THOMAS MÜNTER:
PROPHET OF RADICAL CHRISTIANITY

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THIS afternoon I wish to offer a tentative, impressionist account of the gospel according to Thomas Müntzer. For four centuries the Saxon fanatic of the German Peasant War, Luther's "archdevil of Allstedt", has been in ill repute and, after his death following the peasant rout at Frankenhausen, he became a kind of Saxon Guy Fawkes. Now, behind the Iron Curtain, he has come into startling favour. Modern Russian historians like M. M. Smirin, whose work on Müntzer earned the left-handed compliment of being awarded the Stalin Prize (Second Class), have expanded the earlier view of Engels who hailed Müntzer as the apostle of the real, People's Reformation. The Russians have paid their Eastern German comrades the doubtful compliment of removing the precious bundle of Müntzer manuscripts which were taken from his widow after the battle, and which remained in Dresden for four centuries—and putting them for safe-keeping in the Lenin Library in Moscow. There have been Müntzer streets, theatres, a postage stamp and, this summer, a historical pilgrimage to the Müntzer country. It is not all propaganda. The serious rehabilitation of Müntzer began with two great scholars: Karl Holl, whose classic essay "Luther und die Schwärmer" is indispensable reading on Reformation radicalism, and who declared that Müntzer had more originality than all the other Left Wing Reformers combined. And though a mass of new evidence has appeared in recent years, and a number of intriguing new important figures among the Anabaptist leaders have been re-discovered, it is also

1 A Lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 13th of October 1964.
3 K. Holl, Gesammelte Aufsätze, 1948, i (Luther), 420-67.
true that recent research is showing how deep was Müntzer’s influence on a generation of radicals and Anabaptists in south Germany. Then Heinrich Böhmer,1 a great historian, wrote a penetrating essay and edited for us a collection of Müntzer’s papers and letters, just short of definitive since we wait with some impatience the edition of Müntzer’s writings soon to come from Dr. Günther Franz in Germany. The study by Smirin was a recognition from the Marxist side that Müntzer is not to be explained in terms of social and political ideas alone, and the recent studies by Carl Hinrichs,2 Franz Lau3 and Walther Elliger4 fully support the view that we can only understand Müntzer if we remember that he was (like Luther) in Hubert Kirchner’s words “Wholly a preacher, wholly a theologian”.5

A brief sketch of Müntzer’s career may help at this point. He was like Luther, a Thuringian, born on the other side of the Harz mountains from Luther, in the little town of Stolberg. He was trained as a secular priest, and attended two universities, the ancient Oxbridge University at Leipzig and the brand new “Sussex” or “Canterbury” at Frankfurt on Oder. In 1521, perhaps on Luther’s recommendation, he went as supply preacher to Zwickau where he soon became the regular preacher in St. Catherine’s church.

In St. Catherine’s church today you may see one fragment of its medieval glass: a picture of St. Stephen, and it seems appropriate that a picture of the Angry Young Man No. 1 of the New Testament should have faced Thomas Müntzer, the Angry Young Man of the Reformation. For Müntzer’s sermons were full of impending judgement and a fierce anti-clericalism. Much of it was aimed at the other preacher in the city, Sylvius

1 Thomas Müntzer’s Briefwechsel, ed. H. Böhmer and P. Kirn, Berlin, 1931.
5 H. Kirchner, Johannes Sylvius Egranus, Berlin, 1961. The view that Müntzer was a much older man, born in 1466 and of the age of Erasmus, and that he was an Augustinian monk, has been put forward by H. Goebke (Harz Zeit­­schrift, Bad Homburg, 1957) but with a ridiculously slight basis of evidence not to be taken seriously.
Egranus. He was a humanist, a cold fish who liked to do himself well—if there is truth in the gibe from Müntzer’s rhymsters:

You like to sit among the fine ladies  
They give you presents of wine,  
You like to sit among the Top People.

When Egranus learnedly discussed the problem of the Lost End of St. Mark’s Gospel, it is plausible that the proletarian element preferred Müntzer’s lower witticisms to the humanist higher criticism. Müntzer’s preaching provoked an anti-clerical riot, and the whole Luther-Egranus affair became implicated with a ferment stirred up by a group of laymen, the so-called “Zwickau prophets”, friends of Müntzer but perhaps rather his pupils than his teachers? Their feud became entangled in politics in a restless age, and a political revolution followed. Despite Müntzer’s perfect alibi “I had nothing to do with it. I was in the bath at the time”, in the end Müntzer it was who went.

