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Some speculate that Merton was killed

By JOSEPH SWEAT

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (NC)—Some close friends of Thomas Merton still speculate that his death 12 years ago was caused by agents connected with the Central Intelligence Agency.

Merton, the Trappist monk and spiritual writer, was electrocuted when he came in contact with an electric fan while bathing in a hotel room in Bangkok, Thailand. He was in that city to visit the Dalai Lama, leader of Tibetan Buddhists.

The theory that the CIA was connected with Merton's death, while held for some time by certain close friends of the late monk, has apparently never been published. *The Tennessee Register*, Nashville diocesan newspaper, uncovered it while working on a feature story on Merton.

"Tom was becoming a serious threat to the policies of the U.S. government," said one of Merton's long-time confidants, who asked to remain anonymous. "Increasingly people were reading what he had to say in opposition to the Vietnam war, which was raging at the time he went to Thailand.

Here was a man deeply respected as a spiritual writer by millions of Roman Catholics and others in the United States, and here he was telling them how immoral their war was.

"And then, to compound the problem, here he was coming out of the monastery and traveling to see a leader of 244 million Buddhists about a possible spiritual effort to force a halt to the war. This journey took him to an area of Southeast Asia which at that time was crawling with all types of CIA agents. Some were directly connected with the agency, others only loosely so.

"I have reason to believe some agent, perhaps an overzealous native of the area with only loose ties to the CIA, saw a golden opportunity to help the cause and tipped the electric fan over into Tom's bath water."

The cursory investigation made by Bangkok authorities on that December day in 1968 shed little light on the subject. Their report listed the death as accidental and said simply that investigators were unable to determine whether the fan fell into the tub or Merton inadvertently touched it while getting out.

Before most of the world learned of his death, Merton's body was aboard a U.S. Air Force plane en route back to the United States for interment at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky.