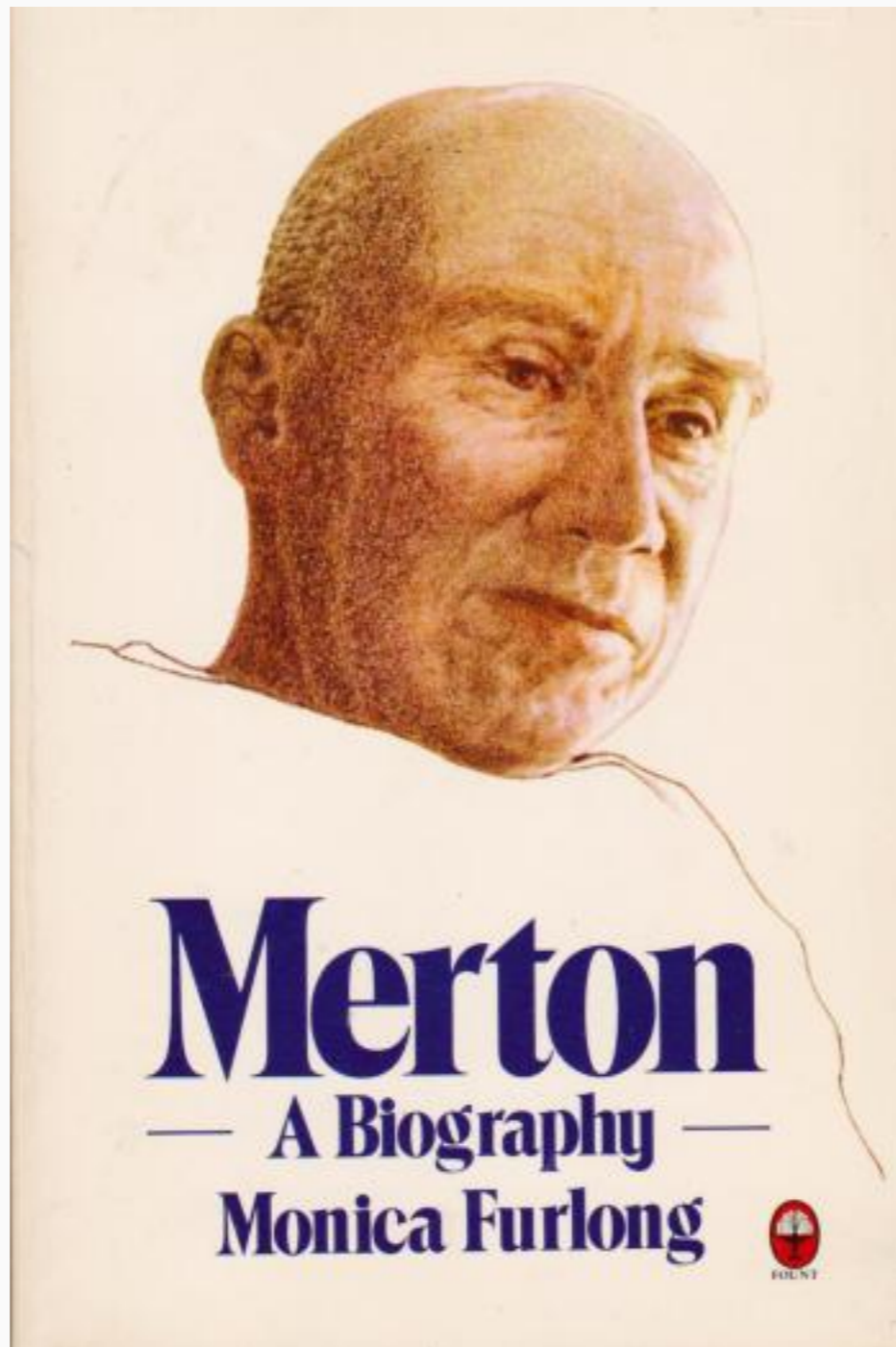


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Crucified Christ Today: Merton and Romero

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Why would Thomas Merton be assassinated? With the publication of the Hugh Turley and David Martin investigative journalism book *The Martyrdom Of Thomas Merton, An Investigation* this is often the first question on the minds of Merton readers, fans and devotees. (see Feature section)

ICN has published two embracing reviews (See ICN June and September 2018 issues) of their principal

contention that Merton was one more assassinated Catholic/Christian social justice advocate with massive following in the 1960s. The Kennedys and Martin Luther King were one thing but why would a monk be assassinated for his political views?

There are a number of often overlooked aspects to Thomas Merton that bear closer scrutiny.