He went to Prague, in Bohemia, and I think he went as a disciple of Luther, a Martinian, and preached where he could, with a Czech interpreter. But on All Saints Eve 1521 he prepared, perhaps in conscious imitation of Luther, a manifesto which he wrote in four versions: a short and long German version, one in Latin and one in Czech. Nobody knows if they were ever actually nailed to the doors of the Elizabeth chapel or the Cathedral of St. Vitus. If they were, it is difficult to see what the ordinary citizens of Prague made from the long theological rigmarole. But they could not miss its anti-clericalism:

All the days of my life I never met a parson or monk  
who knew the real meaning of faith

And there was his own apocalyptic view of Church History, the doctrine which he got from Eusebius, of a Fall of the Church in the sub-apostolic age, and his assertion that here, in the land of John

1 Briefwechsel, Böhmer-Kirn (hereafter B-K), 40. To Luther (1523).
2 The essay by V. Husa, Tomáš Müntzer a Cechy (Rozpravy československe Akademie, V, ed. Rocnik, 67. Sesit. 11. 1957) exaggerates the academic significance of Müntzer’s visit.
3 Texts in B-K, App. 6. See also E. Wolfgramm, Der Prager Anschlag des T.M. in der Handschrift der Leipziger Universitätsbibliothek (Z. der Karl Marx Universität, Leipzig, 1956-7).
Huss, a new church and a new age would begin, of which Müntzer was the dedicated prophet. In the long German version we get some idea of Müntzer's preaching style when he got really worked up:

Oho, how ripe are the rotten apples. Oho, how soft are the Elect. The harvest is here and God has called us to it. I have made my sickle sharp and my lips, hands, skin, body, life life itself are a curse to unbelievers.

But the city of Prague was not amused, or even moved, and after some further preachments, Müntzer landed up in gaol. He returned to Germany and, after some months of real hardship and penury, got his great opportunity when he was called to be the parish priest of the pleasant little Saxon town of Allstedt. In these small towns there was a restless ferment, an atmosphere more like a Western film than Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's dreams of revolution in the alcove at Chetham's Library. Since 1496 every mayor of Allstedt had died a violent death. At first Müntzer seemed likely to settle down: he married a former nun, Ottilia von Gerson, and he soon dominated the town. Here he carried out an amazing series of liturgical experiments: a German congregational version of Lauds and Vespers and a German Mass, with German hymns: and he wrote the music for these fully choral services himself. He celebrated from behind the Holy Table—and the congregation joined with him in repeating the words of consecration—two modern touches. The innovations brought streams of visitors along crowded roads at weekends and the Catholic neighbours, Duke Ernest of Mansfield and Duke George of Saxony, forbade their subjects to attend these novelties, contrary as they were to a recent Imperial Mandate. This provoked Müntzer to vitriolic denunciation, especially of Duke Ernest whom he addressed as "You miserable bag of worms!" He also organized his followers into covenanted bands, ready to take up arms for the defence of the gospel. In May 1524 one of these groups destroyed a miraculous shrine of the Virgin, and Allstedt was in an uproar when Müntzer rang the town bells and his followers entered the city, including a band of armed female viragoes bearing pitchforks and carving knives.

1 B-K, 44 (22 September 1523).
Müntzer addressed a seething open-air congregation, his head sticking out of an upper window like a cuckoo from a clock.

Luther had repeatedly warned the rulers of Saxony against the menace of such radical preaching and, in July, Duke John and Duke Frederick ordered Müntzer to preach before them in Allstedt. This he did in an amazing exposition of Daniel's sermon before Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel ii)\(^1\) when, with startling vehemence, he took the locus classicus of Christian passive obedience, Romans xiii, and set it within a terrible realized eschatology, inviting the princes to use their god-given sword to wipe out the ungodly. In the Bible story Daniel was loaded with presents, but the new Daniel had come to judgement. He was summoned to an audience at Weimar from which he emerged yellow with fear and despair, and a few days later, when it was evident that his followers would betray him, he fled the city leaving a note saying that he had some business to do in the country and would they look after his wife?

After some months in south Germany and Switzerland, where the Peasant War was brewing, he secured lodgment in Mühlhausen,\(^2\) a much bigger affair than Allstedt. Though he had the aid of its fiery preacher, Heinrich Pfeiffer, he never dominated the city. When he addressed the town militia on manoeuvres, the captain told him roundly to stick to preaching. However, what Müntzer failed to do the town council did, for it provided a barrel of beer for each platoon, and by three in the morning the men of Mühlhausen were ready to fight anybody anywhere.

But now the Thuringian peasants prepared to join the sporadic insurrections of the Peasant War\(^3\) and Müntzer wrote a series of bloodthirsty, almost hysterical manifestoes. The peasants were cornered and encircled by a Wellington-Bliicher like conjunction between the Protestant Philip of Hesse and the Catholic Duke George of Saxony. These risings were all balloon-like affairs—unopposed, the peasants terrorized whole countrysides but,

\(^1\) Hinrichs, *Politische Schriften.* An English translation is now available by G. H. Williams, "Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers" (*Library of Christian Classics*, vol. xxv, 1957), 47-70.


\(^3\) G. Franz, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* (Darmstadt, 1956), pp. 238 ff.
when they had to stand and fight real soldiers, it was over in minutes. Frankenhausen became a bloody rout. Müntzer, as a general, was rather like the duke of Plaza Toro, for he was found in bed in the city, feigning influenza. He was taken to Heldrungen where his old enemy, Duke Ernest, met him at the bridge, rather like Mephistopheles at the end of Faust. He was cruelly tortured but, according to Philip of Hesse, died very well. How far he honestly believed his signed recantation seems more than doubtful. In the manner of the day, the defeat was seen as judgement and the controversy between Thomas Müntzer and Martin Luther seemed to have revealed that it was Müntzer who was the false prophet.

