

Doctor Liar and the Satan of Allstedt.

The Development of Müntzer's Relationship with Luther

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October 2015

Compare and contrast; both of the following greetings are addressed by one man to another man: on the one hand, the addressee is the '*model and beacon to the friends of God*'; on the other, he is a '*poisonous little worm with your stinking humility*'. Both addresses are from Thomas Müntzer to Martin Luther – the former from the summer of 1520, the latter just over four years later. One could suppose something had broken down in their relationship. We shall examine the course of the breakdown below, and consider the question of how things got so bad.

As in any relationship breakdown, be it personal, political or philosophical, one of the prime causes was the failure of one or both parties to engage with the facts.

The historian Wolfgang Ullmann puzzled: 'One of the many remarkable features of the Reformation is this: that Luther never once found himself prepared to debate basic theological matters with Müntzer, although, as he himself stated in his "Schmalkalden Articles" [1537], he considered Müntzer alongside the Papacy as his main opponent.'⁽¹⁾ Indeed, rather than enter into debate with Müntzer, Luther was more than content to simply vilify him as a 'Satan', a man of violence, and refer him to secular justice without further ado. By contrast, during that brief period when he was able to reply to his accuser, Müntzer adduced many theological arguments, alongside some factual corrections (and not a few fruity epithets). It is a truism that history is written by the victors; since Luther succeeded where Müntzer failed, it was Luther's defamatory portrait which set the tone for the historiography of Müntzer between 1525 and the end of the 18th century – and even well into the 20th.

Let us therefore look at the evidence which has been handed down to us from the early 16th century. As we shall see, there was other written evidence which has, for the moment at least, been lost, and we are obliged to best-guess some of the lacunae. It should be noted that Müntzer was a chronic hoarder of letters – both those he received and copies of those

he had written: it was a habit which finally revealed his identity to the soldiers of the Princes after the battle of Frankenhausen in 1525.

The first written evidence we possess is a letter in Latin from Müntzer to Luther, dated 13th July 1520, written when the former was employed in the town of Zwickau. In 1518, at a meeting between the two men in Wittenberg, Müntzer had evidently so impressed Luther that the latter recommended him to a vacancy in Zwickau. As things turned out, it was a couple of years before this could happen: Müntzer took over the pulpit at St Mary's Church in May 1520, standing in for the Humanist-Lutheran preacher Johannes Egranus who – after some delay - was taking a short sabbatical. Müntzer stepped straight into a conflict with the Franciscans in the town, and evidently cooked matters to boiling point, but still maintained the support of the town-council. At the council's urging, Müntzer wrote to Luther asking for advice in how to deal best with the controversy. He addresses Luther as 'most benign father' (p18) ⁽²⁾, 'my advocate in the Lord Jesus' (p19), and 'model and beacon to the friends of God' (p22). He signs off as 'Thomas Müntzer, whom you brought to birth by the gospel' (p22); the exact words here are uncertain, since – rather suggestively - some attempt was later made to erase them. Müntzer notes that 'I have a manly trust that God intends notable things through your plans and those of all Christians' (p19). He seeks advice – 'the whole council...urged me, if you advise it, to appeal to a future council against those harpies and all their ravings' (p19); 'if you recommend it, I will reply to all these champions [*of the Franciscans*]; but if I should appeal, write to me to tell me so. If a disputation should be arranged for them, just propose it. Whatever you suggest I will be prompt to do in the Lord.' (p20); 'please indicate what in all this you regard as Christian' (p21).

In short, this is a polite and serious letter, clearly intended to gain the approval of Wittenberg, and not at all loath to bow to Luther's advice. Although Müntzer was by no means a stranger to Reformation controversy – having already successfully negotiated a significant debate in Jüterbog – and by no means lacking in the ability to think for himself, he obviously saw advantages in ensuring Luther was on his side.

Unfortunately, what seems to be lacking here was any kind of reply from Luther. This is not to say that a reply was not forthcoming – but we have no evidence of it in the archives. What we do have is a letter, also written in Latin, from Johann Agricola to Müntzer and

written in early February 1521. Agricola was a close colleague of Luther and functioned as a personal secretary, so it is unlikely that Luther was unaware of this letter.

It is addressed 'to the Christian theologian, Master Thomas Müntzer, preacher at Zwickau, his beloved brother at Zwickau...good Thomas' (p29). So far, so good. Agricola then praises Müntzer for his energy and indignation: 'I am swept away in admiration for the mighty eloquence' (p.29). But what becomes immediately clear is this: firstly, that this reply is not at all about the controversy with the Franciscans, but about the reforming preacher Egranus; secondly, that Wittenberg was getting a bit nervous about the strength of Müntzer's polemic. In October of the previous year, Egranus had returned from his absence and taken up his post at St Mary's; Müntzer had so far pleased the town-council that they appointed him to the pulpit at St Katharine's.

