

espoused in Zen Buddhism. The book's conclusion (115-18) hearkens to Merton's pursuit of action, especially in response to "the humanly caused evils of alienation and hatred that lead to suffering, in order to usher in Christ's promised kingdom of God here and now" (118). The book includes a brief bibliography (119-24) and subject index (125-27).

Thomas Merton: Evil and Why We Suffer offers a provocative and compelling study of how Merton confronted one of the most pressing existential questions. The fact that Merton struggled with the question of theodicy on several levels over the course of his entire life, and that he weighed a wide range of responses from an array of religious and non-religious thinkers makes him an ideal conversation partner for our time.

Bernadette McNary-Zak

TURLEY, Hugh and David Martin, *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation* (Hyattsville, MD: McCabe Publishing, 2018), pp. viii +309. ISBN: 978-1-54807-738-9 (paper) \$17.99.

Journalists Hugh Turley and David Martin are not investigative journalists of the stature of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and they did not have the resources or the backing the latter had when they wrote their exposés of political skullduggery and ethical malfeasance. But they do benefit from the pioneering work of Seymour Hersh, whose 1974 disclosure of CIA spying practices on antiwar activists provides some underpinning to their central thesis in *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton*.

To be clear, this work – subtitled "An Investigation" – is built on some intrepid research, acquiring official documents, deploying several sources – private and public – in their effort to explore the strange circumstances of Merton's death. They are nothing if not dogged. But they are also overly zealous in their claims, unfazed by the damage they inflict on reputations, unswerving in their conviction that Merton's death is not what it has been purported to be, and oracular in their stance. Once persuaded that Merton perished as a consequence of his profile as a spiritual prophet and as a critic of American defense policies and fears, they leave no stone unturned in their determination to establish the diabolical collusions behind the storied monk's storied death. We live in a time when conspiracy theories are incubated and then released upon a credulous public with distressing regularity. Breitbart is the new *zeitgeist*. *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton* is but one iteration of this pathology.

This is not to say that there is nothing in the Turley/Martin book that is of any value, even if contestable. There are many things they surface in their probings that merit consideration: their serious exploration around

the contradictions in witness testimony at the time of the discovery of Merton's body and the immediate aftermath; their queries around the authorship of official documents; their unearthing of the many counter-narratives around who knew what, who heard what, who saw what; and their drawing together into one whole the disparate threads that make up the "official" story.

Turley and Martin are not appealing stylists and subtlety is not their strong suit. They had a case to make, they would make it and damn the torpedoes. This approach allows them to eschew nuanced approaches to controverted matter and frees them up to self-identify as truth-seekers over against a formidable array of authorities – political and religious. Having established the facts on the ground as they see it – the many irreconcilable versions recording the specifics of Merton's death, the failure to provide an autopsy or to fabricate one or indeed to even request one, the ever-altering statements provided by the monkish establishment, the puzzling reactions of the principals who first discovered the body and their subsequent retellings, the shifting sands of chronology as recalled by those "in the know," and the openly bizarre crafting of an explanation that, though rational (Merton showered before his death) lacks factual foundation – the co-authors move on to very slippery ground indeed.

It is one thing to ascertain and highlight the peculiarities and contradictions around the conflicting accounts of Merton's death – and for that the discerning and fair reader should be grateful – but it is quite another thing to draw from these peculiarities and contradictions an elaborate theory of conspiracy, cover-up and insidious collusion.

Turley and Martin zero in on the official biographers – John Howard Griffin and Michael Mott – as the premier perpetrators of the "myths" surrounding Merton's death. They then concentrate their gaze on all those subsequent biographers and scholars who accept the Griffin/Mott account as normative, including Cornelia and Irving Sussman, Jim Forest, Paul Elie, James Harford, Joan C. McDonald, Robert Waldron, Lawrence Cunningham and myself (although I get off rather lightly by comparison to most).

But if the biographers following Griffin and Mott were unwitting purveyors of fake news, the two official biographers bear much of the blame for the dissemination of inaccurate information around Merton's death. Indeed, Turley and Martin go further and accuse them of complicity, co-partners with the Abbey of Gethsemani establishment in concocting a story for popular consumption that is foundationally shaky at best.