Müntzer died when he was younger than the bishop of Woolwich, and he left only half a dozen tracts and a few dozen letters, and he nowhere attempts a coherent exposition of his doctrines. It is important to listen to him, and disastrous I think to rake his theology in terms of Lutheran categories or some other preconceived theological pattern.¹

We can best begin with the books he read, of which we know rather a lot, for his book bills and lists have survived. Curiously, the authors who intrigued him most were those who had been fashionable a century before, but given a new life through the invention of printing. Thus the recent volume on the early fifteenth century in the Fliche and Martin series mentions a revived interest about 1400 in the writings of S. Hildegarde of Bingen, of Joachim da Fiore in the adaptation of the Spiritual Franciscans, and of the astonishing "Theologia Naturalis" of Raymond of Sébonde.² There was in the fifteenth century a revival of what the eighteenth century would call "inward religion", mysticism no longer confined to hermits and anchoresses and the religious orders, but spilling over into lay movements like the Brothers of the Common Life and the Friends of God. Here the two streams met, that of the "Modern Devotion" coming


down from Holland, and that of German Mysticism, coming up from the Rhineland with Strasbourg as a central point. Thus the world of Eckhart and Suso and Tauler blended with that of Gerson and À Kempis, and between them stood the great figure of Nicholas of Cusa. It is this body of articulate theology and devotion, singularly flexible, astonishingly free from the older scholasticism, which influenced such diverse men as Wimpfeling and Staupitz, Oecolampadius and Müntzer.

There exists a skittish letter from a Nun, Sister Ursula, in which she suggests that Müntzer ought to have learned from his Tauler and Suso how to give presents to young ladies. There is a reliable story that Müntzer carried about with him a double volume, one half of which consisted of writings of Tauler. It may well have been Tauler’s sermons, of which there were several printed editions. But it might have included the very influential pseudo-Tauler “Book of the Poor in Spirit.” From Tauler and Suso Müntzer drew his teaching about the soul’s growth to conformity with Christ. From them he learned of a Work of God deep within the ground of the soul, of the discipline and suffering by which the soul is weaned from creaturely lusts, to seek and love the will of God, a life of dedicated renunciation (“Gelassenheit”), and to the acceptance of the “bitter” Christ who comes to us through tribulation and calls us to a life of renunciation and suffering. Above all there is the recurring image of the soul as a field, which God weeds, and which He ploughs up and where He plants good seed, the famous image of a modern mystical description in Masefield’s Everlasting Mercy:

That I should plough, and as I ploughed,
My Saviour Christ would sing aloud,

1 B-K, 11 (1520).
And as I drove the clods apart,  
Christ would be ploughing in my heart  
Through rest harrow and bitter roots,  
Through all my bad life's rotten fruits.¹

Though he knew the little tract, which Luther discovered and published, the "Theologia Germanica", I suspect that his views were already formed when he met it in 1518 and its influence is less evident on him than on Andrew Karlstadt and Hans Denck.² Karlstadt's own mystical writings must have been known to him, but I suspect that the passive words like "Müssigkeit", "Studierung", "Langweiligkeit", "Gelassenheit", which are overtones in Karlstadt, are undertones in Müntzer's dynamic piety—Müntzer is Brer Rabbit to Karlstadt's Brer Terrapin—"loungin' and suffrin'". I have suggested elsewhere that Müntzer knew the extraordinary "Theologia Naturalis" of Raymond of Sébonde and drew from him that exciting "Gospel of all creatures" which he bequeathed to the south German Anabaptists.³

What was explosive in Müntzer was not mysticism alone, but mysticism joined with apocalyptic; the fusion embodied in his key expression for believers—"The Elect Friends of God". Bound with the Tauler in his double volume was the explosive anthology edited by Le Fèvre and published in Paris in 1513, "Lives of Three Men and Three Spiritual Women".⁴ This included the famous "Two Ways" of S. Hildegarde of Bingen, the visions of Elizabeth of Schönau, and of Mechthild of Hackeborn—an interesting combination of Rhineland with Thuringian mysticism; and also that prophetic interpretation of the sub-apostolic church, the Shepherd of Hermas. In addition, we know that Müntzer was familiar with the commentary on Jeremiah wrongly ascribed to Joachim da Fiore.⁵

Despite many assertions of many writers, there is no direct evidence that Müntzer knew Hussite literature, though his