And here the trouble began: Müntzer was not at all enamoured of Egranus' lackadaisical ways. Evidently, there had been further correspondence with Wittenberg: 'First of all,' writes Agricola, 'you accuse us of lying in our letters like Ziba, that worst of flatterers, because, led by the spirit of giddiness (to use your terms) we wrongly accused you of immodesty' (p29). So: further controversy, in which Wittenberg had apparently supported Egranus against Müntzer. Agricola is careful to strike the right tone: he notes that Egranus has 'a primitive mind' and that he 'has no understanding at all of the sacred Scriptures', and is 'an infant in true theology' (p29f). But – there is always a 'but' – Agricola then suggests that Müntzer 'abuse[s] the office of the word...to cut this short, [the council in Zwickau] affirmed that you breathe out nothing but slaughter and blood' (p30). Agricola fully believes this report – 'they were not the sort of people who tell lies ... We have done what we had to do. It is up to you to have due respect for those who justly admonish you' (p30). The advice is perfectly clear: 'Do not be overweening. For it is written: "Do not become conceited."' (p30). 'Set aside this personal hostility, which your letters openly betray... As to those who are evil and contend against us, censure them, raise up your voice against them, correct them whether it is opportune or inopportune, but in such a way that your modesty is evident to all' (p30f).

So much for Luther's support, then. It is unfortunate that we do not possess any of the letters which are referred to – whether one side of the correspondence consisted of letters from Wittenberg directly to Müntzer, or simply to the town-council, is unknown. Whether Müntzer's infuriated replies were addressed directly to Wittenberg, or picked up in reports by

town officials, is also unknown. But the fact remains that Müntzer clearly felt hard done by in his dealings with Wittenberg; possibly doubly so, since it had not been Luther, but merely Agricola, who replied.

In the following two years, any documented criticism by Müntzer of Luther and his followers is more often implicit than explicit. In his 'Prague Manifesto' of late 1521, there are hints of his differences with the theological 'academics'; but nothing further. We have a couple of other random notes hinting at dissatisfaction: firstly, on a clutch of notes made by Müntzer on the writings of Cyprian and Tertullian (probably made around 1522?), where he notes that: 'He [*Tertullian*] lets the coming of Antichrist coincide with the day of judgment, like the monk Martin Luther, but I dissent' (p428); secondly, in a brief summary made by Georg Spalatin of a colloquy in Weimar between Wolfgang Stein and Thomas Müntzer – these provide a very sketchy overview of Müntzer's theology - but end up with the words "He [Müntzer] thinks and speaks ill of the Wittenbergers, describing Doctor Luther, Doctor Karlstadt, Phil. Mel[anchthon] and even Doctor Lang as fatuous.' (p455). This colloquy most likely took place in November 1522.

The next concrete evidence we have of a deteriorating relationship between Müntzer and Luther comes in a letter from the former to the latter, from Allstedt. It is dated 9th July 1523, barely three months after Müntzer had arrived there to take up the position of preacher at St John's Church. Again, this letter is written in Latin – remarkably so, since Müntzer was by now already writing his own liturgies and pamphlets in the German language; one might consider the use of Latin to be an act of courtesy to the recipient, who was still pondering the rights and wrongs of the use of the native tongue in matters religious.

Again, it is clear that some correspondence is missing from the archive – but it is probable that the missing letters are the same as those which were sent in the Zwickau period.

The letter starts politely enough: 'Greetings, father, whose sincerity surpasses that of all the others' (p55); and later he addresses Luther as the 'dearest of patrons' (p58). In amongst the criticisms which Müntzer goes on to make, he pleads that 'I am not so arrogant in this matter as to resist being corrected and instructed by your superior testimony so that we may set out together on the way of love' (p58).

But – always a ‘but’ – ‘what really shocked me...was that your letters commended to me that most pestilential fellow, Egranus’ (p56). The bulk of the letter is given over to complaining about Luther’s support of Egranus, firstly; and secondly his condemnation of the Storchites, the ‘Zwickau Prophets’.