Thomas Merton had a direct connection to the Nicaraguan revolution of the 1970s. One of his novice Monks was a Nicaraguan who joined the revolution and later served in the cabinet of the ruling party. Ernesto

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Cardinal was a poet like Merton who underwent a radical conversion to Christianity. There were three Catholic priests in the Nicaraguan Revolutionary Cabinet, all influenced in their societal sensibility by Merton. (see image page 12)

Merton was a major promoter of Gandhi's Satyagraha, or active nonviolence, which had proven so effective in bringing about social revolution in India. Like many idealistic young Americans in the 1930s, he had flirted with communism in his university days. At the time of his death he was the spiritual guru for politically active radical anti-war activists in the *Catholic Worker* and beyond.

The CIA and The FBI were both populated by right wing Catholics who found his left wing bent a complete embarrassment. When Daniel Berrigan led them a year long merry chase after his destruction of draft records their wrath was palpable according to Francine Duplessix-Gray's *Divine Disobedience* published at the time.

Just as dozens of Jesuits were murdered for trying to directly help the poor of Latin America, it was his overt support for Liberation theology that got Merton killed. In the Vietnam Era in America, it was judged treasonous to hold the sort of radical pacifist views that Merton espoused throughout his writing. Merton said that he had been so threatened, as recorded in the film biography by Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn.

There was no way to blacklist or neutralize Merton's pervasive influence. Rather it was ramping up. Merton was the spiritual teacher behind the radical Catholic war resisters, The Berrigan Brothers and the *Catholic Worker*. Each Advent he held a retreat for them at Gethsemane, his monastery. Things were deepening.

Dorothy Day and the *Catholic Worker* had been the inspiration of the Kennedy brothers in their earliest anti-poverty inclinations as budding politicians. Their resistance to the American War machine had resulted in their political assassinations, Bobby earlier in the same year as Merton's death. Jim Douglass's *JFK and the Unspeakable* explores this ground and link with Merton.

Each of these areas need to be explored for those who want the real answers. As they have said themselves, Turley and Martin's expose is a long overdue pronouncement. It seems to have waited fifty years to come out in detail because now it is needed spiritually more than ever.

Closer to home on Vancouver Island, according to hermit monk Charles Brandt of Black Creek, in the autumn of 1968 just before his death in December. Merton arranged to meet with Brandt and Bishop Remi De Roo to discuss the idea of his joining the eremetical hermit community established earlier in the decade on Vancouver Island.

As a Vatican II Father, De Roo had worked with its founder Jacques Winandy, a Belgium monk, and other members including Brandt and former Merton secretary at Gethsemane Bernard De Aguiar, to successfully establish such a community of more than half a dozen hermit monks. This initiative filled a hiatus of some 400 years absence in the Catholic Church. It followed on the new openness following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Brandt and De Roo waited at the Vancouver airport but Merton missed the connection and went on to Asia for the conference in Thailand where he died on December 10, 1968. The appeal of leaving the odious politically-charged atmosphere of the United States for the sanctuary of Canada was obviously working on Merton's consciousness just as it did thousands of draft dodgers and military deserters at the time.

En route to his final Asian Journey, he was scheduled to stay with Beat poet and publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti in San Francisco and to confer with another Catholic Bishop in Alaska about this relocating idea.

The existence of such an eremetical hermit community on Vancouver Island would have been seriously attractive to Merton who had a great deal of resistance from behind from his Abbots in his push to be a

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hermit at Gethsemane.

Merton often said that it was places like Gethsemane and the hidden life in monasteries that kept the world from collapsing into moral chaos. In the era of Trump, we can see this as even more pertinent today.

Gore Vidal argues that historical amnesia and deliberate ignorance have emerged as America's chief characteristics. In that power and control context, it would be assumed Merton could be removed with little public scrutiny.

For reasons of grace, figures like Thomas Merton (who has been dead fifty years this month), and Oscar Romero assassinated by a School of the Americas trained death squad in El Salvador in 1980, are as prominent in the public imagination today as at the time of their prescribed deaths.

Bishop De Roo has said that the canonization of Oscar Romero has further legitimated Liberation Theology within the church. (see article page three) Teilhard de Chardin is another parallel major Catholic figure who has awoken into the current consciousness today along environmental lines. As Jackson Browne sings, there is often a reason to our lives to which we are not privy to know.

In her 1980 biography of Merton, English writer Monica Furlong had this to say about Thomas Merton's last day; and the talk he gave favourably comparing true communism and true monasticism.

“The next morning, December 10, he gave a talk on ‘Marxism and Monastic Perspective’, filmed by an Italian television company. He sat down to talk with his usual ease, humour and informality.

“He spoke first of those who had suffered from communism, but said that he had come to speak about dialogue with the Marxists, that he was influenced by the thinking of Herbert Marcuse. He noted similarities of dedication between Marxists and monks and quoted a young French Marxist he had met in California who had startled him with the proposition, “We are monks also.”

“What interested him...was the critical attitude toward the world and its structures ...one who believes the claims of the world are fraudulent... and the desire for change.”

“Merton underlined Marxist formula in which communism consists in a society where each gives according to his capacity and each receives according to his needs. 'Now if you reflect two seconds on the definition, you will find that it is the definition of a monastic community'.”