¹ J. Masefield, *The Everlasting Mercy*.  
² As against E. W. Gritsch, op. cit. pp. 184 ff.  
³ Rupp, op. cit.  
⁴ Ibid. p. 493.  
⁵ O. H. Brandt, *Thomas Müntzer : Sein Leben und Schriften*, Jena, 1933 (hereafter O.H.B.), 132. The commentary comes from the Spiritual Franciscans. T.M. says "The Witness of Abbot Joachim has counted a lot with me. But I have only read him on Jeremiah. My teaching, however, is from high above."
notion of the godless ruler has a faint smell of the Wycliffite doctrine of dominion by grace, and his programme of violent war against the godless has obvious affinities with Taborite radicalism. More interesting is the question how far Müntzer’s teaching is his own, and how far it is derived from an existing Protestant underworld. More and more evidence is showing how widespread in that age was a lay heresy, anti-clerical, Biblical, and probably anti-sacramental, which in England may very roughly be labelled Lollardy but which had its counterpart in groups and conventicles also roughly labelled Hussite and Waldensian. Müntzer’s reference in his Prague Manifesto to those who could testify to his earnestness from his youth up, and the allusive character of some of his theological references, suggests the possibility of an initiated community with its own evangelical jargon.¹

There is a book list among Müntzer’s papers which includes almost all the tracts, Erasmian, Lutheran, etc., of the years 1518-19, and, though it would be precarious to judge a parson’s reading today from a Blackwell’s catalogue found in his pocket, several books on that list can be confirmed as his possessions elsewhere and, from 1518-21 at least, he kept well abreast of contemporary literature.² He also read and re-read Augustine in six volumes and at least knew S. Basil of the other Fathers,

¹ There is some evidence that this jargon, with its technical terms (“Verwunderung”, “Entogrobung”, “Studierung”, “Langweil”, “Besprengung”) was that of the circle of the Zwickau prophets. Although I believe A. M. Lohmann (Zur Geistige Entwicklung Thomas Müntzers, Leipzig, 1931) exaggerates when she speaks of a “Storchismus” phase in Müntzer’s development, and I rather incline to think of Müntzer as influencing rather than being influenced by Storch and his friends, they evidently share this common vocabulary which they also passed on to Karlstadt. But Müntzer’s letter to his brethren in Stolberg (O.H.B. p. 62)—his home town—also suggests they would know what he was talking about in describing the stages of salvation, and what I have in mind is something wider than the small circle of Zwickau prophets. Apart from the letter of N. 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² B-K, App. 3, p. 131. See also B-K, 8-9 (1520).
while he studied intensively in 1519 the church history of Eusebius and the councils of the Church. His classical reading included treatises by Plato, the "Golden Ass" of Apuleius, and he may have read the Koran.

Then there is the Bible. I suspect that, like his friend Karlstadt, he drew some of his hermeneutic principles from Augustine's "Spirit and Letter". The Bible is for him witness only in a secondary sense. Primary is the Spirit, the Living Word, the Inner Word, which touches the heart and gives a man faith; could give it to him, even if he had never seen a Bible, and without whom a man can have no faith, though he learned a thousand Bibles by heart. Müntzer like other radicals such as Denck and Huth is aware of, and points out the many apparent contradictions within the Bible itself. But, though without the Spirit the Bible is dead, and a thing of the Law, yet for Müntzer as for Luther the whole Bible treats of Christ, and contains in Old as well as New Testament the Promises and Covenant of God; a Covenant which would be meaningless were it not grounded in promise and in grace, so that it is not fair to accuse him of legalism or of an Old Testament theology—though it is true that for Müntzer (as for Calvin) the Old Testament law has a binding force repudiated by Luther.

The first books of the Bible are specially important for Müntzer's doctrine of God's Order of Creation, and the dominion given by God to man over all other creatures; and for the witness of the Patriarchs to living Faith.

The Elect man will find that all the Fathers, Patriarchs, apostles and prophets, but especially the apostles, have come to faith only through great difficulty, not like those crackbrained easy-going swine at Wittenberg who are scared by the hurricane of roaring waters and the great floods of wisdom.¹

He drew much, perhaps too much, inspiration from the more bloody-minded sections of Judges and Kings and too much admired the facility with which the prophet Elijah disposed of the Prophets of Baal. But the Psalms were intimately woven into the texture of his mind (and not least their dualism between godly and ungodly) and two in particular: Psalm 19, with its stress on the divine law in creation, and Psalm 92 became for him the

¹ O.H.B., p. 127.
epitome of his gospel. Important, too, were Proverbs and the Book of Wisdom and indeed "The Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom" is his key signature. Ezekiel, and in the last persecuted months of his life Jeremiah, counted much with him. We have some notes of his on Amos which show that he connected the divine Word with social righteousness. He appeals to all levels of the New Testament, and we have some marginal notes on Acts, where he lists the revelations through dreams and visions in the Apostolic Church. Thus his repeated claim to speak with the witness of the whole Bible is justified and there is no radical writer as saturated in Biblical quotation.

Despite the bitter enmity against Luther of his later career, Müntzer began as a Martinian, and there is truth in Martin Schmidt's perceptive remark that, in the end, Müntzer's is a Word of God Theology. Although what Müntzer says does not fit into Luther's view of Justification by Faith and, though one cannot say of him as Karl Holl says of Luther that his is a religion of conscience (despite a striking fragment of a sermon on the "Unjust Steward"), he entirely shared Luther's antagonism to indulgences and to Masses, and to the external legalism of contemporary Popery.

