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The Divine and the Mortal Worlds of Thomas Müntzer

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The problem of how Thomas Müntzer interpreted the events of the Peasant War of 1524-25, and his own role in it, remains thorny in Müntzer research. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the general consensus was that Müntzer had stirred up the revolt in Thuringia, if not across the whole of south Germany, and that he shouldered the responsibility for the fate of all its victims. Even before the events, in August 1524, Luther described his rival as “eyn baum ... der keyn ander frucht tregt / dann mord und auffhur / und blutvergiessen anzurichten”¹; and afterwards, the Wittenberg reformer explained: “Denn hie sihestu / wie disser mordgeyst sich rhumet / Gott rede und wircke durch sie ... Und ehe sich umbsihet ligt er mit ettlich tausent ym drecke ... Ists am tage / das er under Gottes namen / durch den teuffel geredet und gefaren hat.”² Melanchthon presented a picture of Müntzer’s evil will inciting the entire peasantry: “Da meynt Thomas er wolt das stundleyn treffen / die Fursten weren erschrocken / der Adel verjagt / die Baurn wurden das feld behalten / ... und liess sich horen ynn predigen die zeit wer komen / ... es louffen auch das landtvoick mit hauffen gen Mulhausen / wolten all reich werden.”³ Bullinger provided a most remarkable argument of cause and effect in his pamphlet *Der Widertouffern Ursprung, Fürgang, Secten etc* (1560), when he described Müntzer’s supposed incitement of the Black Forest peasantry - Müntzer arrived “in das Klackgouw gen Griessen ... und sinen giftigen samen der bald hienachvolgender purischer ufrur in die unruwigen ufrurigen hertzen pflantzet.”⁴ The predominant view in German historiography for nigh on 350 years was that Müntzer’s sole concern in the uprising was to use the peasantry in his own Satanic plans to overthrow ‘Gottes Ordnung,’ and that without him, there would have been no uprising.

In the late 18th and 19th centuries, however, this absolute view was put into some perspective as the enlightened historians and moralists - G. Strobel, J.F.Kohler (according to whom Müntzer was “mehr ein betrogener Schwarmer, als eigentlicher Betruer” (p. 76)), von Baczko, J. K. Seidemann and W. Zimmer-

1. L. Fischer: *Die lutherischen Pamphlete gegen Thomas Müntzer*, Tübingen 1976, p. 14.

2. Fischer, p. 18.

3. Fischer, p. 33.

4. H. Bullinger: *Der Widertouffern Ursprung, Fürgang, Secten etc.*, Zürich 1560, pp. 2.a-2.b.

mann ⁵ began to unearth evidence both that the peasantry were in revolt despite Müntzer, and that Müntzer's view of the world was far from simply evil.

But the first real examinations of the connection between Müntzer's thought and his intervention in 1525 did not appear until the 1920's; Karl Holl's essay on "Luther und die Schwärmer" ⁶ came as the first honest account of Müntzer's doctrine - not "das Erzeugnis eines verworrenen Kopfes, sondern ein vollkommen klarer, fest in sich zusammengefügtter Gedankengang" (p. 433). Unfortunately, detailed and penetrating as this analysis was, Holl was unable to bridge the gap between Müntzer's thought and his revolutionary actions. Annemarie Lohmann's study ⁷ of Müntzer's spiritual development specifically excludes the historical background, so that no real connection between thought and practice can be made. It was not until after 1945, and even then only rarely, that any serious attempts were made to analyse the problem of Müntzer's real intentions during the period of the uprising. This development was at first quite contradictory: the first major study, by M. M. Smirin ⁸, concluded that Müntzer was a "Gegner der betrachtenden Religiosität" (p. 179) and from this developed a thesis that he was nothing less than a conscious social-revolutionary. Carl Hinrichs' study of "Luther und Müntzer" ⁹ of 1952 examined Müntzer's conceptions of history and of the role of the League of the Elect before the actual uprising and provided a guide to understanding why Müntzer should attack the Church and the State, and how he interpreted the rebellion. The studies of H. J. Goertz, G. Maron, W. Elliger and P. Lucke ¹⁰ have also given some insight into the logic of Müntzer's theology and his revolution. Elliger's biography, certainly the fullest and to date the best, falls down on the question of relating the theology and the practice, since, at the very start, he declares that the "Begriff 'Revolution' ist hier fehl

5. G. T. Strobel: *Leben, Schriften und Lehren Thoma Müntzers*, Nürnberg 1795; J. F. Kohler: *Thomas Münzer, Bauerngeneral in Thüringen*, Leipzig 1799; L. v. Bazkow: *Thomas Münzer (Geschichte und Politik, Ü)*, Berlin 1804; J. K. Seidemann: *Thomas Münzer*, Dresden 1840; W. Zimmermann: *Geschichte des grossen deutschen Bauernkrieges*, Stuttgart 1843.

