

configured within the ideological apparatus of the law. Thus, the summary of migration in the 'Belgian context' (3-5; 14) as a European 'hot topic', and of how Catholic chaplains can become bridge builders (14) seems to oversimplify the European as well as the global situation. Despite such reservations, Lootens does acknowledge his own positionality in all this, but perhaps the implications need to be probed a little further. The power and force of negative discourse deployed in populist media output often sets the terms of how people read and subsequently 'feel' about migration. How might theology and religious life intervene in critical as well as liberatory ways such that subjects, no longer the object of research, are free to exercise transformative agency? Again, this is a huge question, but Lootens' book invites us more than anything to continue reading Merton in ways that encourage both contemplation and action.

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Enacting Love – How Thomas Merton Died for Peace

John Smelcer

Forward by Dr. Paul Pearson

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The idea that Merton's death was due to some form of skulduggery has been gaining increasing credence in recent years, contrary to the view of Michael Mott, who in his official biography of Merton, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (1984), concluded that, 'However confused it is, the evidence still speaks overwhelmingly for an accident (567)', and dismissing the grounds for his murder as implausible. It was Matthew Fox, theologian and former Dominican priest, who first started speaking about Merton's possible murder. James W. Douglass, author of *JFK and Unspeakable* (2008), openly aired the idea at the 1997 ITMS conference. And Matthew Fox codified his thoughts in *A Way to God* (2016), claiming that the CIA were the villains of the piece, and concluding: 'Perhaps we will never know whether or not Merton died a martyr at the hands of the American government. But it is very possible he did. I believe he did (142).'

The whole debate heated up in 2018 with the publication of *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton – An Investigation* by Hugh Turley and David Martin, in which the authors make a detailed examination of all the known facts around Merton's death. Their approach has caused some controversy, not least on account of their strident defence of their views. Their conclusion, that 'there really is no mystery about how Merton died. The best evidence indicates beyond any serious doubt that Merton was murdered (267),' is followed by accusations of a widespread cover-up, citing the CIA, John Howard Griffin, Patrick Hart, and Michael Mott as 'CIA accomplices (270)'. In 2023 they followed this with *Thomas Merton's Betrayers – The Case against Abbot James Fox and the author John Howard Griffin* – the title says it all.

On the face of it, *Enacting Love* — a rather clunky title — starts off as though it means to cover much of the same ground as that of the books cited above, the author confidently stating that he is 'not alone in my conjecture that Thomas Merton was assassinated (27).' Where it differs in its approach is that, whereas Turley and Martin examined the facts around Merton's alleged murder, in this volume the author claims to examine what has been missing from this controversy — motive.

After a pair of introductory chapters the whole focus of the book shifts, and we are introduced to two new characters, Robert Grimes and Helen Marie. As a listless teenager Robert ran away from home and joined the army in 1939, transferring in 1942 to the Air Corps. Flying operations over Germany as a gunner in B17s, he was shot down in a raid over Hamburg in 1944 and spent the rest of the war in a prison camp. After the war he had a difficult time adjusting to civilian life, but inspired by reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he was admitted as a novice to Gethsemani in 1951 taking the monastic name Br. Irenaeus. By 1967 he was working in the Tailoring Shop looking after the monk's clothing, but was growing restless and wondering whether he should do something different with the rest of his life.

Helen Marie was born in 1932. In the early 1950s she became a cloistered nun in Brooklyn, taking the name Sister Mary Pius. Along with several of her friends they secretly started reading Thomas Merton who was seen as too progressive by the older nuns and the Mother Superior. In late 1966 she felt a burning desire to meet Merton, to discuss with him her doubts about her life in the convent. She found her way to Gethsemani in January 1967 where she had a two hour meeting with Merton. With his help she was transferred to a convent near Gethsemani, attending the abbey each Sunday for mass. Merton became Helen Marie's

personal spiritual teacher, confidant and friend.

After mass, Merton and Helen Marie, chaperoned by Robert, would go out for picnics. Merton confided in her about his feelings for the nurse M (the author gives her actual name), and Helen Marie told him of the similar feelings developing between her and Robert. At their final picnic before he left for Asia, Merton took Helen aside and divulged to her a secret, 'a secret she would safeguard for the next half century . . . a secret that had to the potential to change history (83)'.

Following Merton's death Abbot Flavian, fearing that people might seek out Merton memorabilia, gave Br. Irenaeus the task of disposing of Merton's personal possessions. According to the author, Abbot Flavian essentially said, 'Just get that stuff out of here. I don't want to know what you do with it. Just get it out of the monastery (88).' Br. Irenaeus filled three trunks and, not able to bring himself to destroy the items, drove them someplace for safe-keeping.