If "Faith in God" is a key phrase for Luther and "Love towards God" a mark of Catholic piety, then perhaps the ruling word for Müntzer is the "fear of the Lord", for his is a sombre piety, set always within the minor key. For Luther faith is a kind of compass, and he does not draw maps. But Müntzer does; he has what used to be called a Plan of Salvation. We must not make it too rigid, and his descriptions are not states of the soul which we can plot like stations on a map of the London Underground. But they are coherent and dynamic, and there is a rhythm between active and passive experiences of the regenerated soul which is highly interesting.

1 Dresden MS., fol. 15a. I am indebted to the Direktor of the Stadtarchiv, Dresden, for permission to study the photostats of the Dresden Müntzer MSS.

2 G. T. Strobel, op. cit.

3 M. Schmidt, Das Selbstbewusstsein Thomas Müntzers und sein Verhältnis zu Luther (Theologia Viatorum, 1954-8).

4 Dresden MS. fols. 75a,b.; B-K, App. 7. The sermon ends with the famous sentence of S. Augustine "Da, quod jubes, et fiet quod vis".
Very important for Müntzer is what he calls "The Beginning" (the fear of the Lord which is the Beginning of Wisdom): those initial experiences through which Living Faith comes (what he calls the "Ankunft"—the Arrival).  

The "Beginning" comes when a man contemplates the Law of God, which is written in every human heart as also within all creation. It is, therefore, not confined to Christian lands.

I preach [he said] a Christian Faith which does not agree with Luther's and which is the same in shape in the hearts of all the Elect on earth. And even though a man were born a Turk, yet he might have the Beginning of such Faith, that is the Movement of the Holy Spirit.

For Luther the law’s office is to terrify the conscience. With Müntzer it is rather the earnest contemplation ("Betrachtung") of the works of the hands of God in creation (Genesis i and Psalm 19) and that gospel of all creatures which, as the parables of Jesus show, pointed to the Kingdom of God from the whole sphere of ordinary human existence. From this contemplation comes "Verwunderung"—awe, and wonder—and this is the work of the Holy Spirit.

It comes down from God in a sublime Wonderment and this Wonderment begins when a child is 6 or 7 years of age, as is prefigured in Numbers 19.

But now this rather passive business of contemplation and wonder is interrupted by the dynamic phase of "Movement" ("Bewegung") by the Spirit in the ground of the soul by waters of tribulation and despair, those experiences which, like Luther, Müntzer describes as "Anfechtung". Here Müntzer uses the Scriptural image of water. This tribulation brings man to the point of despair and unfaith—I will not say unbelief, because some scholars import eighteenth-century rationalism into Müntzer at this point.

Despair is the water, the Movement to good and evil, and whoso swims on this water without the Saviour is between death and life, but he reaches hope through the work of despair which confirms a man in all good things.

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2 B-K, 64 (to Frederick the Wise, 3 August 1524); O.H.B., p. 71.
4 Rupp, op. cit. 513 ff.
6 O.H.B., pp. 154. This occurs in the depths, abyss or ground of the soul.
7 O.H.B., pp. 135, 178.
Before a man can be sure of salvation, there come so many streams of waters and
great storms and tumults of waters that he almost loses his will to live, for the
great billows of this wild sea destroy many just at the point when they think they
have won through. But a man must not run away from these waves but break
through them in a masterful way like a skilful sailor, for the Lord gives nobody
His holy witness unless he has worked through him first of all his woes, his
Wonderment and Reverence. He has really received it when God takes away
from him his fleshly desires and when the Movement of God comes into his heart,
he will kill all the sensual desires of the flesh.1

A man is sure of his divine Origin in the wild tempestuous seas of the Movement
when he is in travail in it, and then he must behave as a fish which swims against
the current and strikes out against the water in order to come home to the place of
his breeding and origin.2

"While the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high." This is an existential view of Faith and one of the sad features
on the battle between Müntzer and Luther is that neither knew
how agreed both were about the importance for Faith of "Anfecht-
tungen" and on the error of preaching a mere "fides historica",
which Müntzer called a False or Phony Faith ("Von dem
gedichteten Glauben").3

Thus, like a drowning man, the believer comes gasping to
shore and there he rests. Müntzer's next description suggests
patience, a time of waiting, and he calls it "Langweil" where the
soul receives the gifts of the Holy Ghost.4

Though the Elect may sin deeply, yet the fire of their conscience drives them to
nauseate and abominate sin, and when they give themselves to sorrow for and
hatred of sin, then they cannot sin, and this I call "Langweil" which sticks up the
nostrils of those worldly swine.5

Very few men know how to talk about the Beginning, the Movement of the Spirit
—they have never tasted the "Langweil" through which alone the work of God
may be found.6

As "Anfechtung" covers the initial movement towards God and
the coming of faith, so the second part of salvation is a growth in
renunciation, in "Gelassenheit". Here Müntzer uses the
Biblical image of God dwelling in man, as in His Temple.
This is focused by Müntzer in his own daringly free translation
of Psalm 92 where he renders the Vulgate:

Domum tuum decet sanctitudo, Domine, in longitudinem dierum

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1 O.H.B., pp. 62. To his brothers at Stolberg. 2 O.H.B., pp. 146.
5 O.H.B., p. 146. 6 O.H.B., pp. 177, 178.
as
Do siht der mensch das er ein wonung gottes sei in der lankweil seiner tage.¹

