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Thomas Müntzer and the Fear of Man

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SINCE THE PIONEER studies into Thomas Müntzer's thought by Karl Holl and Annemarie Lohmann¹, there have been many studies into the relationship between Müntzer's thought and his political activity during the peasant uprising of 1524-1525; with very few exceptions, however, these studies have only highlighted either half of the relationship (in the West, predominately the half of Thought; in the East, that of Praxis) or only one aspect of the entirety of the relationship.² While it would require a full length study to explore all the main strands in the dialectic of the relationship thoroughly - both the historical background and the origin, development, and significance of the theology - , we shall attempt here to fit another piece into the jigsaw by examining Müntzer's doctrine of "fear." We shall try to show that Müntzer's theology, which gave a humanist primacy of the individual over the society which oppressed him, was both the motive power of his intervention in the German Peasants War of 1524-1525 and the result of those social developments and crises which led up to that war. The doctrine which can be described as that of "the fear of man"³ grew in importance in Müntzer's theology as the crisis of the German Reformation progressed to its climax.

But before we examine this doctrine, let us recall the events and their causes in the years 1517-1525. The slow conversion of the German - and especially the Saxon - economy to a monetary one, with the increased exploitation of the great silver mines in Saxony and on the borders with Bohemia, led to an upheaval in all social relations which was uncontrollable and which was widely interpreted as the onset of the end of the world. This upheaval affected all layers of society - in the towns, where the guild system was crumbling; in the country, where peasants were gradually forced to accept new measures and taxes, to pay in money what had previously been paid in kind, to abandon the land for the towns. The imperial aristocracy, impoverished, was being squeezed out by the landed princes - hear their complaint of November 1522, at the time of Hutten's abortive aristocratic revolt, before the Imperial Diet: "Firstly, we complain severally against the common princes and the nobility, for it is a burden to the counts, lords, and other aristocrats

1. Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zue Kirchengeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1927, 1, 420-467; Annemarie Lohmann, *Zur geistigen Entwicklung Thomas Müntzers* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1931)

2 For a bibliography of works on Müntzer, see Hans J. Hillerbrand, *Thomas Müntzer, A Bibliography* (Sixteenth Century Bibliography, 4; St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1976)

3 "Menschenforcht" as opposed to "forcht Gottis," the fear of God.

that, when almost all sections of our needy Roman Empire gather to discuss their needs, yet various princes and nobility prevent their lords from doing so with force or threats.”⁴ The old leaders of the medieval empire now faced money in power. The Saxon princes, both the Ernestine and the Albertine lines, were the wealthiest in Germany and possibly in Europe. The mines sunk in their lands yielded reliable silver for trade and for nascent industry. In 1525 a pamphlet in praise of Duke Georg of Saxony announced that “as a result of trade, mining, peace and good coinage, many people have come to this country.”⁵ In Saxony, therefore, (and since this was the womb of the Lutheran Reformation, this is the area that is of most importance to us) the economy, culture and national fervor flourished. The new way of living and trading led to new ways of thinking: the latent anti-Roman traditions that had flared now and then in some local heresy now found fuel in the thought that German silver should be invested in Germany and not in Rome, that German thoughts were as good as Roman ones. Ideas for reform began to emerge, followed by practical ideas for the formation of a national church.

Parallel to this development in thought ran the development of urban and peasant rebellion. From 1476 onwards the peasants of South Germany plotted and demonstrated time and again, particularly in the Black Forest region. The unrest in the towns was not so spectacular, but there is more than enough documentation of riot and civil disobedience. And as we shall see, it was from the towns that the Thuringian radical, Thomas Müntzer, drew his support.

