

Thomas Müntzer and the Common Man

How Müntzer Incited Resurrection.

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On the 15th of May 1525, Thomas Müntzer found himself standing in the ranks of the rebel peasant army on a hill above Frankenhausen; he was exhorting them to victory over the godless. Ranged against them stood the army of the princes of the German Nation, both Lutheran and Catholic. Before much time had elapsed, most of the rebel army lay dead on the ground, the rest fleeing and scattered, with Müntzer himself captured, soon to be executed.

What brought Müntzer to take his stance among the peasants and plebeians of Thuringia? Was it simply that he was a revolutionary, some kind of early Bolshevik? Was it a logical outcome of his radical theology? Was it because he was a bloodthirsty psychopath, seeking death and destruction wherever he went? Such questions have exercised historians and theologians since the day that Müntzer died – indeed, Martin Luther had been pondering the problem for almost a year before that. Political revolutionary, apocalyptic theologian, psychopath – each of these explanations has had enthusiastic proponents over the centuries. Some assessments even manage to combine all three attributes into one slightly vertiginous composite. And each explanation still has its supporters today, almost 500 years after the event.

One counterpart to this question is equally intriguing. What was it that brought Martin Luther in 1525 to condemn the peasant armies outright and throw in his lot with the rulers of the German lands? Why did the man who apparently ‘started’ the German Reformation in 1517 find himself a few years later urging the princes to put down the peasant rebellion with the utmost force? Was it – to revisit the questions regarding Müntzer – because he was a reactionary conservative, some kind of early Fascist? Was it a logical outcome of his theology? Was it because he was a bloodthirsty psychopath? Or did he simply make a tactical mistake? Interestingly, although the same kind of questions arise, there has never been much debate about them. For those inclined to be charitable to Luther, either the ‘theology’ or the ‘mistake’ solution has proved acceptable.

However, it is not our primary purpose here to delve into the mysteries of Martin Luther's motives and motivations. We aim only to shed some light on those of his greatest opponent, Thomas Müntzer.

One way to examine Müntzer's sympathy for the lot of the 'Common Man' is to read through his published works and extant letters, looking for the tell-tale phrases 'poor man' (*armer Mann*) or 'common man' (*gemeiner Mann*), or similar; searching not just for the incidence of the phrases, but also for the context in which they are used.

It should be pointed out before we begin that the word *arm* in German has the same double meaning as *poor* has in English – either lacking in finances or possessions; or lacking in good fortune or spirit. In Müntzer's writings we find that the adjective was applied not only to people, but also (and indeed more so) to 'Christianity', the religion and the church; and in these cases, clearly, the second meaning applies – Christianity was in a pitiable moral and spiritual state. It is therefore with some caution that we should approach any phrasing of 'poor man' or 'poor people' – according to context, the adjective can have one or other or both meanings.

One of Müntzer's first significant pieces of work is the so-called *Prague Manifesto*, of November 1521. This unpublished work is a broadside attack on the 'scholars', the theologians of the Catholic Church (but even then arguably also Luther's followers) who had neglected their duty to bring enlightenment to the population at large: the priests and the scholars

“are no insignificant criminals, but abandoned reprobates, found throughout the whole world from the very beginning, and ordained to plague the poor people which is so very coarse as a result” (p364f).¹

Here the people could be considered *poor* in a spiritual manner – their lack of education results in them being coarse and uncomprehending.

Müntzer continues:

“But I do not despair of the people. Oh, you really poor and pitiable little group, how thirsty you are for the word of God ! For it is abundantly clear

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all quotations and page-references are taken from Peter Matheson's translation of *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, Edinburgh 1988.

that no one, or hardly anyone, knows where they stand or what group they should join. [...] The prophecy of Jeremiah was fulfilled in them: ‘The children have asked for bread, but no one was there to break it to them.’ Oh, oh, no one broke it to them” (p367).

Again, *poor* in this context reflects a spiritual state, not social status. But what is interesting in this extract is the first sentence: Müntzer states openly his belief that ordinary people can indeed overcome their misfortunes and come to salvation – just as long as a true preacher illuminates their darkness. To arrive at such an optimistic conclusion in this otherwise quite dark summation of the parlous state of the church suggests an underlying confidence in the ‘poor people’; but note also the adjective *little* applied to that group – clearly this is not the broad mass of the common people; more plausibly a band of the Elect?

One final mention is made of the poor here:

“The usurious, interest-exacting priests [...] gulp down the dead words of Scripture and then pour out the mere letter and the untried faith (which is not worth a louse) upon the poor, really poor people. The end result is that no one is sure of his soul’s salvation” (p367).

The emphasis in this *Prague Manifesto* is very obviously on spiritual poverty.

There is a lengthy hiatus before we next find Müntzer talking of the ‘poor people’; and even then it is just a passing reference. In his introduction to the *German Church Service Book* of the summer of 1523, he discusses why he has rendered the church services into German:

“This attribution to the Latin words of a power like the incantations of the magicians cannot be tolerated any longer, for the poor people leave the churches more ignorant than when they went in” (p168).

Here, quite obviously, *poor* signifies unfortunate and pitiable. However, it is precisely the ‘people’ that he worries about.

In January 1524, the same themes of priestly neglect and popular ignorance are pursued in the pamphlet *Protestation or Proposition*. Here we find that it is ‘Christianity’ or the ‘Christian people’ which is ‘poor’:

“There is absolutely no way,” he says, “to help our poor, wretched, pitiable, needy, crude and corrupt Christian people than to direct the elect towards this with all possible urgency” (p189)

– ‘*this*’ in this context is the “heartfelt groaning and yearning to follow God’s will”. The meaning of the adjective *poor* is perfectly clear: the vast majority of people in the Christian church, kept in wretched ignorance.

“If we scholars are to devote ourselves to such matters we must stretch our brains much more. Hence the idle scholars say: ‘Of course, if we were to confront the ordinary man with such lofty teachings he would become mad and lose his wits.’ They go on to say: ‘Christ says that one should not throw pearls to pigs. What can the poor, crude man make of such high and spiritual teachings?’ ” (p206).

Until 1524, then, the number of times on which Müntzer makes reference to the ‘poor man’ is actually quite low; and when he does use a relevant phrase, it is more often than not in the second sense of the adjective - spiritually deprived. The common people are poor because they have been kept in ignorance by ignorant and untested priests; it is the task of a ‘servant of God’ to enlighten the people and so bring them, through their own inner suffering, to a state of true belief. There is not one place in any of his letters or publications where Müntzer makes an incontestable reference to the socially, financially poor people. Perhaps this should not surprise us: Müntzer was, after all, a man of his times; his solution to the ills of society lay in spiritual reformation or revolution, not in social or political change.

Not yet, at least.

But things are perhaps beginning to change in the summer of 1524. In the introduction to his *German Evangelical Mass* printed at that time, we come across, as before, references to “people’s poor, pitiable, blind consciences” and the “poor laity” (p180), and to the fact that “the poor common man has been accustomed to putting his faith in mere pretences” (p181).

“The ordinary man,” urges Müntzer, “should pay no attention at all to these lazy wretches, the priests” (p182).

But here is something new:

“these abandoned papal villains have robbed our poor Christian people of Scripture, to their great detriment; and [...] have the nerve to gobble up the possessions of the poor folk” (p180).

As it stands, this reference to the financial predation of the Catholic Church and the victims thereof, the poor folk, is no novelty in either the German reformation or in the many

localised anti-clerical movements which flourished in the preceding 150 years: the ability of the Church to fleece the poor was the focus of considerable anger and revolt. It is, however, the first time that Müntzer has actually made the connection between spiritual and economic exploitation.

In the course of that summer of 1524, a number of events took place in Müntzer's life which would have sharpened his focus. Not least was the increasing tension in Allstedt between the radicals, the town-council and the feudal authorities, a tension reflecting the growing social and political restlessness amongst the people of Germany as a whole. One high-profile result of this was the destruction of the chapel at Mallerbach, which enraged the Catholic church and Martin Luther to much the same degree. Luther took to pen and paper and published his *Letter to the Princes of Saxony Concerning the Rebellious Spirit* in the middle of June. Perhaps provoked into some semblance of action by this letter, Duke Johann of Saxony and his son Johann Friedrich sat down to hear a sermon delivered to them by Müntzer, in the castle at Allstedt. Müntzer, feeling himself securely established in the small town of Allstedt, used the occasion to urge the princes to use their power to bring down the godless – or else have 'the sword' taken away from them. This *Sermon Before the Princes* was delivered on 13th July 1524 and printed before the end of the month; the double effect of the continuing unrest in Allstedt and the publication of this provocative document triggered responses from the authorities, and Müntzer soon found himself having to be more forceful in his statements about the 'common man'.