Here, then, is a plan of salvation: a map of Christian experience such as the seventeenth-century Puritans and Pietists, and in the eighteenth century the Methodists, would also draw, with technical terms and categories. It is no doubt very vulnerable, but it is not to be dismissed, as Luther dismissed it, as mere mumbo-jumbo, as pretentious and studied incomprehensibility, the work of a gang of fanatic exhibitionists very like the aesthetes in Gilbert's "Patience"—"the meaning doesn't matter if it's only idle chatter of a transcendental kind". But Müntzer has other images and other patterns. We have noted that of the ploughed field. In his Prague Manifesto he complains that no parsons or monks have ever understood the seven-fold gifts of the Holy Spirit.²

Here the reference is to Isaiah xi. 1, a verse of deep significance to Müntzer and his friends.

The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Müntzer himself may have drawn this from Tauler's second Sermon at Pentecost which expounds these seven-fold gifts of the one Holy Spirit.³

But there is some evidence that, among the radicals, Isaiah xi was significant because for them it was joined with Revelations v. 1-7 with the Book of Seven Seals which only the Lamb of God (with the Seven Spirits of God) can open.

We know that Hans Huth, Müntzer's disciple, carried round with him a mysterious "Book of Seven Seals and Judgments", and that it was bound with a collection of sentences (apparently contradictory) of Scripture.⁴ I cannot but think there is a link

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² O.H.B., p. 59; B-K, App. 6-7.
⁴ W. Neuser, Hans Huth. I am grateful to the late Dr. Neuser for the use of the complete manuscript of his dissertation on Huth. See also the documents printed in Zeitschrift des Historischen Vereins für Schwaben und Neuburg, Augsburg, 1874, 1900 (especially pp. 38-40).
between this and the book published by Sebastian Franck in 1539 which is also about the Seven Seals, and which has also a collection of antitheses in Scripture. I think the preface to this work reflects an earlier radical teaching\(^1\) about the seven spirits of God and the seven seals which are their sinful counterpart. It is true that Huth and his friends thought in Sevens (a notebook taken from Huth on his arrest has a page full of sevens, various ways of preaching) as a mnemonic device and it is probably true that their “Seven Judgments” were primarily eschatological. But they may very easily (for medieval exegesis made this normal) have added a tropological interpretation, referring apocalyptic texts also to the work of God within the soul. At any rate, Franck gives a pattern of seven good and seven evil spirits, and when we read Müntzer’s theology we may feel that he was familiar with such a pattern. The seven evil spirits are the Spirit of the Fear of Man, the Spirit of mere human wisdom, the spirit of Natural reason, of Human counsel, of Human strength, Human strategy (“Kunst”) and godlessness or worldliness. As the Spirit opens each seal, a gift of the Spirit takes its place.\(^2\)

Müntzer is often most medieval when we think him modern and he allegorizes Numbers 19 with a mysterious reference to the sprinkling of the Children of Israel on the Third Day\(^3\) and he uses this, we have seen, to suggest that children may have the beginning of Faith. Thus his doctrine of baptism is between infant and adult baptism; it is to be given at an age when a child

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\(^1\) Das Vernücht schier mit siben Sigeln verschlossen Buch, S. Franck, 1539. I am grateful to the University of Yale for a photostat of this rare work. The preface consists of two documents, an exposition of the Word, and of the seven seals. It is possible that they contain material from the earlier radicals, but I do not press this.

\(^2\) SPIRITS OF GOD  
WISDOM (“Weisheit”)  
UNDERSTANDING (“Verstand”)  
COUNSEL (“Rat”)  
MIGHT (“Stärke”)  
KNOWLEDGE (“Erkenntnis”)  
FEAR OF THE LORD (“Furcht Gottes”)  

SPIRITS OF EVIL  
Human wisdom  
Human understanding  
Human counsel  
Human might  
Human godlessness  
Fear of MAN (“Menschenfurcht”)

\(^3\) O.H.B., pp. 59 ff., 154.
may be articulate and religiously conscious (another point where
his theology touches Orthodoxy rather than Latin Christendom).¹

This Work of God in the soul is the work of the Holy Spirit.
The Prague Manifesto has a very Methodist exposition from
Romans viii of Christian Assurance or the Witness of the Spirit.²

What seems to me interesting is that Müntzer's teaching touches
two famous collects about the Spirit; the prayer for "a right
judgement in all things" ("Urteil", "Judgement", is most
important for Müntzer and his disciples), and the explicit prayer
for Isaiah xi in the service of Confirmation. Ecumenical theo­
logy today is studying Christian Beginnings or Initiation, and
has pointed out how rich was the primitive doctrine of the
Spirit at this point: here surely Müntzer touches this doctrine
more closely than the later attempts of the Reformers to renew
and re-order the sacrament of Confirmation?