On Egranus (if we remember, this was the man described by Wittenberg as having a primitive mind and infantile theology): ‘Your good opinion was never something I held so cheap that I would have lent my ears to any unworthy allegations. After all, from the very beginning I knew for sure that you were not seeking your own interests but those of all men. What really shocked me ... was that your letters commended to me that most pestilential fellow, Egranus ... You wanted this fellow, who was so zealous for his own glory, to be reconciled with me to prevent your enemies attacking you en masse. ... I opposed wholeheartedly this “proud eye and insatiable spirit with whom I refuse to sup”.’ (p56)

On Storch and his associates (whom, in fact, Luther never met, that privilege being reserved for Melancthon while Luther was closeted in the Wartburg): ‘As to [the council] blaming me for the disorders at Zwickau, all but the blind civic leaders know that during the uprising I was in the baths, with no inkling of what was going on, and that the whole council would have been killed the following night if I had not intervened. Today I am ready to explain everything.’ ‘On the issue of revelations, many lies have been cast in my face by these distinguished brutes...’ (p56) ‘You raise objections about Markus and Nicholas. What manner of men they are is up to them, Galatians 2. I fear and tremble before the divine judgments. As to what they said to you, or what they have done, I know nothing about it. You objected that certain terms sickened you. I do not know which they are, but surmise: perseverance, tribulation, gifts of the spirit etc.’ (p58f)

It is noteworthy that Müntzer declares that, on the matter of Storch, ‘today I am ready to explain everything’ – and then proceeds not to do so. Is this a well-concealed offer to debate? Or is the short statement of ‘knowing nothing’ the sum total?

There is a neatly barbed comment in the last quotation above – Müntzer declares that he knows nothing of Luther’s objections to Storch but is willing to bet that it has to do precisely with those aspects of faith which Storch and Müntzer evidently shared: suffering and spiritual proof.

A civil letter, but clearly one in which he is at odds with Luther; and one in which is reflected his rare but much-appreciated sense of stability which had been lacking in

Müntzer's life for so long; at last, in Allstedt, he has the opportunity to put into practice his ideas on educating the 'poor people' of Germany. He signs off amicably enough: 'Give my regards and greeting in the Lord to Philipp [*Melanchthon*], Karlstadt and Jonas and John [*Agricola? or Bugenhagen?*] ... and the others in your church' (p59). Presumably he was unaware at that time that Karlstadt had already embarked on a course of reforms in Orlamünde which would result, less than a year later, in Luther's condemnation.

Once again, there is no evidence that Luther replied to this letter. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that we actually possess not a single letter sent by Luther to Müntzer; this would not have been Müntzer's fault – if he had held on to many other less signifying letters, then he would assuredly have held on to such as those. It must be supposed that Luther preferred to keep the debate at arm's length. In this spirit of proxy, then, the next hint we have of any sort of debate is in a list of questions to Müntzer, set or transmitted by Georg Spalatin, follower of Luther and secretary to the Elector Friedrich. These questions came out of Wittenberg, arguably from Luther, and are generally supposed to have prompted Müntzer's pamphlet of December 1523, *On Counterfeit Faith* ('Von dem getichten glawben'):

1. Which and what is truly Christian Faith?
2. How is faith born?
3. Where does one seek faith and enquire about it?
4. How can faith be secured?
5. How are we to be taught faith to our profit and well-being?
6. How can we be sure of our faith?
7. How can and ought each individual test his faith?
8. Who are the true followers of Christ?
9. What are the trials under which faith is born, bears seed, and grows?
10. How can faith maintain itself under trials and emerge as conqueror?
11. Which faith saves and how?

Spalatin notes that 'Thomas Müntzer wrote back to me, G. Spalatin, as follows, in his own hand...' (p224f) 'As follows' precedes a handwritten copy, more or less faithful, of the text of *On Counterfeit Faith*. Insofar as that pamphlet sets out Müntzer's view of how faith is acquired, it can be viewed as part of a debate with Wittenberg.

But again, there seems to have been no immediate reply.

As Müntzer settled into a successful ministry in Allstedt, his attitude to Luther becomes more that of an equal than of a pupil. In his *Protestation or Proposition* ('Protestation odder empietung'), printed in Allstedt in January 1524, he mentions Luther directly or indirectly a couple of times. On the matter of baptism: 'He [Luther] has never once produced a single thought from any of the works of the Church Fathers, from their beginning to their end, to prove what true baptism is.' (p191). Similarly, 'if I am in error here [*about baptism*], I will let myself be amicably corrected before an impartial congregation, but in the full light of day and not without sufficient witnesses or in some obscure corner. ... For I pledge myself, life and limb, scorning any devious defence by human hand, through Jesus Christ...' (p207f) – 'defence by human hand' is almost certainly a reference to Luther's asylum in the Wartburg. Note this insistence by Müntzer that he would under no circumstances consider a 'hole and corner' debate; his preference was for an open discussion before a wide audience. 'All I ask is that judgement should be delivered on me before the whole world and not in some obscure corner' (p208). This is a crucial point to which Luther would himself reply in due course, albeit with wilful misunderstanding.

A swipe at Luther's justification through faith is made by lampooning the Lutheran Christians: 'For those who champion the gospel at the moment praise faith above all things ... "Yes, yes, I am a good Christian. O, can I come to salvation so easily?" [...] For people then think they can come to salvation in this wind-catching way; they neither read nor attend to a single thing one writes about faith and works; they just want to be good evangelical folk by using many vainglorious words' (p202f).

Luther's reply, when it came was heavy-handed and startlingly vicious. It came not as a letter to Müntzer, and certainly not in some debate, either of the 'obscure corner' variety or in open forum. This was his '*Letter to the Princes of Saxony concerning the rebellious spirit*' ('Eyn brieff an die Fürsten zu Sachsen von dem auffrurischen geyst'), written and – importantly – printed for wide distribution in June 1524.⁽³⁾ The letter was addressed specifically to 'Friedrich, Electoral Prince, and Johann, Duke of Saxony and Landgrave of Thuringia.' (Friedrich der Weise 1463-1525, and his brother Johann 1468-1532).

Remarkably, Luther does not once name Müntzer by name – he uses such generic terms as 'Satan', the 'Allstedt Spirit', 'False Prophet' etc. As a piece of non-specific denunciation,

this has few equals. 'There was an assumption that every reader would know precisely whom was being discussed. But more than that: these generic terms place Müntzer very firmly and squarely in the inner circle of the forces of evil.

Luther starts off by stating that, as a general rule, 'Satan sets himself against [*the Word of God*] with all his might, firstly with the fist and sacrilegious force. But if that does not work, then he attacks with false tongues, with lying spirits and teachers' (Fischer p2). This is not necessarily a bad thing: 'as Paul said in Corinthians, there must be sects' (p3): Luther appears to leave room for dissent. Having set the scene in the eternal battle between God and Satan, Luther moves from the general to the particular: 'Now when the Satan had been expelled [*from Zwickau*], he wandered around in the desert places for one year or three, and sought a resting-place, but did not find one, then he settled down in Your Princely Graces' principality and made himself a nest there.'(p3)

Luther then outlines his understanding of the teachings of Müntzer and his followers, pointing out rather gleefully that 'they neither learned nor received anything from us'. They allegedly receive commands directly from heaven, and hear God speaking to them, and say that what they teach in Wittenberg 'is a bad thing'. 'The Scripture means nothing, yes Bible Babel Bubel etc.' (p3) (An aside here: Luther's citing of 'Bible Babel Bubel' appears to be a quotation from Müntzer's 1521 tract 'Prague Manifesto' – '*I affirm and swear this by the living God: anyone who does not hear from the mouth of God the real living word of God, and the distinction between Bible and Babel, is a dead thing and nothing else.*' However, the *Prague Manifesto* was never published, nor, as far as we know, did it ever reach Wittenberg; the phrase is not used in any of Müntzer's publications in 1523 and 1524. It would be interesting to know just how Luther came upon this phrase – from reports of sermons in Allstedt perhaps?)

All of which, writes Luther, would not be a concern, except... 'I have written this letter to Your Princely Graces for this reason that I have understood from their writings that this same Spirit does not simply want to stick to words alone but wants to threaten with his fist and set up a power against secular authority and straight away start a physical rebellion.' (p4)

This is an interesting circular argument – having started off his pamphlet by saying that Satan tries first of all with violence and then resorts to lying, now he states that this particular Satan tries first with lying and then resorting to violence. One is left puzzling.

'Your Princely Graces know well that your power and worldly sovereignty are given to you by God with the command that they should be used to keep the peace and punish the

unruly, as St Paul taught in Romans 13.’ ‘It is an evil spirit which bears no other fruit than the destruction of churches and monasteries and the burning of holy statues’ (p4). The violence referred to here is the infamous destruction of the chapel at Mallerbach, just outside Allstedt, an act of vandalism undertaken by Müntzer’s supporters on 24th March 1524 which was to have repercussions over the succeeding few weeks and lead ultimately to Müntzer’s departure from Allstedt.

Luther then goes on to revisit the matter of the debate behind closed doors. ‘One should test the spirits to see whether they are inspired by God. But this spirit has not yet been put to the test, but simply proceeds with violence and unrest as he pleases.’ ‘But the Allstedt Spirit avoids [an open debate], as the Devil avoids the Cross... For he boasts in his writings that he would willingly stand before an impartial gathering, but would not stand and answer in a corner with two or three...’ (p5) Luther puts this unwillingness down to cowardice, adding for good measure that ‘once or twice he fell on his nose in my monastery at Wittenberg’ (p5) – a piece of fiction that Müntzer would later refute most strongly, since, firstly, he had only ever met Luther in Wittenberg in 1518, at the university and at that time was warmly welcomed; and secondly that it was likely that Luther was deliberately confusing him with Nikolaus Storch – whom he had also not met in Wittenberg! Against Müntzer’s cowardice, Luther points out that he himself was not afraid to stand up before hostile audiences at Leipzig, Augsburg and Worms. (p6)

However, it is not the task of secular authority to intervene in theological differences – unless the theology concerned leads to violence. ‘Just let them happily continue to preach what they want and against whom they want. For as I have said, there must be sects... If their spirit is correct then it will not fear us... If ours is correct, then it will have nothing to fear from us... But if they want to do more than merely fight with words, if they want to destroy and strike with the fist, then Your Princely Graces should intervene: it is either us or them. (p9f). ‘I feel that there is no other fruit from the Allstedt Spirit than striking with the fist and breaking down stones and wood...’ (p9)

He concludes his pamphlet as follows: ‘Here I will leave this affair, and beg Your Princely Graces most submissively to deal very severely with this raging fanaticism, so that God’s word alone is discussed in this matter, as befits Christians; and to prevent rebellion for which Everyman seems to be too much inclined. For those are not Christians who wish

to use their fists over and above words, and are not at all prepared to suffer when they think they are full to overflowing with ten holy spirits.’ (p12)

Luther may have been a little disappointed that his call for action by the Princes had little noticeable effect. What actually happened was that, a month later, Müntzer was invited to give a sermon to this same Duke Johann, in the castle at Allstedt. This was the famous *Sermon Before the Princes*, in which – not by chance alone – Müntzer made similar but more advanced demands on the secular authority: to take up the sword against the godless (not, in this case, Luther) or else have the sword taken away from them by the common people. Perhaps bewildered by these conflicting demands from their reformers, the Princes delayed. It was not until the end of July that Müntzer and various officials of Allstedt were summoned to Weimar and there given an ultimatum that all violence had to cease forthwith. It was shortly after this that Müntzer found his solid position in Allstedt undermined, and had to leave town.

We must suppose that Müntzer was fully cognisant of Luther’s intervention. No surprise then that the printed version of his *Sermon Before the Princes*, which appeared in late July, makes most unflattering mention of Luther: ‘So to expect visions and to receive them while in tribulation and suffering, is in the true spirit of the apostles, the patriarchs and the prophets. Hence it is no wonder that Brother Fatted Pig and Brother Soft Life reject them, Job 28’ (Matheson p242). Like the ‘Satan’ of Luther’s pamphlet, the ‘Brother’ in question here would be recognisable to readers (or listeners?) from context.

At this time, all Luther had to work with were the events in Zwickau – in which Müntzer perhaps had no involvement; and the events at Mallerbach, in which he almost certainly did have a hand. What was not yet to hand was any other evidence, such as – say – a clarion call to murder monks and priests: such words only come later, notably after Luther’s denunciation – appearing first of all in the *Sermon Before the Princes*: ‘I say with Christ ... and with the guidance of the whole divine law, that one should kill the godless rulers, and especially the monks and the priests who denounce the holy gospel as heresy’ (p250).

Nothing daunted by the irresolution of the Princes and Müntzer’s disdainful reply, Luther struck back. When Müntzer left Allstedt in a hurry, he travelled the short distance to the Imperial city of Mühlhausen. It is not known exactly when he fetched up there –

sometime between 9th and 15th August. But bad news travels fast. Within days (21st August), Luther had committed to print again, this time with his '*Open letter to the honourable and wise Mayor, Council and whole community of the town of Mühlhausen*' ('Ein Sendbrief an die ersamen und weysen Herrn Burgermeister, Rhatt und gantze Gemeyn der stadt Mülhausen')⁽⁴⁾ The letter was brief and to the point: Müntzer was on his way – do not give him shelter.

Luther would dearly have liked to come and warn the people of Mühlhausen personally, he writes, but his work in Wittenberg prevents him. He issues a stern 'warning against [Müntzer's] teachings': he is 'a false spirit and prophet, who goes around in sheep's clothing but is underneath a ravening wolf. For in many places, especially in Zwickau and recently in Allstedt, he has proven what kind of tree he is, for he brings forth no other fruit than murder and rebellion, and calls for the shedding of blood, all of which he openly preached, wrote and sang in Allstedt.' (Fischer p14) ('Many places' in fact reduces to precisely Zwickau and Allstedt, since Luther could never come up with any other examples). He has been sending out envoys 'who were not sent by God (for they cannot prove that) nor have been called by men, but come at his command and do not step in through the front door. And they act as Christ once said of these same people, John 10: "All who have come before me are thieves and murderers".' 'Whoever listens and follows [Müntzer] will be called the chosen son of God, but whoever does not listen will be called godless and will be killed.' (p15) There is considerable distortion of Müntzer's teachings and writings here, but that is perhaps beside the point – which was simply to scare the civic authorities.

Luther finishes off in a rather surprisingly offhand manner: if the civic leaders accept Luther's advice, that would be good; 'but if you despise it, and accept this prophet, and misfortune comes to you as a result, then I am innocent of your injury, since I have warned you in Christian and friendly manner.' (p15).

Once again, Luther was to be disappointed. The civic authorities in Mühlhausen were in no fit state to deny entry to the radical preacher, since they had been fighting a valiant retreat against the tide of radicalism for over a year already. It took them six more weeks to turn that situation around, and it is unlikely that Luther's intervention added much to their own political desire to expel the radicals.

Müntzer arrived in Mühlhausen with some ideas at least, if not the manuscripts, for two further pamphlets which were printed in the late autumn of 1524. Both were responses to Luther's two interventions, the second one very explicitly so.

The first of these, at least in terms of the chronology of printing, was *A Manifest Exposé* ('Aussgetrückte emplössung des falschen Glaubens der ungetrewen welt' etc), which saw the light of day – albeit briefly, before being confiscated – in Nürnberg in October 1524. By and large, this was a complete declaration of Müntzer's theology, as it had developed during his ministry at Allstedt and in the pressure-cooker of the turbulent events there in the summer of 1524.

With a side-swipe at Luther, Müntzer discusses the mutual exclusivity of a 'fleshly' life and a Christian life. 'Now, now, why does Brother Soft Life or Father Pussyfoot react so vigorously, even agitatedly? Job 28. You see, he rather fancied the idea of trying out all the pleasures he had planned, and of holding on to his status and his prosperity, and yet combining this with a well-tried faith, although the son of God had criticised the biblical scholar for precisely this, John 5, when he declared: "How can you possibly come to faith as long as it is your own reputation that you are pursuing?"' (Matheson p278f)

Müntzer saw it necessary to clarify the position of the world in relation to God's wrath, and quite specifically in relation to Luther: 'to avert imminent catastrophe, it has become absolutely critical that you be shown what Christian authority is, following the appearance of the slanderous books, which intimidate you one moment and provoke you to rage the next' (p260f). The main 'slandorous book' is, of course, Luther's *Letter to the Princes*. Müntzer proposes to initiate a reasoned debate: 'to set this process of explanation and demonstration in train, I will have one chapter published at a time, to give my opponents ample time and opportunity to reply. My only reason for refusing some hole and corner hearing is that our case demands this. Christ himself shunned that breed of adders, the biblical scholars, John 7, and when he was heard in private by Annas the only defence he would give of his teaching was to point to those who had listened to him, to the common people, John 18. He said quite clearly: "Why ask me? Ask those who heard me." Our scholars would like to have the testimony of Jesus brought within the walls of the university.' (p264). So Müntzer again returns to the question of open or secret debate, a matter of controversy which Luther (described here by Müntzer as 'a poisonous black crow') seems not to have understood and which Müntzer insisted on repeating. His stated intention here was quite clearly to arrange a

full and very public debate – to publish ‘one chapter at a time’, so that there would be a measured pace to the debate; this was, of course, not to be – time was already running out for Müntzer: only a hundred copies of the *Manifest Exposé* escaped from the printing-shop, leaving 400 in the hands of the Nürnberg authorities. The chance of a serialised public debate evaporated completely.

If the *Manifest Exposé* barely made it out of the print-shop, Müntzer’s second pamphlet of that autumn of 1524 fared even worse. This was the *Vindication and Refutation* (‘Hoch verursachte Schutzrede’), which was printed in Nürnberg in December 1524. Quite accidentally, the print-run was discovered when the authorities were searching for a work on Utraquism by Karlstadt, and the whole lot was confiscated.

The title of the pamphlet bears stating in full, for it sets the tone of the entire work: ‘A highly-provoked Vindication and a Refutation of the soft-living Flesh in Wittenberg, whose robbery and distortion of Scripture has so grievously polluted our wretched Christian Church’. (No prizes for guessing who lived softly in Wittenberg.) The work is no more and no less than a point-for-point reply to Luther’s *Letter to the Princes*.

The first two-thirds of the pamphlet address Luther in the third-person; the last third addresses him in the second person. But what is most noticeable is the splendid variety of (insulting) names used to describe Luther. Only three times is he named ‘Luther’, with a couple of ‘Martins’ thrown in for good measure. These names are far outnumbered by similar-sounding sobriquets – ‘Doctor Liar’ (*Dr Lügner*) (ten times), ‘Doctor Lampooner’ (*Dr Ludibri*); or insulting epithets - ‘Unspiritual Soft-Living Flesh of Wittenberg’, ‘sly robber of scripture’, ‘Brother Soft-Life’, ‘the godless flesh in Wittenberg’, ‘wily black crow’, ‘Father Pussyfoot’, ‘the Wittenberg Pope’, ‘our virgin Martin’; or bestial comparisons - ‘a basilisk, a dragon, a viper and a lion’ (p338), ‘puffed up, wily dragon’, ‘poisonous little worm’, ‘fox’ (several times), ‘wolf’; or quite simply, but no less abusively, ‘monk’. One might see in this an over-egged response to Luther’s refusal to name Müntzer by name in his *Letter* – but, again, there is a further purpose to the name-calling, which is to place Luther firmly in the same camp as monks and Papists, Princes and tyrants.

The document represents the absolute nadir of Müntzer’s relationship with Luther. For the first time, he does not beat about the bush with passing references to Luther and his

errors; he comes straight out with his differences with Wittenberg. The main charges which Müntzer levels against Luther can be summarised as follows:

1. He has robbed and distorted Scripture
2. He rejects faith through suffering and denounces God-fearing men
3. He has embraced easy-living and the pursuit of fame
4. He ignores and condemns the needy, and fears the justice of - and for - the common man
5. He prefers instead to kow-tow to the Princes
6. He relies on the Princes to resolve theological differences by force, rather than submit to open debate
7. He deliberately falsifies his history with Müntzer.

On this last point, Müntzer is at pains to state that, far from Luther having ‘punched me in the mouth’ in Wittenberg, ‘I have not been near you for six or seven years’ (p347); he also stresses that Luther, far from being in peril before ‘threatening assemblies’ in Leipzig, Worms etc, was there under the very real protection of the Princes of Saxony.

This pamphlet is not all abuse and counter-accusation, interesting and entertaining though that aspect is. Müntzer very clearly comes out and states that he is on the side of the Common Man: ‘There is no greater abomination on earth than the fact that no one is prepared to take up the cause of the needy [...] What is the evil brew from which all usury, theft and robbery springs but the assumption of our lords and princes that all creatures are their property? The fish in the water, the birds in the air, the plants on the face of the earth – it all has to belong to them! [...] It is the lords themselves who make the poor man their enemy. If they refuse to do away with the causes of insurrection, how can trouble be avoided in the long run? If saying that makes me an inciter to insurrection, so be it!’ (p335). Coming from a slightly different angle, he attacks the question of academic debate behind closed doors: ‘it would certainly be more profitable for me to spend my time instructing the poor people with good teaching rather than getting myself entangled with this blasphemous monk’ (p341).

His parting shot is a warning to both Luther and to his Princes: ‘Therefore your fate will be that of the fox which has been hunted down; the people will go free and God alone will be their Lord’ (p350).

In his last days, Müntzer gave a final side-swipe at Luther. In his deliberately provocative letter to Count Albrecht of Mansfeld, dated 12th May 1525, written ostensibly in a last-ditch attempt to persuade the Lutheran Albrecht to come over to the side of the peasant armies, he castigates Albrecht for indulging in the 'Lutheran pudding and your Wittenberg soup' and thus disregarding what the prophet Ezekiel (chapter 37). 'You haven't even been able to detect the flavour, because of that Martinian peasant filth of yours [...] that God instructs all the birds of the heavens to consume the flesh of the princes.' (p157). On the eve of the battle of Frankenhausen, then, Luther himself is identified firmly with the 'tyrants', 'pagans' and the 'arch-enemies of the Christian faith'.

So what have we learned from this short review?

Firstly, on Luther's part there seems to have been a very real reluctance to engage in debate; this is all the more surprising if we consider that Müntzer was, between 1522 and 1525, one of Luther's main opponents in the reform camp. Although Müntzer wrote directly to Luther, there do not appear to have been any letters in reply – such debate and questioning as took place was undertaken by proxies – Agricola, Stein, Spalatin (and Duke Johann of Saxony perhaps?). Nor is there any evidence anywhere in Luther's writings of an analysis of Müntzer's alleged theological errors. Where Luther did intervene, it was simply to brand Müntzer as an agent of Satan, a troubled spirit. For all that he decried Müntzer's violent actions, he could only ever cite two examples: the riots in Zwickau in which, quite probably, Müntzer was not actually involved; and the destruction of the Cistercian chapel at Mallerbach. On a scale of violent occurrences, neither loomed large. Luther's concern presumably was that such acts of vandalism or manifestations of unrest would tip the delicate balance of forces between the reforming and the Catholic princes of Saxony.

