

# THE MERTON FILES:

## Washington Watches the Monk

—by **Robert Grip**

Correspondence between Thomas Merton and Soviet author Boris Pasternak began in 1958, but unknown to both men, Merton's mail was intercepted en route to the Soviet Union by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

The illegal action, part of a program called HTLINGUAL, was revealed after a petition by this author to the C.I.A. under the Freedom of Information Act, a 1966 law which allows restricted access to Government records.

The C.I.A. files contained copies of an envelope, hand addressed in Russian by Merton, and the typewritten letter within, dated December 15, 1958, advising Pasternak, in part, to oppose attempts to make his novel *Dr. Zhivago* into a film ("The movies here are quite bad, and I have always firmly resisted any attempt to use one of my books in a film . . . a Hollywood production of *Dr Zh* would do more harm than good in every respect.")<sup>1</sup> The letter was intercepted by C.I.A. officers in New York City, photographed, and then resealed. According to the Rockefeller Commission, which investigated C.I.A. activities within the United States, the C.I.A. knew the interception program was illegal, but "apparently considered the intelligence value of the mail operations to be paramount."<sup>2</sup>

However, the C.I.A. was not alone in its interest in Merton.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation indirectly monitored Merton's association with the American peace movement through groups which used his name. The F.B.I. even went so far as to save anonymous hate mail sent to the agency about the anti-war movement. Merton's name is included in a September 1965 confidential memo from the Special Agent in Charge of the F.B.I.'s New York office to F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover. This entry concerns the Catholic Peace Fellowship, of which Merton was a sponsor. The file includes a petition to Pope Paul VI encouraging his efforts for world peace, letters to the editor of an unnamed newspaper, and a letter dated July 8, 1965 from James Forest, a co-chairman of the group, detailing the C.P.F.'s leadership and its relationship, if any, to the Roman Catholic Church. Forest replied to questions raised by an anonymous person. Confidential F.B.I. reports show the letter writer had ties to the F.B.I.

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A February 1968 memo from the Louisville F.B.I. office to Hoover includes a statement written by Merton on behalf of Joseph T. Mulloy, a draft resister. The F.B.I. described Merton as a “Trappist monk . . . who is also a well known writer” and transmitted his letter to Washington:

As spiritual advisor, I have been consulted by Joseph Mulloy who is seeking to follow his conscience in opposition to war. I believe he has every right to do so & also believe that his rights are being denied him. Consequently, doing my simple duty as a priest, I have given him encouragement & support in his fight for his right. I would like to make clear that such support is a religious matter and is not to be construed as an illegal act, nor is it political. It is essential for the preservation of American democratic values that the rights of conscience be respected even, indeed especially, in matters involving violence and war.

Files from the U.S. Department of State contained a 1967 letter from Merton to Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach, pleading for permission to “send medical aid to the civilian victims of the [Vietnam war].”

I address this letter to you with diffidence and yet with some hope that you will accept it as a straightforward human statement. I formulate this statement at a time when immense military power is smashing down on a primitive Asian country with half a million tons of high explosives a year, resulting in an overwhelming majority of civilian casualties. I do not write at this time to condemn this action morally, to vilify the President and others who must ultimately take responsibility for it, but only to make an earnest human plea for the victims. Hundreds of Americans are deeply troubled by this massive violence exercised in the name of liberty and humanity. Millions of people all over the world think they have reason to question the good faith and even the basic integrity of the United States in carrying out such a war and with such ambiguous effect.

These other Americans of whom I speak, and I myself, we merely ask that we may be allowed to send medical aid to the civilian victims of this massive violence. We ask this not out of political motives, not in order to aid the enemy of our government, but simply because a grave injustice has been done to these people and before God we have a duty to repair that injustice. We simply ask that we may not be obstructed in carrying out this solemn religious and human duty. It is not our intention to make this an occasion for oblique criticism or political maneuvering against the interests of anyone currently in power. We just want to help people, innocent and helpless civilians, who have been gravely injured and whose lives have perhaps been ruined in actions which at time have been interpreted as sheer terrorism. It is our duty to help these people, even though they may be in North Vietnam, and even though it is possible that some of the medicines may reach persons deeply hostile to the United States. Obviously one cannot exact a loyalty oath from everyone who might receive these remedies.

It seems to me, frankly, that it would be an act of magnanimity on the part of our government to allow this gesture—for it can scarcely be more than a gesture considering the magnitude of the harm that has been done. The United States is surely big enough both morally and humanly to permit this work of mercy dictated by the consciences of persons who are also frankly dissidents in regard to the war policy.

I assure you of my sincere personal regards.

Cordially,

Rev. Thomas Merton<sup>3</sup>

Merton's brief encounter with Communism during his days at Columbia University surfaced years later, as he applied for American citizenship. Although Merton admitted joining the Young Communist League in 1935 and took the name "Frank Swift"<sup>4</sup>, records from the Immigration and Naturalization Service show he signed a statement on May 3, 1951 denying past membership in any "Communist action organization."

Records of the F.B.I. office in Louisville, Kentucky include a May 1968 leaflet, postmarked Louisville, to "Anybody Concerned" from "Catholic Concerned Citizens." It describes Merton as an "admitted Ex-Communist (Card holding member) now in residence at Trappist Kentucky. . . he is of an undesirable element and should be watched closely. He is a dangerous radical. . ."

Other documents from the I.N.S.-Merton file trace his entry into the United States and contain a potpourri of data. There is a 1934 copy of Merton's birth certificate from France, copies of identification photographs, letters from Merton asking for help in finding misplaced records, and even one form in which Merton identified his race as "Scotch."

While the Department of State and the I.N.S. kept routine records, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and particularly the C.I.A. clearly exercised extraordinary means in tracking the American peace movement, and in his turn, Thomas Merton.

#### NOTES

1. The complete text of this letter is printed in Boris Pasternak/ Thomas Merton, *Six Letters* (Lexington, Kentucky: King Library Press, 1973): pp. 15-20.
2. Report to the President by the Commission on CIA Activities within the United States" (Washington: Superintendent of Documents, June 1975): p. 101.
3. Thomas Merton, Letter to Undersecretary of State Nicholas de Belleville Katzenbach, 7 March 1967. See also Merton's "Notes for a Statement on Aid to Civilian War Victims in Vietnam" in *Thomas Merton on Peace* (New York: McCall Publishing Company, 1971): pp. 264-266. These "notes" are dated 22 February 1967.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1948): p. 148.