Nor is this mere subjectivism, for it is very important that
Müntzer's theology has a Christological core and is set within a
framework of sound Trinitarian theology (one evidence is a
fragment of a beautiful sermon in the Dresden manuscripts).
Müntzer's is no legalist imitation of a dead Christ, but a living
conformity with Christ which goes back to the Greek Fathers:

Thus we experience the Arrival of Faith, and we earthly men shall become God's
through the Incarnation of Christ, and also with him become God's scholars
taught and made divine by Him Himself, yes, indeed utterly and wholly trans­
formed into Him so that our earthly life is caught up into heaven. Phil. iii.³

But Müntzer is free from that individualism, that atomism
which has marred evangelical Protestantism from the time of
William Perkins. Fundamental for Müntzer is the phrase
"Christ in Head and Members"—the great "totus Christus"
of Augustine to which Pope Paul VI so movingly referred in his
oration to the Vatican Council last year. The whole Bible, he
says, and, he adds, the whole of creation, too, teach nothing
else but the suffering Christ—in Head and Members.⁴ When

¹ O.H.B., pp. 133 ff.  "Von dem rechten Christenglauben und der Taufe", 1524. Also the important fragment B-K, 106.
² O.H.B., pp. 60 ff.
³ O.H.B., pp. 170. See also the very interesting sermon fragment, as yet un­
published (Dresden MS, fol. 44a).
⁴ "The whole of Holy Scripture is about nothing else—as are all the creatures
—than the crucified Son of God" (O.H.B., p. 189).
he criticizes the Lutheran preaching of atonement it is not because he denies the sufficiency of Christ, but because he hates any easy view of salvation, the view that Christ has done all and that Christians need not suffer, which would reduce Christianity to bourgeois mediocrity and in this, across three centuries, he joins hands with Søren Kierkegaard.

But with Müntzer, as in the Epistle to the Colossians, which he quotes with remarkable frequency, Christ is present not only in redemption but in creation too, and, if what he says is an echo of Nicholas of Cusa rather than a premonition of Teilhard de Chardin, it is striking and perceptive. Here he takes the doctrine of the Whole and the Parts which he found in Parmenides’ “One and the Many” (a book which is included in his book list in Dresden). In Christ all things, creation and redemption, find their unity.

“All knowledge of God and the Creator is to be referred to the Whole.”

I never heard any scholar tell about the Order of God which he planted in the creation from the very tiniest word upwards and that the Whole is the only way to understand the parts.

As you see in Psalm 18, the Word of God flows out of the Whole and into all the Parts.

But this for Müntzer has a Christological core and characteristic­ally he binds Parmenides to 1 Corinthians xiii to what we know in part, and how that which is in part is to be done away. Here is an emphasis which from Frederick D. Maurice to de Chardin modern theology has needed to re-discover—Müntzer is not the only Reformer to have a theology of the natural which later Protestantism overlaid.

From this Christian solidarity he draws the dynamism of his apocalyptic, the mission of the Elect Friends of God. Müntzer says that the Elect have the gift of judgement and discrimination and are, therefore, able to tell who are godly and who are re­probate and this judgement (“Urteil”) becomes the basis of a

1 O.H.B., p. 131; B-K, 24. Scrawled on the back of a letter are these words: “In toto exordienda est omnis scientia creaturarum, que est optima, nam est de operibus manuum suarum, que eque laudabilis est sicut scientia dei cum in toto intelligatur. Sed cum in deum regetur optima est rerum scientia.” (This sounds like an echo of Nicholas of Cusa.) 2 O.H.B., p. 59.
revolutionary programme.\(^1\) His liturgy centres in the thought of the divine mystery and the divine Covenant.\(^2\) Poor fallen Christendom has been perverted, above all by knavish parsons who have stolen and perverted the Scriptures. But now the new age is at hand. Now the Elect will wipe out the ungodly. "O Thomas Müntzer thou bloodthirsty man" sang his enemies in Zwickau and there is in him a ferment of violence which at the end was to be terribly purged. At its worst it suggests a kind of Christian Mohammedanism—but at its best it foreshadows the activism of Zwingli and Calvin and the revolutionary élan which a doctrine of election would give to the Reformed churches in the next two centuries and which has counted for much in modern European history, not least in Scotland and Holland and America. Of course, Müntzer's messianism deserves Luther's strictures but we do not always remember that Luther used high sounding phrases about his own mission, and even in the last weeks Müntzer has none of the crackpot megalomania of Augustine Bader or Jan Bockelson and keeps to Biblical phrases about himself, as a Servant of God, and subjects what he has to say to the witness of Holy Scripture.

Carl Hinrichs has dealt adequately with Luther and Müntzer and their contrasting views of civil obedience. In Müntzer there is a perception that Romans xiii was being interpreted in too rigid categories for a changing world and a new age. If, like other prophets, he foreshortens the horizons and anticipated an order of social justice for the lower orders of society, which was impossible in the sixteenth and barely in the nineteenth century, one cannot simply say that the issue between him and Luther was that between a false and true prophet. For, if he appealed to force, the rest of Protestantism was too soon to follow his example and in twenty years' time there would be very few Protestant rulers who would cry with the young Luther: "The Word alone must do it!"