6. K. Holl: *Luther und die Schwärmer (Gesammelte Aufsätze, I)*, Tübingen 1927.

7. A. Lobmann: *Zur geistigen Entwicklung Thomas Müntzers (Beitr. zur Kulturgeschichte des Mittelalters und der Renaissance, 47)* Leipzig 1931.

8. M. M. Smirin: *Die Volksreformation des Thomas Münzer und der grosse Bauernkrieg*, Berlin 1952.

9. C. Hinrichs: *Luther und Müntzer. Ihre Auseinandersetzung über Obrigkeit und Widerstandsrecht*, Berlin 1952.

10. H. J. Goertz: *Innere und Äussere Ordnung in der Theologie Thomas Müntzers*, Leiden 1967; G. Maron: *Thomas Münzer als Theologe des Gerichts*, in: *Zeits. für Kirchengeschichte*, 83, Stuttgart 1972; W. Elliger: *Thomas Münzer. Leben und Wirken*, Göttingen 1975; P. Lucke: *Gewalt und Gegengewalt in den Flugschriften der Reformation*, Göttingen 1974.

am Platz” (p. 2), and then proceeds to demonstrate that Müntzer was a revolutionary. Indeed, Elliger is quite sympathetic to the original Lutheran view that Müntzer was mentally unbalanced and responsible for the bloodshed of 1525 at Frankenhausen: “die revolutionäre Ideologie hat einen wahrhaftig blutigen Tribut gefordert” (p. 786). Lücke’s study, finally, concludes that “Müntzers Ideologie bestand darin, dass er nicht gesellschaftliche, sondern heilsgeschichtliche Ursachen für den Bauernkrieg annimmt” (p. 166), and connects this with Müntzer’s analysis of the role of the feudal authorities to provide a springboard to revolt. From this necessarily rapid survey of interpretations of Müntzer’s attitude to revolt in 1524 and 1525, it can be seen that there has always been a dilemma regarding the approach to be taken to the problem. Should one concentrate on the thought, on the politics, or try to find some middle way? Few researchers have managed to draw in all the strands of Müntzer’s experience, and analyse his interpretation of his times.

Müntzer considered the main dynamic of history to be the separation of men from God, and that the main purpose of God’s messengers on earth, the Elect, was to overcome his separation, first individually and then universally. “Opus meum non ago, sed domini” (p. 360)¹¹ was his description of his task in 1521, and in 1525, “es ist nit euer, sondern des herrn streyt” (p. 456). In a sense, Müntzer regarded the cosmic division, not as that between God and Satan, which was the traditional medieval and Lutheran view, but as that between God and men.

H. O. Spillmann¹², in his studies on Müntzer’s vocabulary, records some interesting statistics on the use of the words ‘Gott’, ‘Gotlos’ and ‘Teuffel’. The word ‘Gott’ appeared some 885 times in Müntzer’s German writings, and the deity was regarded largely as an Old Testament, vengeful being, a friend of the Elect and a punisher of the godless. Several times, if only by implication, God is opposed to the Devil - “ich gleube schiere widder an Gott noch creatur ... Gebt mir umb Gottis willen einen gutten rath, dann ich forchte sere, ich bin des teuffels” (p. 238) - but this thought is often put into the mouths of others. The word ‘gotlos’ is recorded 102 times, while ‘Sathan’ and ‘Teuffel’ only appear 69 times. The former is used against Catholics and Lutherans and princes, and is purely on the human level: the Devil has no irreplaceable role in this schemata.

11. Page references in brackets hereinafter refer to the Franz edition of Müntzer’s works: *G. Franz: Thomas Müntzer: Schriften und Briefe*, Gütersloh 1968.

12. *H. O. Spillmann: Untersuchungen zum Wortschatz in Thomas Müntzers deutschen Schriften*, Berlin 1971.

'Teuffel' itself is often only a linguistic crutch, a curse or a turn of phrase. When we analyse the 69 usages, we find that ten are in fact quotations from the Bible, fourteen are references to Luther's description of Müntzer - eg. "solche schriftgelerten seindt die warsager, die do offendtlich die offenbarung Gottis leugknen ... Und was yrem unerfarnen verstande nit gemess ist, das muss yn alsbald vom teuffel sein" (p. 249), and at least seven are purely oaths. Thus we are reduced to 38 mentions of a moral or spiritual Devil, as opposed to 102 'gotlos' and 885 'Gott': we see, even superficially, where the real division lies.

