

THE LIFE OF THOMAS MÜNTZER

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Roots of Anabaptism
April 30, 2009

Thomas Müntzer is one of the most unique and controversial figures of the Reformation period. Throughout history he has been credited by some for starting the the anabaptist movement, being a leader in the Peasants' Revolt in 1525, having mystical tendencies, a religious socialist, and some have even suggested that he was never a Christian.¹ Even though there have been extensive works written about Müntzer throughout these five hundred years, much of his life still remains a mystery and is very unclear. This paper will give an overview of Müntzer's life and also take a brief look at the downward spiral of the relationship between Müntzer and Martin Luther.

Although Müntzer's exact date of birth and the location of it is debated, many scholars believe that he was probably born between 1488-1490 in Stolberg in east-central Germany near the border of what is now known as the Czech Republic. In fact, when he attended the University of Frankfort he registered as Thomas Müntzer from Stolberg. Very little is known about his parents or his early years. There is conflicting evidence that Müntzer may have been born into a family that was well-to-do. Some think that Müntzer's father was a good craftsmen.² Historical records indicate his mother probably received a nice inheritance when her parents passed away. Otherwise Müntzer wouldn't have written his father saying "My mother brought you enough, as many folk in Stolberg and Quedlinburg have told me. She earned her bread three-fold"³ Eric Gritsch writes that Müntzer inherited everything from his mother when she passed

¹ Mario Josipovic and William McNeil, "Thomas Müntzer as "Disturber of the Godless": A Reassessment of His Revolutionary Nature," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 70, no. 4 (1996): 431.

² Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer: Apocalyptic Mystic and Revolutionary*, trans. Jocelyn Jaquiere (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 33.

³ Peter Matheson, *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 22.

away in 1520⁴. This could have led to paternal envy, but it didn't end the father-son relationship because there is evidence that Müntzer took care of his father until he died in 1524.

In 1506, Muntzer went to University of Leipzig where he began studying *septem artes liberales* which was to qualify him for further studies in theology, jurisprudence, and medicine.⁵ The University of Leipzig was prominent among those that were demanding reform within the church world. During Müntzer's time at the University, more than eight hundred students listened to the Humanist Peter Mosellanus.⁶ Mosellanus became a personal friend of Philip Melanchthon and a supporter of Martin Luther and the Reformation. One can assume that Müntzer attended the lectures of Peter Mosellanus and that formed the framework for his radicalness in later years. From the University of Leipzig, Müntzer attended the University of Frankfort in 1512. One of the main difference between the University of Leipzig and the University of Frankfort was Frankfort lacked the Humanistic spirit of reform. Many of the teachers there were opposed to any reform within the church. The rector of the University of Frankfort was Conrad Wimpina, who supported John Tetzel in the selling of indulgences and later became a leader in opposing the cause of Martin Luther. It isn't known if Müntzer graduated from the University of Frankfort or elsewhere. Regardless, he made the announcement in 1521 that he had received a master of arts and bachelor of Holy

⁴ Eric Gritsch, *Reformer Without a Church: The Life and Thought of Thomas Muentzer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 2.

⁵ Goertz, 34.

⁶ Gritsch, 3.

Scripture.⁷ It has also been thought that Müntzer may have studied and even completed his degree from the University of Wittenberg.⁸ The fact remains that much of the educational career of Müntzer is as unclear as the details surrounding his early life.

In June of 1517, while Müntzer was the provost at Frohse, Matthew Volmar sent a letter to Müntzer with several theological questions. Questions such as what the definition of the relationship between sinful human nature and divine forgiveness, what indulgences were, and why was there such a distinction between the clergy and laymen. Although the answers that Müntzer provided are lost, it gives us a sense of the battle underlying battle that was beginning to rage. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the door the Wittenberg church. The events of that day were the spark that lit the Reformation fires. Müntzer as well as many others were dramatically influenced by the events surrounding this day.