This brings us to communism. The one explicit reference was wrung from him under severe torture and is a little suspect. That 'omnia sunt communia' and should be distributed to each according to his need and opportunity.\(^3\)

\(^1\) O.H.B., p. 182. \(^2\) O.H.B., p. 127. \(^3\) O.H.B., p. 82; B-K, 165.
Here the reference is to the Book of Acts, and to the Primitive Church. But since finding references in the Dresden MSS. to Müntzer having read several treatises of Plato, including the Republic, I take Müntzer’s communism more seriously. And if we nowadays take seriously the importance of Plato’s Republic for Calvin’s theology I do not see why Müntzer should not have the credit for the same thing.

But there is another reference of Müntzer which may be of importance. In a recent dissertation on “The School in Martin Bucer”, Ernst Wilhelm Kohls has shown the importance for Bucer and for contemporary sixteenth-century political philosophy, of his phrase “gemein nutz”—common weal.\(^1\) It is no accident, I think, that Müntzer returns to this phrase in his last letters to the citizens of Mühlhausen.\(^2\) Here he contrasts the need for “Gemein nutz” with the disastrous self-seeking “Eigen-nutz” which he says has brought the peasants to disaster. It may well be that here is another important debt to Plato. At any rate, what he says about “Eigen-nutz” goes deep in diagnosis of the evil of the age: it agrees exactly with another seer, with what Shakespeare has to say in King John about what he calls “Commodity: tickling commodity”.

I have not time to discuss Müntzer’s doctrine of the Eucharist: there is a tantalizing because undated fragment in Dresden which suggests that he may ante-date the arguments of Zwingli and Oecolampadius about a spiritual presence and possibly even those of his friend Karlstadt.\(^3\)

Müntzer’s is the rebel pattern: striking out against the Establishment, but not only the Catholic Establishment—Luther did that, but the nascent Protestant Establishment too, so that he has some startling affinities with what we currently call “Radical Christianity”. The agreements and affinities with Kierkegaard are real and extend almost to fine points of vocabulary: what better translation is there of Müntzer’s “Gelassenheit”?

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\(^{1}\) E. W. Kohls, Die Schule bei Martin Bucer, Heidelberg, 1963. Exkurs II: Zur Bedeutung und Geschichte des Begriffes “gemein nutz”. We might remember also the group of Reformers in the reign of Edward VI in England, including the fiery Hugh Latimer, also known as “Commonwealth men”.

\(^{2}\) O.H.B., pp. 76, 83.

\(^{3}\) Dresden MS, fols. 44a,b.
than Kierkegaard's "Knight of Infinite Resignation" or Kierkegaard's criticism of Luther, or what both call the knavery of infant baptism: their common setting of all true Christianity under suffering, the sign of the Cross. And when Paul Tillich speaks of God at work in the "ground of our being" he is returning to a mystic word which Müntzer well understood. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reacting against an introverted Protestant pietism, speaks of "religionless Christianity", here is a view which Müntzer emphasizes again and again, that the outsiders, the Jews and Turks, are nearer to salvation and nearer to being prophetic bearers of the new age than the complacent and worldly apostate Christians.

I preach a Faith . . . which is in the hearts of the Elect in the same form all over the earth: and even if a man were born a Turk he might have the Beginning of such a Faith, that is, the Movement of the Holy Ghost.¹

The Gospel will come into a much higher reality than in the time of the Apostles.² From many lands and many strange nations will come Elect of many kinds who will put us slothful neglectful Christians to shame.³

There was no real confrontation and dialogue between Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer, but in these ecumenical days we are beginning to reconstruct one. Beside the element of misunderstanding, and through the hubbub of polemic, it is possible to see on Müntzer's side things which anticipate later Protestantism, things which he saw, which in default of listening to him Protestantism had to learn to do again in other ways. His tragic story needs to be read with compassion as the story of one of the most gifted of God's delinquent children.

He lost his war, and for most men that was enough. But at the end Müntzer seems to have rejected the appeal to the big battalions. In his last poignant letter to the men of Mühlhausen, he bids them take the long view and look below the surface of events. And after four centuries this is what their successors in Eastern Germany are trying to do. A few months ago I stood in the Town Hall of Zwickau, where there is written on the wall in huge letters a facsimile of Müntzer's signature—"Thomas Müntzer—qui pro veritate militat in hoc mundo."

And as I listened to the Communist Oberbürgomeister telling of his Christian upbringing, his disillusionment with bourgeois Protestantism, his time in a concentration camp as a Communist, and as he threw at me sentences from the teaching of Jesus, I thought I heard the ghost of Thomas whispering: "Endlich—at last—my peasants have won their war." And though we should not accept the grievous over-simplification which divides East and West into godly and reprobate, the society of "Gemein nutz" against that of "Eigen-Nutz", this surely may be said. In Thomas Müntzer, as in no other Reformer, we touch that smothered undercurrent of pain and injustice which would one day explode in modern revolutionary man, one-sided, heretical, but something to which the Church, by reason of its own failure of compassion, cannot return an unqualified "No". Thomas Müntzer, like the churches on the other side of the Iron Curtain, should give us an uneasy conscience.