“The fear of God ... must be pure, with no fear of man or any creature Oh, the fear is most necessary for us. For, just as no man can honestly serve two masters, Matthew 6, so no man can honestly fear both God and the world.”⁶ In the autumn of 1524, in his pamphlet *The Express Revelation of the False Belief of the Disloyal World*, Müntzer saw the two-masters principle as something crucial: in the face of the provocations and hostility of first Catholic and then Lutheran officialdom, he considered that the only way forward for his religio-political cause was to ignore officialdom. Luther, he considered, was selling the Reformation to the highest bidder by serving both God and the princes of Saxony: he accused Luther of making the princes “Bohemian gifts” — a reference to the practical result of the Hussite Reformation, the transference of church property to the nobility — , of being “the defender of the godless,” and he claimed that Luther's appearance at the Diet of Worms in 1521 was “thanks to the German aristocracy, whose mouth you smeared liberally with honey.”⁷ Müntzer, as a theologian, expressed his essentially political idea of civil disobedience in the form of his religious doctrine of fear.

4 *Deutsche Reichstagsakten, Jüngere Reihe* (Gotha, 1901), III, 697.

5 H. Schöffler, “*Reformation und Geldabwertung*,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 38 (1941), 55-62.

6 Thomas Müntzer, *Schriften und Briefe. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Günther Franz (Gutersloh: Mohn, 1968), p. 246.

7 *Ibid*, p. 341.

The roots of this doctrine can be pinned down in several places. The first time we really come across it in recognizable form is in his letter to Luther in July 1522 when he wrote of the necessity of having the fear of God (“timor domini”) in the face of the attacks of the enemy in order that the cause should not be weakened by fear of men. There are several paths which led to this statement.

One of these can be found in the Franciscan Bernhard Dappe's report of Müntzer's intervention in the controversy in Jüterbog at Easter 1519. Müntzer here apparently made a sustained critique of the epigones of the scholastic tradition, the saints Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventura, because of their mingling of the worldly with the divine in knowledge: worldly reasoning should not be brought into heavenly things, for that was to lessen the mastery of the divinity. Müntzer never retreated from that position, always distinguishing between base human reasoning and the inspired knowledge of God.⁸ This distinction also turned up in Müntzer's separation of the “Elect,” the “godless,” and the common “poor-in-spirit,” of whom only the first group could have a direct, living communication with God, while the second group deceived the third with worldly learning and the dead knowledge of the past. Müntzer's 1519 attack on scholasticism was maintained in his criticism of the humanist-Lutheran preacher Egranus in Zwickau in 1521 when he suggested that Egranus denied the possibility of un-reasoned faith. He attributed the following maxim to Egranus: “No man can be forced to believe that which his mind will not understand. For human reason is very beautiful in itself but it cannot be given into captivity of the faith.”⁹

But why exactly should Müntzer have insisted so much, and so bitterly, on the necessity of not mingling worldly and divine knowledge? It was this insistence that first made Luther his best enemy, and it was a position which he never abandoned for anyone. In his theology a sharp distinction was made between several antitheses: past and present, God and Man, the Letter and the Spirit. All of these antitheses had a common bond in that of the Object and the Subject: the objectified Bible, the written word of the past, now dead and outside Man; the pragmatic knowledge of men - this was the Object, something that was once part of men's living experience, but now outside them; the living present, the directly received spoken word of God, the natural inspiration of dreams and visions - this was the Subject, something inextricable from the living (and especially the uneducated common) Man. The living Spirit had primacy over the now-dead Letter. And in this antithesis of Object and Subject we find the answer to our problem; but before we can apply it, we must draw in the other strand of the actual historical experience of the Reformation.

⁸ See H. O. Spillmann, *Untersuchungen zum Wortschatz in Thomas Müntzers deutschen Schriften* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971), for a discussion on the use of the word “Vernunft” (reason) in Müntzer.

⁹ Müntzer, p.. 514.

