confines of a Catholic monastery, by taking his gospel values and the ensuing perceptions and analysis seriously, was assassinated in the same year as Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, for the same reasons: because he was deemed a traitor to the villainous empire Amerika was becoming (and has more transparently become under Donald Trump).

2.

That is its thesis. It may seem a bit much to swallow in one gulp but I defy anyone to read this book and not have their understanding of the facts and meaning and political significance of Merton's death radically altered, in this era of Pope Francis. Personally I buy the whole thing for reasons which I will try to make clear. But basically, it just fits better as an explanation.

Perhaps the most famous 20th Century Jesuit name prior to Pope Frank was Father Dan Berrigan who single handedly and nonviolently terrorized the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the 1960s with his antiwar activism.

Thomas Merton was Berrigan's mentor in terms of Christian radical non-violence, conducting an annual Christmas retreat at Gethsemane for the leaders of the Catholic left in America in the Sixties, including the Berrigan brothers and The Catholic Worker. This would be just prior to his inconvenient death on December 10, 1968 in Thailand at a Red Cross centre while serving as the keynote speaker at a meeting of Monastic leaders in the Far East, Bangkok December 9-15, 1968. He spoke on the elements of compatibility of Marxism, Buddhism and Catholicism in the climate of the times.

3.

In case my tone is pushing you in the direction of thinking this is not a serious book, let me just say that it is in effect like a forensic audit of the evidence of the facts of Merton's mysterious death, supposedly by electrocution after taking a shower. The book shows that he was not electrocuted and he had not just taken a shower. It closely reasons its way from point to point in true investigative fashion of some of the best of true crime writing.

It spells out all the contradiction, inconsistencies, misinformation, deliberate disinformation and outright lies that have compounded the story over the five decades. There is a great deal of puzzlement expressed in the book at why Catholics have left this crime unresearched and solved over all this time.

There were suspicions especially outside the Catholic Church. The singer Joan Baez, a friend and associate of Merton, felt it was a political assassination. Marnie Butler, who edited *Island Catholic News* in the 1990s, had been an associate of Joan as part of the *Institute for the Study of Nonviolence* in Palo Alto California, held this view.

Marnie is still dumbfounded at how her revelation was received at a Canadian Catholic Press Annual Meeting in Vancouver in that period. Everyone there said they had 'never heard that before', in a way that revealed they had never even thought about it. This included Thomas Merton scholar Rev. Donald Grayston, recently deceased.

The book does a very convincing job. It reads like a murder mystery, a whodunnit married to the sort of closely reasoned criminal investigation analysis. It is in short devastating and alters the meaning of the life and seminal influential work of this great author and spiritual guide and giant for the 21st Century. His appeal as politically assassinated should greatly enhance the interest the world at large takes in him.

4.

The influential official biography of Merton by Michael Mott is seen as deliberately misleading and instrumental in the coverup. Mott had complete access to all the damning evidence by which the authors prove their case. The key elements were the lack of an autopsy and the suppression of two photographs which contradict the official story. An autopsy would have immediately revealed the way Merton actually died. The fact there was none held has always been suspicious.

There is a villain perpetrator named, a Belgian monk attending the conference with mysterious past, and future after 1968. He has all but



The late Bede Sullivan, OSB at her Thomas Merton Centre in Victoria, 1988.

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entirely disappeared and is virtually disowned by his home monastery.

Rev. Francois De Grunne was instrumental in the crime, Hurley and Martin argue. He facilitated the access to Merton's quarters, having the room above Merton in the four person cottage. He was the one to discover the body and provide the explanation that Merton took a shower and was accidentally electrocuted by a faulty fan. This was contradicted by others who were in on the discovery, including the monk Rev. Celestine Say from the Philippines who shared the common shower area with Merton on the same floor.

It was Say, the most consistently reliable witness, who took the photographs before the police arrived or anything was moved. He was told to stop by American Abbott (later Bishop) Rembert Weakland, OSB who organized the conference in Thailand.

A sample of the writing early in the book reads: "Fr. Celestine Say, OSB (Order of St. Benedict), from the Philippines, was on the first floor with Merton; Fr. Francois de Grunne, OSB, from Belgium and Moffitt, the poetry editor for the Jesuit America magazine, were in the rooms on the second floor of the cottage. Merton left the lunch area in the company of de Grunne, walking some five minutes ahead of Say. The last time Say would see Merton alive was when he saw him with de Grunne well ahead of him, bound for the cottage."

The detail in this section makes it clear that Merton could not have taken a shower without Say being aware of it and Say said he did not.

The body was arranged for the cover story in an unnatural position

as recorded by the two photos taken at the time, which were later suppressed when they contradicted the official fictional explanation.

The Thai Police were called in. They swiftly took charge, neglecting to order an autopsy even though it is the regular procedure for mysterious deaths of foreigners. Soon the American military were whisking the body back to America.

De Grunne's behaviour the day of, prior to the death and immediately after discovery, was suspiciously erratic. De Grunne had a key role to play in the followup and it was making him anxious as revealed in his behaviour, including accompanying Merton back to the cottage and rushing off to report the incident but in a very odd and telling manner.

Merton's massive spiritual and intellectual influence is the key to motivation for his killing. He was too politically astute. He had evolved that way over the 27 years he lived as a monk, dying at the age of 54.

If he were alive today he would be 103, and probably still productive and radically influential, given the long life of many religious hermits.

Besides Rembert Weakland, other popular icons are seen to fail, including Patrick Hart, Merton's literary executor and John Howard Griffin, friend and close colleague of Merton, and author of the classic *Black Like Me*. Upon closer examination doubts prevail.

SIGNIFICANCE

Perhaps the most important aspect of this book going forward, is that it serves as a model of how things will have to be sorted out in the new context it reveals. If Merton was eliminated it changes the landscape for Christian social activism.

This book is a template for the analytical way to figure out what is going on. As Merton said in his final talk: 'Do not expect the authorities to be able to tell you the truth,' especially the progressive truth.

The film biography of Thomas Merton, by Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn (1984), features some of the final footage of Merton in his morning presentation. His final theme was that it is every person for himself, that the systems and symbols used by the authorities are suspect at best. He seems to close his lecture that way and then heads off for lunch, from which he was not to reappear on December 10 1968.

Readers will have to decide for themselves, but the disquieting tone of this work is built on the careful examination of the available evidence after fifty years, and it proves an augury too disturbing to be dismissed or explained away, calling for a new period of candour about these fresh revelations.