Around 1519, Müntzer became acquainted with Philipp Melanchthon who was the co-worker of Martin Luther. He also was introduced to a gentleman by the name of Andreas von Karlstadt. Karlstadt was then the arch-deacon of the Castle Church of All Saints. Karlstadt had a major influence on Müntzer and encouraged him to immerse himself in the reading of St. Augustine and the Church Fathers in the new editions that were put out by the humanists. Müntzer also began to study the the issues surrounding the controversy between Martin Luther and the Humanists. He became fascinated with the mystical writings of Tauler who interpreted the Scripture allegorically and preached Gelassenheit - complete independence from creatureliness. This would later play a

⁷ Matheson, 406.

⁸ Goertz, 35.

significant role in the theological development of Müntzer as he would later express his own opinion about the relationship between men and God.

The same year, Franz Günther was preaching at St. Nicholas. He was preaching the new Reformation doctrine that the citizens did not need to confess to the priests, nor did they need to purchase indulgences. This obviously offended the Catholic church and a bitter controversy sprang up. The Franciscan monks felt personally attacked. Günther personally insulted the abbess of the St. Mary's Convent and feeling like he needed a break from the controversy sought relief. This is when Thomas Müntzer entered the scene. It is not certain whether Günther asked him to come or if Martin Luther sent him. Müntzer criticized the Pope during the festival days leading up to Easter and became embroiled in the controversy so much that the Franciscans called him a Lutheran as a term of hatred.⁹ Luther personally defended Müntzer against the accusations of the Franciscans.

In 1520 Müntzer became priest or preacher (the terms were still interchangeable in the early days of the Reformation) in Zwickau. The council of Zwickau had asked him to preach at St. Mary's, which was one of the most influential churches in Zwickau. The preacher that Müntzer was filling in for was the Johannes Wildenauser who changed his name in true humanistic fashion to John Egranus. He desired a study break so he contacted Martin Luther about being a substitute preacher. It is assumed that Martin Luther recommended Thomas Müntzer as substitute. Regardless of who recommended him, Müntzer began substituting at St. Mary's in May of 1520. Zwickau at that time was not only a prosperous city, but it was a city that was ready for reform. Müntzer hardly

⁹ Goertz, 51.

allowed time for himself to settle before he took a shot at the Franciscans from the pulpit of St. Mary's where he proclaimed that the monks had mouths from which you could cut a pound of flesh and still leave mouth enough.¹⁰ Müntzer continued his straight-forward preaching against monasticism and the pope. The Franciscans countered by declaring Müntzer a Lutheran and a heretic and asking him to recant. The city council thought it best to write to Luther and get his opinion on the matter. It is unknown if Luther responded to the query. Müntzer also sent Luther a letter defending his position and asking Luther to support him. Zwickau was slowly joining the Luther reform program and by the end of the summer of 1520, Müntzer had emerged as the leader of a Lutheran movement in the city.¹¹

During this time Egranus was negotiating a new contract with the city council for resuming his preaching duties after his sabbatical. Müntzer decided that it was abominable things like this that needed reformed and he made his opinion clear on the issue. When the city council gave into the demands of Egranus, he arrived back at Zwickau to find the beginnings of a class warfare. Egranus and Müntzer began to voice their opposition to each other. Egranus was appalled by what was happening and Müntzer appeared to be trying to beat the opposition into the ground verbally by choosing to go on the campaign trail and go from house to house explaining his views. News reached Luther and he apparently asked Müntzer to settle down because Müntzer wrote to Luther telling him that he would not be reconciled in order to save face and avoid embarrassment. Towards the end of his stay at St. Mary's, Müntzer penned

¹⁰ Goertz, 58.