The social pressures (the transference to a monetary economy, the expansion of mining and of the national wealth, the advances in science and printing) which laid down the pre-conditions for the Reformation of Luther and permitted his stance of 1517 to have such an immediate and resounding echo throughout German society were not at all resolved by the developments in Wittenberg but rather exacerbated since all layers of society now saw in the Reformation a road out of their particular social dilemma. The causes of the Reformation and of the peasant and urban revolts were one and the same. While Luther was alternately announcing the end of the world or seeking an alliance with the princes of Germany, the lower social groups were alternately idolizing Luther or massing behind local radical leaders. For the whole period between about 1521 and 1525 the political content of the Reformation was so vague as to be quite explosive, and even the Lutheran princes were heard to state that “if God so commands, then so it shall be, that the common man shall rule.”¹⁰ Luther attacked “Monopolia” and usury and adopted a very radical stance until about 1522. The decisive question here was that of political and religious leadership. The support among the peasants and urban lower classes was enormous. But Müntzer appears to have looked for support exclusively among the urban lower classes, built on their tradition of anti-clericalism, and he gave them a view of life which permitted the acceptance of new, living, tested experiences of that historical period, which allowed the most potent and revolutionary ideas to emerge, and which finally injected the Thuringian Reformation with the thoughts of a major section of the population. In his life Müntzer preached and was active principally in this setting, and his supporters - certainly until January 1525 — were almost exclusively plebeian, burgher, or from the mining communities. His only lengthy stay in a peasant environment was at the time of the South German uprising in the winter of 1524-1525. It is because of this urban activity that Müntzer stands out as a leader of what has been called the “early bourgeois revolution” (“frühbürgerliche Revolution”).

And so we see that Müntzer's defence of the Subject against the Object had a social and political basis since it was precisely at this time that the recent subjective experiences of the peasants and plebeians were breaking out of the old forms of society. However, Müntzer's defence took theological form since in no sense could Müntzer be described as a fully conscious politician. The highest Subject of the Reformation was God. Thus, in his attempts to found a democratic church and state Müntzer saw himself as acting in defence of God. Those who were against God were to be opposed in every way by the Elect. That meant opposing the “dead” letter of the church with the “living” perception of the Spirit - thus inverting the customary relationship. The test for deciding what was Subject and what was Object was reflected in the antithesis “fear of God” and “fear of Man.” Those who feared

10 C. Hinrichs, *Luther und Müntzer* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1952), p. 8.

Man more than God worshiped the Object more than the Subject. If we follow the course of development of the doctrine of Fear, then some significant facts are established. It would appear that, as the socio-political crisis developed, Müntzer insisted more and more on this doctrine so that, finally, it became a demand for open rebellion at the very moment when other social and economic pressures actually forced the Thuringian peasantry into open rebellion. In other words, it became the slogan of revolt.

We have already noted that Müntzer used the expression “the fear of God” in relation to the events in Zwickau of 1520-1521 although for lack of evidence we do not really know what kind of theological basis he gave in his support for urban rebellion at that time. But by the time he left Prague, in the winter of 1521, the principle had emerged. In his “Declaration on the Bohemian Matter” (Prague Manifesto) Müntzer had this to say: “Students and priests and monks... also do not experience the suffering of faith in the spirit of the fear of God, for they are sent in to the burning sea where the false prophets will be tortured by the Antichrist in all eternity, Amen. They do not wish to be frightened by the spirit of the fear of God, and so they eternally mock the temptations of faith, for they are not filled with the experience of the Holy Bible with which to explain it.”¹¹ These false teachers in the church, then, had no experience of the bitter assaults of faith; they had not experienced the fear of God. As Müntzer wrote in 1524, “They almost all say: Oh, we are sated with the Bible; we do not wish to believe in any revelation; God does not speak any more.”¹² Fear of God is righteousness and revelation while lack of it was sin. Unlike these academics the common people were “frightened by the spirit of the fear of God so greatly that the prophecy of Jeremiah has been fulfilled in them: ‘The children have asked for bread, but no one was there to break it for them.’”¹³ Here, the fear of God is regarded as something alien to an ignorant people. Fear of God was part of the process of salvation, election, and could indeed be regarded as one of the most important steps since the Elect were not de facto knowledgeable or fearful. As Müntzer wrote to his brothers in Stolberg in the summer of 1523: “The true reign of God advances really joyously only when the Elect first see what God has created in them through His work in experience of the spirit.”¹⁴ Recognition and fear of God was the first human step to true salvation.