Müntzer's understanding of the nature and role of the Devil was completely opposed to that of Luther. The inner torment which Müntzer attributed to the onslaught of faith was interpreted by Luther as the cosmic battle between God and the Devil for the mastery of the soul. Particularly in his accounts of his residence in the Wartburg, Luther's descriptions of the Devil border on demonomania - but fortunately he had worldly means of chasing Satan away: "Wol zehen mal in einem tag wurd ich anderst zu sinn, et tamen resisto Satanae. Jag yhn auch oft mit eim furtz hinweg"; "denn es ist mir so: wenn ich aufwache, so kompt der Teuffel bald und disputirt mit mir, so lang bis ich sage: Leek mich in gem A.; Deus non irascitur sicut tu dicis"¹³. In the opposition God and the Devil, there was no middle, human way: one was ridden either by God or by the Devil, an object in a battle that proceeded outside the sphere of human influence. Neither the language nor the thought of Luther in this matter could possibly be found in Müntzer.

A study of the alternative terms to 'Teuffel' used by Müntzer emphasises this difference to Luther. Spillman lists a whole series of 'Schlagwörter' which includes 'gotlos' (102 times), 'affe' (7), 'bebstisch' (14), 'bösewicht' (21), 'mönch' (17), 'schriftgelerter', 'schriftsteler' (53), 'tyrann' (7) - ie. approximately 250 occasions when an alternative is employed. And most of these alternatives refer to human activities or attitudes. The first main group of these 'godless' was composed of the 'schriftgelerten', the academics and Philistines in the Catholic and Lutheran camps who prevented the poor-in-spirit from coming to the true word of God. These priests were the "gotlosen feynde Gottis" (p. 243), hypocritical and worldly. "Sol nun solche schedliche wurtzein aussgerottet werden, so muss man sich hutten vor der gottlosen art der schriftgelerten" (p. 276). It is to be noted that all these alternative, anthropocentric terms were regarded by Müntzer as quite exact, scientific terms, not mere insults. The 'schriftgelerten' of his times were exactly as the Philistines 1500 years previously; the 'natterzichtigen' priests were replicas of the godless in the days of the prophets. Worldly

13. WA, Tischreden, I, p. 48, p. 64.

intellect was regarded as a negative quality - “die kluglichsten schriftsteller” (p. 314) was a highly derogatory term.

So Müntzer’s philosophy tended to exclude the God-Devil opposition in favour of a God-Man opposition which placed the responsibility for salvation with men themselves. This stress filtered through into Müntzer’s vocabulary, so that the word ‘Teuffel’ was greatly outnumbered in incidence by more human, or simply un-Godly terms. Each of these terms was applied concretely to what Müntzer saw as evil — social and ecclesiastical tyranny, and false doctrine. And since the responsibility for salvation lay in the mortal world, it was inevitable that the solution to the problem should be expressed in concrete social activity. The effect of this basic position was to separate the mass of the people from the control of the authorities, since these were branded as ‘godless’ and therefore incompetent.

So, on the one hand, the Elect were communicating directly with God, as His messengers, and in so saving themselves were preparing for the salvation of the ‘armgeistigen’, the poor, uneducated people; on the other hand, the ‘godless’, the ‘tyrants’ and the ‘Philistines’ assumed the role played by the Devil in traditional theology — perverters of truth, seducers of the people, monsters of sin - but for Müntzer they were not above, or separate in any way from mortal reality, but were separate from divine reality within mortal reality. To all intents and purposes, the divine struggle of Good and Evil was embodied in and encompassed by the struggle between the Elect and the Godless, although Müntzer could of course not yet make that step to humanism.

For men to come to God required several steps: in essence, it required the complete subordination of the individual, not to tradition or authority imposed by his fellows, but to his own subjective interpretation and reaction to the mortal and divine worlds. In an era of feudal authority in matters lay and religious, such an attitude to life was the epitome of rebellion. Müntzer could not call it ‘revolutionary’ or ‘political’, for he spoke the language of theology; his attitude must be perceived through its religious forms, one of which, as Maron has pointed out, is the question “Wer vollzieht die Urteile?”; another is the conflict of “innere und äussere Ordnung”, as Goertz has argued. There are other forms, all around the same basic content, such as the ‘two masters’ principle.

In the pamphlet *Ausslegung des andern underschyds Danielis*, Müntzer stated: “Die forcht Gottis aber muss rein sein on alle menschen- oder creaturenforcht ... O die forcht ist uns hoch von noten. Dan gleich so wenig als man seligklich zwoeyen herren dienen magk, Matth. 6, so wenig mag man auch Gott und creaturen seligklich forchten” (p. 246). In 1523, in his reply to Ernst