The author relates how, at a meeting between Abbots Flavian and Fox and Br. Irenaeus, Helen Marie revealed her secret, that of Merton's plan to sneak out of Thailand after the conference in Bangkok and make his way to North Vietnam and offer himself as a hostage for peace. Apparently both abbots already knew of this, and counselled them both never to reveal what Merton had told her that day. Apparently both abbots tried to talk Merton out of this plan – but one might question that if they were so opposed to it, why did Abbot Flavian not forbid it as Merton's superior?

Eventually released from their vows Helen Marie and Robert were married in December 1969 and both found jobs working locally. Following a stroke, Robert died in 2009, and the book includes Helen Marie's moving eulogy for him. Together they had guarded the three trunks of Merton's artefacts, but they were continually hounded by requests for items, and the contents were gradually, by fair means or foul, whittled down to two trunks, bearing 'witness to the greed and vanity of humanity (126).'

The author describes how, purely by accident, he came to meet Helen Marie in 2015. She was obviously impressed by his knowledge of and enthusiasm for Merton, and over the ensuing years they had many meetings; and it is through their conversations that the author was able to piece together the details of Merton's secret plan and his meeting with the abbots. Helen Marie had been praying to Merton to send somebody to help her with donating the collection to a museum. Eventually Helen Marie trusted the author enough to let him take the trunks and find their

proper home, as well as revealing to him Merton's 'secret'.

In 2015 the author visited Paul Pearson, the director of the Thomas Merton Centre in Louisville, to talk about the artefacts. Paul immediately realized their significance, and a few weeks later drove to the author's house to collect them. For Paul, holding up Merton's work jacket was an emotional moment, being 'overcome ... on seeing and holding such an iconic piece of clothing by a man who had had such a profound impact on my own life (169).' In 2016 Helen Marie was able to visit the centre to attend the first exhibit of some of the objects.

It is only in the last thirty pages that the author addresses the questions arising from Merton's 'secret' plan to be a hostage for peace, and the possible motive for his alleged murder. As mentioned before, apparently Abbots Flavian and Fox already knew of his plan — though one has to question whether Helen Marie could have remembered conversations so clearly after fifty years — and Mott tells us that in 1967 Merton had the same idea as Daniel Berrigan to become a 'hostage for peace', an idea which seems to have appealed to him strongly. But by the time he left for Asia the evidence points towards Merton going there to develop his own deepening prayer life. And what of the practicalities of the plan? The author claims that it is possible Thich Nhat Hanh could have put him in touch with Buddhist monks who could assist in smuggling him to North Vietnam, but without being able to offer any evidence in support of this conjecture (203). Against that one might cite Merton's reassuring comment in his circular letter to friends in the Fall of 1968 that 'I have no intention of going anywhere near Vietnam', though according to the author, Merton told Helen Marie that he purposely added it to put the FBI and CIA off his track (217).

As to the motive for Merton's possible murder, commentators always make out the CIA to be the perpetrators, citing their known interest in the activities of active peace campaigners, and their emerging track record of clandestine activities both in America and South-East Asia. But with so few verifiable facts available, all the author can do, having trotted out well worn tropes, is to ask us: 'Is it really difficult to believe that the CIA may have assassinated Thomas Merton ... and made his death look like the result of a freak accident or natural causes?' (209)

In summary this book offers no new substantive evidence to enhance our understanding of the events around Merton's death, or of the motive for his possible murder; but the story of Robert, Helen Marie and the fate of Merton's possessions which forms the major part of the book makes fascinating reading, sometimes quite touching, though the writing can be

rather laboured. The book, aimed at the general reader, includes many b&w photographs, a brief bibliography, but has no index. It sits on the periphery of Merton studies. If we are to understand the febrile atmosphere of the late 1960s, the urgency of Merton's writings and the threat they made to the established order, better to read his own writings on peace collected together in *Faith and Violence* (1968) and *Passion for Peace – The Social Essays* (1995). Never has his wisdom, his compassion, his vision been more needed.

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Merton & Confucianism: Rites, Righteousness and Integral Humanity

Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell.

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This volume, the eighth in Fons Vitae's Thomas Merton and World Religions series, is, thus far, the most comprehensive and complete selection of Merton's writings on Confucianism, and addresses a gap in the repository of available knowledge on Merton's engagement with Asian religions and cultures. It is divided into two main sections. The first deals with the Merton/Sih correspondence, reading notes on Confucianism and related material, and his use of the *Analects* in Novitiate Conferences. The second concentrates on commentaries and critiques of Merton's engagement with Confucianism, from 'The Ox Mountain Parable' to a discussion of his interaction with the Jesuit humanist scholar, Matteo Ricci.

It is the latter essay by Wm. Theodore de Bary I would like to focus upon, for it reveals an inherent tension, if not wilful misunderstanding, in the heart of Merton's engagement with Confucianism. 'The Confucian system of rites was meant to give full expression to that natural and humane love which is the only genuine guarantee of peace and unity in society, and which produces that unity not by imposing it from without but by *bringing it out from within men themselves*,' Merton wrote. Yet in other excerpts, we discover that Merton characterised Confucianism as