But, as yet, this principle was not applied to a social situation. It remained a guideline for action within the church as long as the Lutheran Reformation appeared to be receptive to radical ideas. It was only when Müntzer returned to Thuringia and experienced the hostility first of the Catholic princes and then of Luther and the Lutheran princes, while in Allstedt and Mühlhausen, that it became a guideline for political action.

11 Müntzer, p. 499.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 297.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 500.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

In September 1523, when the principle of fear was still bound up with the suffering and despair of divine election of the soul, it also acquired a new dimension. Count Ernst of Mansfeld, a Catholic engaged in preventing his subjects from attending Müntzer's reformed mass in Allstedt, was the victim of Müntzer's attack, in a letter of September 22. Lambasting Ernst for his tyranny, Müntzer stated: "And you should know that I do not fear even the whole world in such mighty and just matters. For the key to the knowledge of God is that one should govern the people so that they learn to fear God alone, Romans 13, for the beginning of true Christian wisdom is the fear of the Lord."¹⁵ Thus, in one stroke, Müntzer stated that a man of God was not required to bow to the secular might of the nobility, that the nobility should not lay hands on the Reformation, and that true cognition was identical to the "fear of God." It is interesting to note that, only a few months later, in the pamphlet *Declaration or Offering* ("*Protestation odder empietung*") Müntzer, using the same kind of language, wrote: "The bitter expectation for the word makes the beginning of a Christian. This same expectation must firstly suffer the word, and there must be no comfort in eternal pardon Then the man thinks that he has no belief at all.... He feels or finds a craving for the righteous belief."¹⁶ If we compare these two passages, then the exact theological and psychological nature of the "fear of God" becomes clearer: it was the beginning of doubt, despair, rejection of the worldly conception of religion and the established order of (inner and outer) things.

But gradually the principle of fear became outspokenly social. As the opposition to Müntzer from the Lutherans came to a head in July and August 1524, at a time when the people of Allstedt and Sangerhausen were involved in conflict with state authorities who had decided to deal with the radicals around Müntzer, it became clear that the "fear of God" had to be the polar opposite of the "fear of Man" ("*menschenforcht*"). Müntzer's letter to "all the God-fearing people of Sangerhausen" wished them "the peace which is an enemy of the untested world," a clear distinction. True knowledge arose from the fear of God and not from the fear of those human authorities who were trying to silence them: "Fear only your Lord alone; then the fear will be pure, Psalm 18. Then your faith will be tested like gold in the fire."¹⁷ Here the important word was "alone": God (the inner voice, the Subject) alone was to be feared, not those who were persecuting the faithful. In a letter of the following day (July 16), he reiterated: "'Do not fear those who kill your body, for then they can do no more, but I will show you whom you should fear: fear Him who has the power, after He has killed the body, to cast the soul into the fires of hell; Him, Him you should fear;"¹⁷ "if you fear life, then consider the example of the holy martyrs, how little they valued their life and mocked the tyrants to their faces;" "Summa summarum, you must fear no one beside God.... If your prince or his official orders you not to go here

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

or there to listen to the word of God, or make you swear to go there no longer, then you should swear nothing, for then the fear of man would be set up in place of the fear of God and set up as an idol.”¹⁸ Fear of man was equivalent to godlessness.

The message to the princes in the sermon at Allstedt castle on July 13, 1524, was the same: “If you wish to be righteous rulers, then you must grasp government by its roots as Christ has decreed. Chase out the enemies of His Elect If you now put aside the worldly mask, you will recognize it for what it is God is your shield, and He will teach you to fight against your enemy, Psalm 17. He will make your hands skillful for the battle and will succor you. But you will have to bear a great cross and suffering for this, so that the fear of God is completely clear to your eyes.”¹⁹ At that time Müntzer was trying to persuade the princes to take up the sword of God against the worldly godless, and he realized that such a step would require a rejection of all the principles of law and order of the age; hence, the fear of Man had to be rejected. Interestingly, when Müntzer's appeal to the princes failed and, under threat of retaliation by the state, he was forced to flee to Mühlhausen, he condemned the town councillors because they “preferred to serve two masters, one against the other,”²⁰ and he also declared defiantly that “the fear of God in me will not yield to the insolence of another.”²¹

So, with Müntzer's transition from reform to revolution during the month of August 1524, the transition towards the complete rejection of social compromise embodied in the idea of the “fear of Man” was accomplished. In his pamphlet, *The Express Revelation*, the sin became a wrong that required righting: “What is it but a wicked deed that one places the world before God and fears it reverently and with honor? ... Oh, the fear of God can and may not become pure because of gross human pleasure.”²² What this understanding was approaching was a campaign of justified civil disobedience, a refusal to accept the “wicked” ways of society and an attempt to change society. This was apparently a long way from the theological reasoning which only five or six years previously had rejected scholasticism for its intellectual approach to the mysteries of God. But the basic attitude was no different: the thought had merely been transformed, by increasing social and political pressures, into a political stance. “We should fear God without any fear of Man and serve Him in holiness and in righteousness; that is in an honest, tested belief.”²³ But it should be noted that what Müntzer intended in thought was not identical to what he achieved in practice. Even if he still regarded the fear of God as a spiritual act of liberation, in practice it became a declaration of political thought and of social revolution.

The Peasant War, which began with the Stühlingen uprising in the autumn of 1524, gradually covered the whole of South Germany; by the time

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 412-413.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

20 *Ibid.* p. 342

21 *Ibid.*, p. 435.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 285.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 292.

the uprising reached Thuringia — spilling over from Franconia and the armies of Götz von Berlichingen and Florian Geyer - in March and April of 1525, we find that Müntzer's doctrine of fear emerged as one of his most important pieces of advice to the insurgents. By that time he himself had experienced the South German uprising at first hand, and this had undoubtedly confirmed his own beliefs in the power of the Subject. In his letter to the men of Allstedt and the miners of Mansfeld, of April 26, he roused them to action with the following words: “On, on, while the fire is hot. Do not let your sword grow cold, do not let it become blunt! Smite cling-clang on the shield- boss of Nimrod; cast down their towers! As long as they live, it is not possible to be emptied of the fear of man. One can say nothing of God as long as they rule over you. On, on, as long as you live: God goes before you, so follow, follow!”²⁴ “So act in God, that He may strengthen you in the true belief without the fear of man, Amen.”²⁵ He called on his supporters and the insurgents generally not to be afraid of the might of the princes. To the peasants at Eisenach went the call: “Have the best courage and sing with us, 'I will not be afraid of one hundred thousand, even though they surround me.' May God give you the spirit of strength.”²⁶ The fear of God absolutely cancelled out the opponents of God. In the period when the Elect vanguard joined forces with the “poor-in-spirit” to remove the social hindrances to the apostolic church, the “true wisdom” achieved an attributed degree of real political power, not so very distant from the basic separation between Subject and Object: the power of the Subject, endowed by God and permitting the expression of living, experienced social grievances, was to overcome the Object, rotten because of false, “invented” teaching.

Müntzer's political position in May 1525 was undoubtedly that of a social revolutionary; but he himself regarded his role as theological, not political. It is noteworthy that Müntzer, although often regarded as the sole leader and originator of the troubles in Thuringia, was only one - and at times a minority leader - of the uprising. His last conflict with his comrade Heinrich Pfeiffer was on the question of whether the Reformation should be parochial or national. It can be argued that Müntzer's broader view of events was a direct result of his broader theological knowledge, his theoretical knowledge. Part of that knowledge was his doctrine of fear, which expressed social discontent in theological language.

During the period of the English Revolution in the seventeenth century, one of the radicals who proliferated at that time, William Dell, declared: “He

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 455: “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! ...”

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

that fears God is free from all other fear; he fears not men of high degree.”²⁷ It is perhaps not entirely extraordinary to find Müntzer's words repeated 120 years later and in a distant land. These Reformation radicals were involved in national revolts that heralded the era of burgher democracy; they all represented a lower-class opposition to the revolts of bourgeois reformers. The radical “fear of God” expressed the autonomy of lower-class revolt.

²⁷ Quoted in Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London: Pelican, 1976), p. 42.