von Mansfeld's ban on his sermons, Müntzer drew the following conclusion: "Und ir solt wissen das ich in solchen mechtigen und rechten sachen auch dye ganze welt nit forchte... Der schlussel aber der kunst Gottes ist der, das man dye leuthe domit regire, das sye Got lernen alleyne forchten, Ro. 13, dan eyn anfangk der rechten christlichen weysheyt ist dye forcht des herrn" (p. 394). A year later, under the circumstances of a similar intervention of the worldly authorities in spiritual matters, the conclusion was the same: "Summa summarum, neben Got must yr nichts forchten ... Wenn euch euer furst oder sein befelhaber gebeut, yr sollet hie ader dohyn nyt gehen, zu horchen das wort Gotts, adder vorloben nicht mehr dohy nyt gehen, solt yr keynerley weysse vorloben, dann als do wyrnt menschen forcht an die stadt der mrcht Gotts dargestellt und euch zum abgot aufgericht" (p. 412). By obeying the godless actions of mortals instead of the divine will, men were trying to serve two masters but serving only men. The fear of man exclusive of the fear of God was godlessness, capitulation to the godless.

The 'two masters' principle gained concrete expression in Müntzer's account of his departure from Allstedt in August 1524: the councillors who had turned against Müntzer "namen fur, zweyen herrn gegen einander zu dienen" (p. 342). In April and May 1525, the question of serving two masters became a political matter: the social masters were to be rejected. "Dran, dran, dyeweyl das feuer heyss ist. Lasset euer schwerth nit kalt werden, lasset nit vorlehmen ! Schmidet pinkepanke auf den anbossen Nymroths, werfet ihne den thorm zu bodem ! Es ist nit mugelich, weyl sie leben, das ir der menschlichen forcht sollet lehr werden. Mann kan euch von Gotte nit sagen, dieweyl sie uber euch regiren" (p. 455). This was the call to action addressed to Allstedt. The doctrine of 'forcht' passed into the sphere of positive action and revolt, when only one master could be served.

For Müntzer, there were two main forces in the mortal world — that of men and that of God. When men stood in opposition to God as 'godless tyrants' who hindered the spread of God's word in one way or another, then they also stood in opposition to men who defended and spread God's word. And since there could not be two masters in divine co-existence, one or other had to be removed.

But this question of serving two masters points the way to a more basic opposition in Müntzer's mortal world, one highlighted by the extracts we have used. To serve a master was to fear him: and so the question of fear became a primary question — a conflict between the 'forcht Gottis' and 'menschenforcht'. This doctrine of fear is one that had early beginnings in Müntzer's theology, although the first time we actually encounter it as a slogan is in his letter to Luther in July 1522, when he states that the "timor domini" (p. 383) is neces-

sary for remaining steadfast against the onslaughts of the godless. But three years earlier, in the controversy at Jüterbog at Easter 1519, Müntzer was reported by Bernhard Dappe to have made a violent critique of the fathers of the Scholastic tradition in the Church, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventura, because they introduced worldly knowledge into divine knowledge, and interwove mortal reasoning with divine inspiration, which effectively lessened the significance of the divine, since worldly reasoning was generally the work of godlessness¹⁴. This distinction between worldly reason and learning - which was later termed 'Philistinism', the work of the 'schriftgelerten' - and divine knowledge and inspiration was one of the most important in Müntzer's later polemics. His attack on Scholasticism was maintained during the next three years, and next finds its subject in the Zwickau Humanist Egranus in 1521; at this time he suggested that Egranus rejected divine inspiration utterly, attributing to him the following maxim: "Nullus constringitur credere, que intellectus eius non potest capere. Nam ratio hominis copiosissima est apud semet ipsam, nec datur captiva in obsequium fidei" (p. 514). Thus, if knowledge gained purely from the mortal world was set up over the knowledge of divine provenance, then the mortal was being set up over the divine.

The development from this through the doctrine of fear from 1521 is well established. To counteract the dominant influence of worldly matters, the world had to be reduced to something less than God and had to be feared less than God. As Germany's socio-political crisis grew, Müntzer insisted more and more that God had to be feared more than the world. Finally, at the very point when objective social and economic pressures brought the peasantry and plebeians to open revolt, his doctrine was transformed into a political slogan.

After leaving Zwickau, Müntzer went to Prague, where his conflicts with the authorities clarified the doctrine. In November and December 1521, Prague was in a state of unrest, the scene of Utraquist demonstrations. In his Prager Manifest, Müntzer wrote: "Studenten unde pfaffen unde münliche ... leiden auch keine anfechtung des glaubens im geist der forcht Gots, denn sie sint gesant in den sehe, do dye fallschen propheten mit dem endechrist werden gepeiniget in secula seculorum, amen. Sie wollen auch vom geist der forcht Gots nit geengstet seyn. Dorümb vorspotten sie die anfechtunge des glaubens in ewigkeit... dan sie wissen der heiligen schrift keine erfahrung, dye sie gefulet haben, in erclerunge vorczuwenden" (p. 499). Those Philistines in the established Church had rejected direct communication with God and so had not experienced the suffering of the fear of God, which was the sign of righteousness. On the other hand, the common people experienced suffering