The key figure in shaping the "authoritative" story concerning all matters linked to the death of Thomas Merton was his secretary, Brother

Patrick Hart. Turley and Martin are convinced that Hart, along with Abbot Flavian Burns, suppressed vital information, airbrushed inconvenient facts and simply wove a narrative replete with falsehoods or wild extrapolations.

But it doesn't stop here. Hovering over all the monastic shenanigans and biographer compliance hangs the cloud of the Central Intelligence Agency. The authors see the CIA hand everywhere, although it is in the nature of espionage to keep things behind the veil. They write:

We *can* point a finger at the most likely suspect in Merton's murder cover-up, Brother Patrick Hart notwithstanding, and that is the CIA. The CIA had the motive and they had the means. . . . [Merton] was completely independent and thoroughly incorruptible, and they knew that he 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. (267-68)

While Turley and Martin may subscribe in their investigative methodology to the mantra of that fictional giant of a detective, Sherlock Holmes, that "when you have excluded the impossible whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth" they fail to convince in the end. Moving from a spreadsheet of contradictions to a conspiracy narrative requires considerably more than what they have provided. Human testimony is always uneven and inconsistent, mistakes are often made during a time of chaos and shock, translations are frequently imprecise, human memories are notoriously faulty, and institutional incompetence is hardly a rarity. Turley and Martin have painstakingly assembled items that support their argument – and they are to be commended for providing data hitherto inaccessible to the public – but they have crafted in the end a thesis that is both impossible and improbable, but more important still: unpersuasive.

The authors are not new to this kind of investigative reportage, and they have a well-earned reputation for frenetic marketing. I am reminded of an instance three decades ago when I was asked to write a review-essay for *The Conrad Grebel Review* on a book by the British investigative journalist David Yallop, who was similarly disposed to conspiracy dramas and who promoted the argument that Pope John Paul I (Albino Luciani) was assassinated by a cabal of disgruntled curialists, Mafiosi and rogue bankers. What I said of Yallop's book, *In God's Name*,¹ applies to the Turley/Martin text:

1. David Yallop, *In God's Name: An Investigation into the Murder of Pope John Paul I* (New York: Bantam, 1984).

Yallop's strange admixture of reportage and dramatic reconstruction may make for effective docudrama but it cannot possibly contribute to the necessary redressing he calls for, unless we can be led to believe that what is argued is more fact than fiction, more the stuff of history than fantasy. . . . We can share his anger and his moral outrage but we need more than passion: we need a cogent, well-documented argument. Otherwise we have unsubstantiated charges, evidence that is at best circumstantial.²

It is not enough to channel one's outrage by focusing on nameless villains – CIA operatives – or now deceased players – Griffin, Mott, Hart and Burns – to support a thesis of collusion, conspiracy and cover-up. And to call Merton's death a martyrdom is to validate specious reasoning desperate for confirmation.

In the end, Turley and Martin have written a not negligible contribution to the literature around Merton's death – and by highlighting many of the mistakes and discrepancies around the official Thai, U.S. embassy and abbatial records, as well as conflicting witness testimony by those in attendance at the conference, they have ensured that “controversial” or “contentious” are appropriate adjectives in defining the circumstances around Merton's death. But by ascribing motives behind the actions, foibles and fumbles of many of the principal players, motives that are insidious if not pernicious, the Turley/Martin team profoundly weaken their argument. In the end, they have written a polemic – inelegant in much of its phrasing and ploddingly repetitive – that is yet another symptom of the Steve Bannon, Alex Jones, Donald Trump era.

Michael W. Higgins

FINLEY, James, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere – 40th Anniversary Edition* (Nore Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2018), pp. xxvi + 128. ISBN 978-0-87793-041-9 (paper) \$16.95.

Much like the work of Thomas Merton, James Finley's *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* has an aura of timelessness. As the book now celebrates forty years of existence, its contemplative heartbeat and inward focus serve an ever-important need in a world that continues to hinder the individual by obsessing over the outer experience at the expense of the inner.

Without even knowing it, I've lived just a few blocks away from James Finley in the Santa Monica area of southern California for the

2. Michael W. Higgins, “Rev. of *In God's Name* by David Yallop,” *Conrad Grebel Review* (Spring 1989) 204-205.