¹¹ Gritsch, 31.

his own twenty-four theses and attributed them to Egranus as *Propositions of an Excellent Man Named Egranus*. He introduces the Propositions with the statement, "These propositions I shall maintain against the entire world in general and against the ass Thomas Müntzer in particular!"¹² Apparently Müntzer hoped to confuse the opposition. Interestingly enough, during this diatribe, both Müntzer and Egranus were sharing the pulpit at St. Mary's! Müntzer then accepted the call to preach at St. Catherine's across town. There the verbal warfare escalated. Müntzer preached fiery sermons against Egranus and his "enemies" and the response was to smash the windows of Müntzer's parsonage. Müntzer finally left Zwickau on April 16, 1521 which was the same night that Luther entered Worms.

Up until this point, Müntzer and Luther were fighting the same enemy - the papal church. But while Müntzer was in Zwickau, he met Nicolaus Storch. Storch was a self-proclaimed prophet who declared that the Holy Scripture was secondary to the direct revelation of God to His chosen servants. Müntzer even praised Storch from the pulpit proclaiming him to be filled with the spirit. From this point on, Müntzer's theology became more and more apocalyptic.¹³ Müntzer begins to believe that they are living in the End Times and that a "new apostolic church must gather the elect and separate them from the worldly."¹⁴ But he didn't begin to urge the sheep to separate from the wolves just yet. He begins to become infatuated with the inner-spirit over the word of Scripture.

¹² Gritsch, 35.

¹³ James Schwenk, *Karlstadt, Muntzer, and Schwenkfeld: The Beginnings of Radical Reform*" (lecture, Evangelical Theological Seminary, Myerstown, PA, February 5, 2009).

¹⁴ George Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 1992), 127.

From Zwickau, Müntzer went to Bohemia where he hoped he would find a people that would be open to a program of reform that was more radical than the reform program of Luther. John Huss and the Hussite movement had railed against the abuse of the church more than a century before the time Luther. In fact the Hussites had adopted what became known as *The Four Articles of Prague* in 1420 which included; free preaching, correct understanding of communion, abolition of temporal rule of clergy, and the subjection of the clergy to secular law for the punishment of public crimes.¹⁵ Müntzer had perhaps thought about visiting Bohemia for sometime as he had read John Huss's book titled *On the Church*. Upon reading that book, Müntzer wrote to George Spalatin that Huss "not only pleases me, but both his spirit and learning seem miraculous."

Once Müntzer entered Bohemia he stayed at a small town called Saaz where the Unity of Brethren had a small community. The Brethren had begun to call Luther the "John Huss of Saxony"¹⁶ and Müntzer most likely felt comfortable to stay at this town. Müntzer had started to refer to himself as a messenger of Christ and a servant of the elect. Shortly afterwards, Müntzer traveled on to Prague. Prague was just recovering from a plague that had swept through the city killing thousands and was on the verge of religious divisions. No stranger to a good religious controversy, Müntzer prepared what became known as the *Prague Manifesto* - a title that he himself did not give. The Manifesto contained a mixture of anticlericalism, and many mystical ideas. In the document he rejected the idea of the legitimization of the priests of an official church. He

¹⁵ Harrison S. Thomson, *Czechoslovakia in European History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 85-86.

¹⁶ Gritsch, 49.

believed that the only people who could hear the word of God were the truly pure in heart.¹⁷ Here again you can see the strain of Gelassenheit. Müntzer stated that Gelassenheit leads a person to a new order, whose secrets have yet to be whispered to priests. Müntzer declared that the godless clergy would be annihilated. He encouraged the common people to not allow themselves to be seduced by the priests. Such statements made for major controversy and threats of uprising against him so he ended up not staying very long in Prague.