14. See *Spillmann*. op.cit. for a discussion on the use of the word 'vemunft'.

and the fear of God: they were “geengste mit dem geist der forcht Gots also seher, das in yhn warhafftig war worden ist dye weissagunge Jeremie: ‘Dye kinder haben gebetten umb das broth, es ist niemant do gewest, ders yhnn hette gebrochen’” (p. 500). So the fear of God was the start of a course of salvation: but at this very start, the poor people were restrained by the worldly doctrines of the Church, and so could not transcend the mortal view of life which feared both men and God. Those who did manage to advance from initial fear were the Elect. As Müntzer wrote to his followers in Stolberg in 1523: “das warhafftige regiment Gottes geht warhafftig mit freuden an, wan die ausserwelten erst sehen, was Got in yhn durch sein werck yn erfahrung des geystes erfmden lest” (p. 23). This doctrine did not become outspokenly social until the summer of 1524, after Müntzer’s experiences with Ernst of Mansfeld, and with his new experiences of steps taken by the authorities against his reforms in Allstedt and Sangerhausen. Fear of God in contrast to the fear of man was now a call for civil disobedience. In a letter to “allen gotforchtigen, die zu Sangerhausen seyn” in July 1524, he made a clear separation of divine peace from the mortal world, wishing his followers “den frid, dem die unvorsuchte welt feynd ist” (p. 408). True grace arose from the fear of God alone: “Forchtet euch vor Got euerm herren allein, dann wyrt die forcht reyne, ps. 18. Do wirt euer glaub bewert wie das golt im feuer” (p. 409). On the following day, he reiterated: “Furchtet die nicht, dye euch den leip todten, dann alsdann haben sye nyt meher, das sie thuen mugen, sondern ich wil euch anzeygen, wen yr forchten sollet: forchtet den, der die gewalt hat, wenn er den leip hat getottet, so hat er auch macht, die sele ins hellische feuer zu stossen; den, den solt yr forchten” (p. 413); “Forcht yr dann das leben, so seht an das ewenbylde der heyligen merterer, wie gerynge sie yr leben geschätzt haben und die tyrannen in die zene vorspottet” (p. 413).

After his appeal to the Lutheran princes failed in August 1524, Müntzer turned to a revolutionary solution to the crisis. In the pamphlet *Aussgetruckte emplossung*, the fear of man was depicted as a mortal sin: “Welch ist nun anderst das bose werck, dann das man die creatur Gott fursetzt, mit achtparer forcht und wirdigkeyt?” (p. 285); “Ach, die forcht Gottes kan und mag vor grosser menschlicher gunst nit reyn werden” (p. 285). He now regarded the fear of God, since it implied the rejection of mortal fear of civil authority, as a spiritual act of self-liberation in preparation for an overthrow of the godless world. The last words of his diatribe against Luther in October 1524 (Hoch verursachte schutzrede etc) were: “das voick wirdt frey werden und Got will alleyn der herr daruber sein” (p. 343) - God alone would be master.

Let us now turn to the question of how Müntzer interpreted the Peasant War

and how he came to involve himself in the leadership of the insurgents, in the light of his doctrine of the mortal and the divine. As the events of 1524-25 unfolded, their effects on Müntzer's attitude to civil society - at first only through the local manifestations of unrest, in Allstedt, Sangerhausen and Mühlhausen - filtered through to his polemic. In his sermon before the princes, he translated the crisis of Reformation Germany into an Apocalyptic-Chiliastic conception of history which divided time into two eras: the period until the present which consisted of five stages of degeneration and alienation from God; and the future, when God and the Elect had swept away the old order and instituted the millennium. In this period, Müntzer also wrote that: "es wyrt nu fortan keyn volk seynem eygen herrn gleuben, so kan auch das volk dem herrn und der herr das volk nicht helfen" (p. 418). His belief that the end of time was reached is of some significance since it bolstered his view that action by the Elect was necessary - if there was no more time, there was no time to delay. His sermon to the Princes was a final appeal. Müntzer had always considered his epoch to be final: in Prague, he declared - "O ho, wie reiff seynt die faulen oppffel ! O ho, wie morbe synt dye ausserwelten worden ! Die zceyt der ernde is do!" (p. 504); in 1522, he wrote to Melanchthon - "Lieben bruder, last euer merhen, es ist zeyt ! Nolite tardare, estas est in janua" (p. 381); and in April 1525, on the eve of open battle, he called - "Es ist hoch zeyth ... der meyster will spiel machen ... Nuhn dran, dran, dran, es ist zeyt" (p. 454). But the difference between the declarations of Prague and of Frankenhausen is not merely temporal; by April 1525, the peasantry of South Germany, Franconia and Thuringia were indeed taking action against the 'godless', and Müntzer could only regard this as confirmation of his belief. In his letters of April and May 1525, he cited Apocalyptic passages from the Bible to explain events in a wider context - Ezekiel 34, Daniel 7, Revelations 11:15, Ezekiel 37.