Luther's two interventions in the summer of 1524 did not in themselves seem to have much immediate effect. Almost without doubt both the Princes and the Mühlhausen authorities would have taken action against Müntzer without any further prompting from Luther. The effect of the interventions was longer term: the simplistic equation of Müntzer with Satan, of all his acts with violence, and of all his theology with spiritual 'enthusiasm'; all these set the tone for the historiography of Müntzer for several hundred years – indeed, in some quarters, Müntzer has still not fully recovered from the pictures painted. In the immediate aftermath of May 1525, Luther, Melancthon and Agricola published slanderous

pamphlets ⁽⁵⁾ which proved that Müntzer was an agent of the devil: all of these works, and all of those which emulated them later, based themselves on Luther's *Letter to the Princes*; for almost three centuries, such demonization effectively prevented any serious analysis of Müntzer's theology and of the events of the early Reformation. ⁽⁶⁾

On Müntzer's part, the break with Luther seems to have taken place quite early in 1521, but he did not engage in open controversy until strongly provoked to do so. In Zwickau, he was clearly anxious to gain Luther's support for his struggle with the Franciscans, but ended up being bitterly disappointed by Wittenberg's rather hypocritical support of Egranus. Even in Allstedt, he was ready to 'agree to disagree' with Luther on past matters (Egranus and Storch), as the relatively civil tone of his letter indicates. It was only after Luther's *Letter to the Princes* that Müntzer felt compelled to unleash the full force of his anger.

Relations between the two men were initially comradely – thus, Luther was happy to recommend Müntzer to Zwickau in 1520. But when it became evident that Müntzer was moving ahead faster than Luther would have liked, a distinct coolness set in. This change in the relationship not only reflects the diverging political and theological stances of the two; it also reflects the sharpening socio-political crisis in Saxony and the rest of Germany – at first sporadic, sometimes concealed, but becoming open and bitter, leading eventually to open civil war in 1525.

And while it is quite clear that Müntzer was prepared to debate theological matters – albeit in an open forum, or in print – it is equally clear that Luther made not the slightest attempt to have a debate of any sort. There exists no letter inviting Müntzer to a discussion. There is only the report of a 'colloquy' with Stein and some questions set by Spalatin. Would a debate of any sort have made any difference? That is unlikely; but it would at least have had the merit of intellectual honesty.

Footnotes

1. Wolfgang Ullmann, *Die sprachgeschichtliche Bedeutung von Müntzers Liturgieübersetzungen* in: W.Ullmann, *Ordo Rerum*, Berlin 2006, p.159.
Cited by Günter Vogler: *Thomas Müntzer - Irrweg oder Alternative? Plädoyer für eine andere Sicht*, in *Archiv für Reformationgeschichte*, Vol.103, Gütersloh 2012, p.21.
2. Unless otherwise stated, all page numbers in (brackets) refer to Peter Matheson's *Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, Edinburgh 1988.

3. The textual extracts in this section are all taken from Ludwig Fischer, *Die lutherischen Pamphlete gegen Thomas Müntzer*, Tübingen 1976. All page-references in brackets in this section only refer to Fischer. The extracts have been translated by the author of the current article.
4. Page-references in this section only are to the Ludwig Fischer edition— see note 3 above.
5. Luther, *Eyn Schrecklich geschicht und gericht Gottes uber Thomas Müntzer*, 1525; Melancthon, *Die Histori Thome Muntzers*, 1525; Agricola, *Ein nutzlicher Dialogus odder gesprechbuchlein zwischen einem Müntzerischen Schwermer und einem Evangelischem frumen Bawern*, 1525. All available in Ludwig Fischer edition (see note 3)
6. As examples, see: T.Edwards, *The Third Part of Gangraena. Or: a New and Higher Discovery of the Errors, Heresies, Blasphemies etc*, London 1646; C.A.Reibenstein, *Nachricht von einer Schrift Thomas Müntzers und dessen übereinstimmung mit einigen heutigen Feinden der Reinen Lehre*, Bremen 1757; J.C.Fröbing, *Muhamed, Münzer und Bockold, ein Lesebuch fuer die Volksjugend*, Hannover 1788; C.G.Anger, *De Thoma Müntzero, Seditionis olim Rusticanä in Thuringia et Anabaptistici Erroris Coryphea*, Zwickau 1797; more recently, N.Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, London 1957. The old demonization still persists today in second-hand articles in popular encyclopaedias and web-pages.