From Prague Müntzer traveled to the Wittenberg area before eventually settling into the area of Allstedt. In Allstedt he married a former nun, Otilie von Gerson, and had at least one child. This fact seems to indicate his break with the old church. While he was in Allstedt the subtle changes that had been shaping his life and theology came into full view. Up until this point, he had not really drawn a distinct line between himself and Martin Luther. During his time in Allstedt he wrote and printed two tracts titled “On the Imaginary Faith” and “Protestation”. These tracts talked about his views on infant baptism, faith and the Reformation. Both tracts were a refutation of Martin Luther’s theology. He considered Martin Luther and his band of reformer friends as evil as the Franciscans because they had elevated themselves above the people by placing themselves between God and mankind with their glorification of *sola scriptura*.¹⁸ Luther responded in turn by calling Müntzer “that Satan in Allstedt”.¹⁹ Disorder soon ruled as supporters of Müntzer destroyed a chapel in Allstedt that was dedicated to the Virgin at

¹⁷ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, “Thomas Müntzer: Revolutionary in a Mystical Spirit,” In *Profiles of Radical Reformers: Biographical Sketches from Thomas Müntzer to Paracelsus*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Goertz, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982), 34.

¹⁸ Goertz 1982, 36.

¹⁹ Matheson, 226.

Mallerbach. The court began an investigation and required Müntzer to preach a trial sermon before them. In that message Müntzer interpreted the dream of Nebuchadnezzar about the collapse of the empires of the world. Müntzer went on to prophecy that the last empire was a mix of church and worldly powers and would be destroyed. The kingdom of Christ would be established on earth by the Spirit of God. Müntzer passionately pleaded with the princes to join the true Reformation otherwise their government and their rule would end and instead it would be given to ordinary people. This sermon became known as "The Sermon to the Princes".²⁰ Müntzer called for the princes and the common man to forge together with the Holy Spirit and cleanse the world of evil through the sword of the elect. He further stated that the ungodly have no right to live except as the elect grant it to them. During this time Müntzer was developing quite a following. His followers were called the League of the Elect and Müntzer promised that they would be the apocalyptic force that would convert the world and bring it to a theocracy. He presented himself as the new Daniel to the leaders of Allstedt admonishing them to believe and convert. The court refused to accept the ideology of Müntzer and the climate in Allstedt became increasingly hostile. Luther published his "Letter to the Saxon Princes about the Rebellious spirit" in which he warned that if Müntzer and those associated with him continued to preach as they were, violence would ensue. Luther believed that Müntzer's real purpose in his emphasis upon visions and new revelations was to obscure the true witness given to humankind, the Word of God. Luther believed that Müntzer was trying to drive a wedge between those

²⁰ Matheson, 226-229.

who taught the Word "orally and in written form" in order to impose a false teaching.²¹ Of course Müntzer retaliated with his *Hochverursachte Schutzrede* ("Highly-provoked Vindication") in which he says that "Luther attacked only helpless enemies such as priests and monks and merchants while he flattered the feudal ruling class, the lords and princes".²² He called Luther the "Soft-living Flesh of Wittenberg and also critiqued Luther's teaching of justification.

After Müntzer left Allstedt he went to Mühlhausen where he attempted to initiate a Reformation with Heinrich Pfeiffer. While he was in Mühlhausen, Müntzer tried to get approval from the city council to obtain fill-in positions at churches. The Mühlhausen council aware of his issues and controversy finding skills, sought to seek wisdom from Chaplain Stein in Weimar. They did not received a letter or answer from Stein, but instead from Martin Luther. Luther had nothing positive to say about Müntzer.

He has shown in may places, especially in Zwickau and Allstedt, what kind of a tree he is, bearing no other fruit than murder, rebellion, and bloodshed. He can only kill as we have seen in Zwickau and Allstedt. Therefore do not disregard my advice. If you do so, by accepting this prophet, and if thereby you are fallen by misfortune, I shall be innocent because I gave you friendly warning in the name of Christ.²³

Luther's warning seems to have had little to no effect. While Müntzer seems to have not found any church openings, he preached on street corners and private homes. Müntzer was advocating the removal of city government, public elections and was basing it on God's Word. On September 9, 1524, Müntzer and Pfeiffer were exiled from

²¹ Darrel R. Reid, "Luther, Müntzer and the Last Day: Eschatological Hope, Apocalyptic Expectations," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69, no. 1 (January 1995): 69.

²² Stayer, 108.

²³ Gritsch, 132.

Mühlhausen. Using a bit of drama, Müntzer led a march to a house carrying a naked sword and a red cross. Müntzer and his followers then signed an eternal covenant together.²⁴

From there he went to Nuremberg where he tried to get his “A Highly Necessary Defense and Answer Against the Soft-Living Flesh of Wittenberg, Which in Miserable and Perverted Fashion Has Soiled Poor Christendom Through the Theft of Holy Scripture” published again for a broader publication in hope that more individuals would come on his side. Müntzer met a young book-binder named John Hut who published it for him. In the pamphlet, Müntzer called Luther attractive names including doctor liar, scheming black crow, and pussyfooter.²⁵ Müntzer argued against Luther’s premise that Müntzer and his followers had separated the Holy Spirit from Scripture. Müntzer also promised that Luther would be annihilated by divine judgement. Interestingly enough, Luther had quite a bit of power by that time and the document was banned and every copy was confiscated. Hut was arrested for not having attained permission to from the censor board in publishing what became the most hunted documents of the Reformation period.²⁶

Müntzer then emerged in the Black Forest area at the beginning of the revolt of the peasants. Some believe that Müntzer may have participated in what became known as the revolutionary “Draft of a Constitution”. Early Anabaptism intersected with the commoners' movement of 1525 on several occasions. Balthasar Hubmaier in Waldshut,

²⁴ Werner O. Packull, *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptist Movement 1525-1531* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1977), 62.

²⁵ Gritsch, 134.

²⁶ Gritsch 136-137.

was involved as were other early anabaptist leaders, with the rebels. It was thought that Hubmaier authored or edited two Black Forest peasant programs, the "Letter of Articles" and the "Draft of a Constitution" as attempts to get the peasants to rise up and revolt.²⁷ In recent years, some scholars believe that Müntzer actually wrote the "Draft of a Constitution" and that perhaps Hubmaier simply edited it.²⁸ Regardless of who wrote it and if it was edited, the "Draft of a Constitution" added fuel to the fire as far as the peasants were concerned.

Müntzer joined the cause of the peasants in 1525, although his theology, eschatology and dispute with Luther and those from Wittenburg had been approaching the point of disaster for years. Müntzer had a white flag made with a rainbow and the inscription that the peasants had been using, "the word of God endures forever". Müntzer sent out letters to peasants all across the region encouraging them to unite and defeat the evil government.²⁹ He told them in his letters that even if there would be a hundred thousand against them, and if they had only three, God would give them victory. The miners and peasants followed his advice and began to destroy church property everywhere in the region.³⁰ Catholic and protestants rallied together and put their funds together and hired a cavalry force of eight hundred and an army of two thousand mercenaries led by Duke George and Philip of Hesse.

²⁷ Goertz 1982, 40.

²⁸ James M. Stayer, *The German Peasant's War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 68.

²⁹ Matheson, 454.

³⁰ Gritsch, 144.

On May 15, after receiving almost no resistance and figuring that the war was almost over, ten thousand peasants armed with the most primitive of weapons took up a defensive position near Frankenhausen. The opposing army with their cavalry, artillery and hired mercenaries, took up positions as well surrounding the peasants. Before attacking, the dukes launched an information campaign promising the peasants that if they left, they would be provided with safe passage to get back to their homes. Müntzer seeing the despair and panic among his troops took to preaching. Seeing a rainbow in the sky, he used that as a symbol of impending victory. The peasants decided to remain and as soon as they had made that decision, the first artillery barrage took place. When the day was over, five-to-six thousand of the peasants were killed, over six hundred were captured, and the remaining became refugees living in the forest. The dukes lost a total of six men. It was a bloodbath with Müntzer and the peasants soundly defeated. Upon the start of the battle, Müntzer, the “fearless” leader ran away and was later found in an attic of a house when search parties went door-to-door searching for him. When he was found, he denied having any involvement with the rebel attack. He was arrested and turned over to Count Ernest of Mansfeld and taken to Heldrungen Castle where he was tortured. His spirit broken, he finally confessed to everything. He wrote a letter to his followers at Mühlhausen where he urged them to stop fighting and cease the egotistic rebellion.³¹ Perhaps that was all it was - ego. Müntzer also asked his friends at Mühlhausen to take care of his wife and child. During this time, one of the other leaders and friends of Müntzer, Pfeiffer was captured. Both Müntzer and Pfeiffer were sentenced to be executed.

³¹ Matheson, 473-474.

On May 26, just eleven days after the war at Frankenhausen, Müntzer and Pfeiffer were taken to the marketplace at Mühlhausen where they received communion. The next day, May 27, both Müntzer and Pfeiffer were beheaded. Their heads were exhibited in the town square on stakes as a warning to not try to do what Müntzer and Pfeiffer did. Luther went on to publish a pamphlet titled "A Terrible Story and Judgment of God Concerning Thomas Müntzer".³²

Müntzer had a major influence on some of his contemporaries. Understandably, his involvement on the side of those who were poor made him popular. Others did not trust Martin Luther, so when Müntzer came around, there were more than a handful who agreed with Müntzer when he disagreed with Luther. Martin Luther and Müntzer disagreed on several religious doctrines. Some of the main differences were Müntzer believed and taught of the "living word of God". Müntzer also believed that one that saving faith would transform believers in the here and now. Müntzer also disagreed with Luther over the elements in communion. He believed that the wine and bread of the Eucharist were only emblems of Jesus Christ's sacrifice. And because Müntzer did not believe that infant baptism was biblical, he is sometimes called one of the founders of the Anabaptist movement. Yet doubt exists as to whether he ever received adult "re-baptism."

A number of Anabaptists later considered him their spiritual father. Factions of the movement in Thuringia, Hesse, Franconia, Bavaria, Swabia, Upper Austria, Salzburg and Northern Tyrol, held some of his beliefs.³³ Melchior Rinck, Hans Hut, Hans Denck,

³² Gritsch, 153.

³³ Robert Friedmann and Werner O. Packull, "Müntzer, Thomas (1488/9-1525)," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M858.html> (accessed April 28, 2009).

Balthasar Reif, Hans Römer and Heinz Kraut were some of the early anabaptist leaders who had contact with him or at least were impressed by Müntzer's beliefs and actions. It seems that many of the radical reformers who made the greatest impact upon the early roots of anabaptism shared many of the same theological beliefs.³⁴

In historical studies of the Reformation, Müntzer has often been ignored. To some, he was a short-lived radical. Müntzer was then adopted by socialists as a symbol of early-class struggle. Müntzer and the peasants' revolt formed an important topic in the book by Friedrich Engels titled "The Peasant War in Germany", which argues against materialism. Engels describes Müntzer as a leader who chose to use biblical language—the only language the peasants would understand. Müntzer even appeared on East German currency in the twentieth century, appearing from 1975 on their five mark bill.

To this day, the confusion and lack of understanding of Müntzer continues. Many anabaptists resist the idea that Müntzer was ever one of them and refuse to believe that he was one of their founders.³⁵ And in the end, even though it can be argued that Müntzer was misguided, and he was, he was searching, as were all of the early reformers. For centuries the world had been dark and steeped in a religion that seemed to offer no sense of a loving and caring and God. And in the midst of this harsh miserable world, God sent men like Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer to begin to offer a little light. Even though they became bitter enemies, God used both of them to begin

³⁴ C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1995), 46.

³⁵ Harold S. Bender, "The Zwickau Prophets, Thomas Müntzer, and the Peasants' War," In *The Anabaptists, Thomas Müntzer, and the Peasants' War*, ed. James M. Stayer and Werner O. Packull, (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1980): 145-146.

to accomplish what needed to be done. Müntzer took a different path from Wittenberg, and in so doing, his life influenced the hundreds of thousands who now call themselves anabaptist.

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