Of course, Müntzer was by no means the first reformer to interpret his epoch as the end of time: it would have been an odd reformer indeed who did not understand the social and religious crises in terms of apocalypse. Luther, Melanchthon, and before them the Chiliasts, the admirers of the Emperor Sigismund, the Hussites — all felt and acted upon what Melanchthon vividly described thus: "Der Tag des Herrn ist nahend, an welchem der Mensch der Sünde und der Sohn des Lusts wird offenbar werden. Denn wir sind die, welche das End der Welt erreicht haben" ¹⁵. But the major difference between Müntzer and the Lutherans was this: where Luther regarded the end of time as something imposed on Man by God, which Man could do nothing to alter or

15. *Corpus Reformatorum* (hg. von C. G. Bretschneider), Vol. I, Halle, p. 515.

hasten, Müntzer saw a role for the mortal Elect within the framework imposed by the divinity. Luther considered that the most active role for men was to prepare their souls for the day of doom: “Hie ist nu hohe zeit, das da lauffe und fliehe, wer da fliehen kan, lasse stehen und liegen, was er hat, und mache sich davon ye ehe ye besser, nicht mit fussen, sondern mit dem hertzen ... und durch den glawben inn Christus reich trete.”¹⁶ But Müntzer had a conception of salvation that necessitated active intervention by the Elect, since it was not an individual but a social matter: in the summer of 1524, he preached: “man muss das unkraut aussreuffen auß dem weingarten Gottis in der zceyt der erndten, dann wirt der schöne rothe weytz bestendige wortzein gewinnen und recht auffgehn ... Die engel aber, wilche yre sichein darzu scherffen, seint die emsten knechte Gottis, die den eyfer gotlicher weyssheit volfuren” (p. 261). This call for the intervention of the mortal force in a divine project is an echo and a development of the doctrines of the Taborites one century previously, who had called for their followers to “take revenge by fire and sword on God’s enemies and on all towns, villages and hamlets”¹⁷ at the end of time. In this respect, Müntzer’s vision was of a different tradition from Luther’s, and this tradition was carried on by the radical Anabaptists in Middle Germany after 1525¹⁸. From Müntzer’s description of the course of history, it is evident that he saw God and His Elect as participants of equal standing in the moment of crisis, for, although it is Christ (“der stein”) who would initiate the end of time, and God who would “hubsch ... do unter die alten topff schmeissen mit einer eysern stangen, Ps. 2” (p. 256), it was the Elect who had the duty to assist in the destruction of the godless.

There is a very interesting tension in Müntzer’s conception of history, between the imposed will of God and the actual events in the mortal world. When, in his sermon before the Princes, he talked of the five Ages of the world until the present, these Ages were determined more by mortal events than by divine intentions: the first lasted from the Creation to Babel - interestingly, not merely until the Fall; the second until the time of the Greeks; the third until the rise of the Roman Empire, and the fourth until its fall; and the fifth was represented by the span of the Holy Roman Empire. While this conception was, on the surface, just an interpretation of the 2nd book of Daniel, it is clear that each Age ended with the snapping of a tension either between men or between God and men, and remarkable that the birth of Jesus did not commence a new

16. WA 15, p. 752.

17. J. Macek: *The Hussite Movement in Bohemia*, Prague 1958, p. 131.

18. See G. Zschäbitz: *Zur mitteldeutschen Wiedertäuferbewegung*, Berlin 1958.

Age. Thus, if Müntzer considered the social tensions in Germany to be close to breaking point in 1524, it would have meant the end of an Age and suggest the dawn of the millennium, since, according to Daniel, there were no more Ages: the mortal idol would be overthrown, there would be but one master, and the tension between the mortal and the divine would be resolved.

In considering all this, we must not forget that Müntzer's visions of history, and those of his contemporaries, were not some idle fantasies, but had a very real basis in social crisis. The end of the Holy Roman Empire did indeed seem in sight, with the demise of the Imperial nobility in Germany, and the mass opposition to popery. The old orders - economic, legal, scientific and religious - were shifting into an abyss and being replaced by new ones. The social tensions between rich and poor had found conscious expression since 1517, and were heading for the confrontation of 1525. Thus, the tensions which Müntzer sensed and saw were translated into the only theoretical language he knew - that of Biblical prophecy.

The actual uprising of the Black Forest and Swabian peasantry cannot have come as a great surprise to Müntzer. If anything, it vindicated what he had been teaching in the preceding four years. His participation in its early stages in the autumn and winter of 1524 is something of a mystery, but as Otto Schiff has suggested ¹⁹, it probably amounted to nothing more than observation and fraternal advice. In any case, our task here is not to speculate on that aspect.

From what we have seen of Müntzer's doctrines, it seems certain that he interpreted the Peasant War both as a mortal event and as a divine event, with the bridge between the two represented by the Elect, a leadership for the 'poor in spirit' to come to God's world and overcome Man's world. "Im Clegkaw and Hegaw bei Basell habe er etliche artigkel, wye man herschen soll aus dem ewangelio angeben, daraus furder artigkel gemacht" (p. 544), he confessed in May 1525 - he had been preparing the peasantry for a new order. As a divine phenomenon, the uprising was something to be supported unconditionally: "Es ist nit euer, sondern des herrn streyt. Ir seyt nit dye da streiten, stellet euch vor mennlich. Ir werdet sehen dye hulfe des herren uber euch" (p. 456). He had stated in the "*Aussgetruckte emplossung*" that the evil oppression by the nobility had reached such a point "das auch Got nach dem ringen der ausserwelten den yamer nit lenger wirt kunnen und mugen ansehen, und die tag muss er seynen ausserwelten verkurtzen" (p. 283); so, now that "das ganze deutsche, franzosisch und welsch land ist wag, der meyster will spiel machen" (p. 454) - God and

19. O. Schiff: Thomas Münzer und die Bauernbewegung am Oberrhein, in: Hist. Zeitschrift, 110, München 1913.

men were acting in unison to overthrow the godless, tyrannical society. By 1525, it was unclear just who was initiating the overthrow, since Müntzer's writings say now one thing, now the other. It was a moment when the mortal and the divine worlds coincided.

As a moment for the Elect, the uprising was full of possibilities, not only for leadership, but also for universal salvation. If, in 1524, he wrote: "Gedenkt, lyber bruder, wher in dieser ferlichen zeyt seynen hals nit wagen wyrt, der wirt auch nicht beweret ym glauben" (p. 418), then in April 1525, the situation was even more critical - "Thuert irs nicht, so ist das opfer, euer herzbetmebtes herzeleyd umbsunst" (p. 454): the entire spiritual suffering and rebirth of the Elect and was not simply an individual goal, but was a stage in the salvation of the world. It was a time for the Elect to intervene in the destruction of the mortal world, to overcome the fear of man, to act as emissaries of God against the godless, to act for the divine against the mortal. And for this, they had to unite with the victims of the godless: "Vorachtet nit die geringen (wie ir pflegt), dann der Herre nympt auf dye schwachen, die gewaltigen vom stule zu stossen, die nerrischen leuthe, auf das er die ungetreuen, vorretherischen schriftgelerten zuschaden mache" (p. 464). The purpose of this unification was to provide a material force for the spiritual revolution, for only in removing material barriers to education could the poor in spirit come to God: "wie ist es umer mehr muglich, das der gemeine mann solte bey solchen sorgen der zeitlichen guether halben das reine wort Gottes mit gutem herzen mugen empfangen?" (p. 463).

On the level of the divine, the Peasant War was the signal for God and His Elect to intervene. There was no more time to delay. The tension between men and God had grown to such a point that men had to be overwhelmed. In this confrontation, the tactical principle of the doctrine of fear had a highly significant role, for it constituted a touchstone by which the significance of men's actions could be measured, both in the mortal and in the divine struggle. Since Müntzer's attitude to both struggles was that the mortal and the divine worlds must merge, and that the tactical principle was in fact to be elevated to a strategy, it is not surprising to find that he mentions the doctrine in almost every letter written in the weeks preceding the battle of Frankenhausen: "Schmiedet pinkepanke auf den anbossen Nymroths, werfet ihne den thorm zu bodem ! Es ist nit muglich, weyl sie leben, das ir der menschlichen forcht sollet lehr werden. Mann kan euch von Gotte nit sagen, dieweyl sie uber euch regiren" (p. 455): "also thuet auch und durch Gott, der euch stergke ane forcht der menschen im rechten glauben, amen" (p. 456); "wan euer nuhr drey ist, die in Gott gelassen allein seynen nahmen und ehre suchen, werdet ir hundert tausent nit furchten" (p. 454). In this way, the obstacles presented by the mortal world

to the divine salvation of the world could be transcended: the Elect would fight with God against the godless

There is one last issue to be resolved in this matter, and that is the question of Müntzer's final letter and recantation after his defeat and capture in May 1525. If we accept that these were genuine and accurate reflections of Müntzer's state of mind - and this we can only do with extreme caution for it was probably produced after the 'peinliche' confession in Heldrungen - then we have to separate out the chaff from the wheat: when he wrote to the people of Mühlhausen that "ich weyss, das euer der mehrer teyl in Molhausen dysser uffrurischen und eygennutzigen emporung nihe anhengig gewest" (p 474) then the intention may simply have been to lighten the punishment of those citizens and to dissuade Pfeiffer from any adventures - the adjectives, those of the language of his captors, in no way signify that he really did consider this to have been an unlawful uprising. The fact that the Elect had failed in to be task and that the mortal world had scored a victory over the divine seemed to be forgotten for the moment.

We have seen therefore, that Müntzer's view of the mortal and the divine, the objective world and the subjective spirit, was one of the underlying features of his doctrines and of his religious and political practice. By rejecting the subjugation to laws and commands of men - which represented the dead objectified world -, and replacing it with an individual communication with God - the subjective, 'living' spirit - he paved the way to a revolutionary attitude to society, which was both caused and spurred on by the social crisis in Reformation Germany. His view of history and of society was flavoured by the basic division between God and man, and when the objective circumstance of the Peasant War broke into his sphere of influence, he was prepared for it "Mann kan euch von Gotte nit sagen, dieweyl sie uber euch regiren."

Andrew W. Drummond

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Seit 1525 beschäftigt sich die Müntzer-Historiographie mit der Frage, wie Müntzer selbst den Bauernaufstand von 1524/25 interpretierte. Eine Analyse seiner Ideen und seines Vokabulars in Briefen und Flugschriften seit 1520 lässt erkennen, dass für ihn die Entzweiung des Menschen von Gott die treibende Kraft im Ablauf der Geschichte darstellte.

Folgerichtig verlagerte sich die traditionelle theologische Entgegensetzung von Gott und Teufel auf eine Unterteilung der Menschen in Gottlose und Erwählte. Müntzer verstand den Menschen überdies nicht als willenloses Instrument im göttlichen Heilsplan, er erklärte ihn selbst verantwortlich für seine Erlösung. Auf der irdischen Ebene mußte sich der Erwählte im Kampf gegen das Gottlose, insbesondere gegen die weltliche katholische Obrigkeit bewähren.

Wesentliche Grundzüge seines Geschichtsbildes können aus Müntzers Theologie abgeleitet werden: Müntzer ging zunächst aus vom Prinzip der zwei Gewalten und betonte, daß Gehorsam gegenüber der gottlosen, weltlichen Obrigkeit nicht zu vereinbaren sei mit dem Gehorsam gegenüber der göttlichen Autorität. Schon 1522 hatte er dazu aufgerufen, in der Furcht Gottes zu leben und den Anspruch, die weltliche Macht zu fürchten, zurückzuweisen. Darin bestand nach seiner Auffassung der Prüfstein für den Erwählten in seinem geistlichen Streben wie in seinem weltlichen Handeln, vorerst im persönlichen Bereich, nach 1523 aber zunehmend auch in Situationen, da soziale Unterschichten sich gegen ihre katholischen wie lutherischen Obrigkeiten auflehnten.

Müntzer charakterisierte den Gang der Geschichte als eine Reihe sich verschärfender Krisensituationen im Verhältnis zwischen Gott und den Menschen. In Übereinstimmung mit vielen seiner Zeitgenossen deutete er die sich entfaltende Reformationsbewegung als Vorstufe der Endzeit und als Beginn des Millenniums. Müntzer ging zwar davon aus, daß Gott selbst das neue Zeitalter einleitet, es sei aber Aufgabe der Erwählten und ihrer Anhänger, der Endzeit durch bewußte und tatkräftige Unterstützung zum Durchbruch zu verhelfen. Müntzer verstand deshalb den Bauernaufstand als den ersten diesseitigen Schritt zur Errichtung der göttlichen Weltordnung. Er griff in die Rebellion mit unmittelbar sozialrevolutionärer Absicht ein, die zum Teil aus seiner Auffassung abgeleitet werden kann, daß Gott selbst den Geschichtsprozeß vorantreibe. Der Bauernaufstand bot den Erwählten die Möglichkeit, sich an die Spitze der Bewegung gegen das Gottlose zu setzen und die heilbringende Endzeit aktiv herbeizuführen.

Die meisten seiner Aufrufe zum Handeln sind eingefaßt in die Forderung, den Anspruch, die weltliche Obrigkeit gleich wie die göttliche Autorität zu fürchten, zurückzuweisen, die diesseitigen sozialen Schranken, welche die Verwirklichung der göttlichen Wahrheit verhinderten, zu beseitigen und schließlich eine neue Einheit zwischen Gott und den Menschen durch den Sieg des subjektiven Geistes über die objektivierte Welt der Gottlosigkeit herzustellen. Selbst Müntzers sogenannter Widerruf und sein Geständnis nach der Gefangennahme im Mai 1525 widersprechen nicht seiner Auffassung, daß die gottlose sterbliche Welt im aktiven Kampf durch eine neue göttliche Ordnung ersetzt werden müsse.