In a letter to the castellan of Allstedt, Johann Zeiss, Müntzer is at pains to issue what might be described as a final warning to the princes – but also a clear statement of how he thought the 'common man' should behave. The letter is dated 25th July, just two weeks after the sermon had been preached. Müntzer urges Zeiss to persuade the princes of Saxony to do the right thing:

“the urgency of presenting this to our sovereign princes cannot be over-estimated; do so with all earnestness, without any hesitation [...] Warn them of the danger that their own people may lose heart because of their negligence and urge them to anticipate any trouble in time, while the people still trusts them. [...] I have to say this: if they delay things too long they will be much more despised than the other princes. Then the people will say: Behold the man who did not make God his helper” (p101).

The Allstedt preacher, still seeking a 'peaceful solution', continues:

"A sensible covenant must be made, one which will bind together the common man with the pious administrators, solely for the sake of the gospel. [...] As far as the rendering of feudal duties is concerned, particular care must be taken in the covenant that the members of the covenant do not think that they should be dispensed from giving anything to their tyrants [...] lest some evil men think that we have covenanted ourselves together for the sake of creaturely things" (p102).

These words should make us consider very carefully the idea that Müntzer was a raging social revolutionary at this time; the sentiment is not so very different from Luther's advocacy of the passage in Romans 13 – 'Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due' – and Matthew 22 ("Render unto Caesar...") However, there is a caveat here, which must give ample pause for thought:

"The most important thing of all [...] is that no one should put his trust in the covenant, for he who puts his hopes in man is accursed of God. It should only be a deterrent to the godless, to make them cease their raging until the elect have been able to search the depths of God's knowledge and wisdom [...] The covenant is nothing more than an emergency act of self-defence" (p102).

So: the princes are being urged to take up the sword against the godless, and in support of Müntzer and the people of Allstedt; to do so, they must join with the people of Allstedt in a 'holy covenant'. All other social and financial activities will continue as before: we are not yet at social revolution. And yet, and yet: the people should not trust their rulers !

Scarcely a week later, Müntzer wrote to the Lutheran prince of Saxony, Friedrich the Wise. His letter, which largely dispenses with the niceties expected in an address to a member of the nobility, is a riposte to the *Letter to the Princes of Saxony* written by "that mendacious man Luther" in June. Müntzer firmly demands that he be allowed to continue his reforms and his sermons in Allstedt – for one thing,

"this would avert any danger arising from actions of the Christian people against the aforementioned Luther, which might then prove hard to settle in a harmonious way" (p111).

He leaves Friedrich little room for manoeuvre:

“If it is your will to act as my gracious lord and prince I will broadcast my aforesaid Christian faith to the whole world by word and writing [...] If, however, this offer should not find acceptance with your benevolence, you should keep in mind that the common folk will lose heart [...] it would be said of you: Look, that is the man who did not want God for his protector” (p112).

In the summer of 1524, then, the broad mass of the ‘common people’ are being identified with those aspiring to the true belief; and significantly they are no longer described as ‘poor’ – a reflection perhaps of the confidence which Müntzer now felt in his ministry at Allstedt.

But in the following six months Müntzer found little time to savour this new-found confidence and comfort. Within a week of his letter to Friedrich, he had been obliged to flee the wrath of the town-council of Allstedt, now fighting back against the radicals; within another eight weeks, he found himself abandoning his next haven, Mühlhausen, and facing several months of homelessness. We have very little evidence of what he was doing or thinking in this period. We know for certain that he was in Nürnberg briefly; and that subsequently he spent time in the main theatre of the uprising of the South German peasantry, meeting most likely with peasant leaders and radical preachers alike. What we do have, however, are two lengthy pamphlets which were printed in Nürnberg between October and December 1524 – the *Exposé of False Faith* and the *Vindication and Refutation* – both essentially attacks on Luther and his style of reform, both composed in the late summer of 1524, probably in Mühlhausen.

In the *Exposé of False Faith*, we find the well-known themes of ‘poor Christianity’ and the pitiable state of the common man. Typical of these is the characterisation of the scholars: “they are mercenary creatures, these evil comforters of our poor, wretched, sad and grief-stricken fellow-men” (p278) But the feeling of optimism which marked his writings of the summer remains:

“It is blatantly obvious to everyone that what they are after is status and material possessions. Therefore you common folk will have to be instructed, so that they no longer lead you astray. May the same spirit of Christ come to your aid which our scholars, to their downfall, can only make the butt of their derision” (p264);

“the poor, common folk must exercise itself in the recollection of the spirit; it must learn to sigh, Romans 8, to pray and long for a new John, for a preacher full of grace” (p296).

In summarising his theology, Müntzer had this to say:

“In short, there is no alternative: men must smash to pieces their stolen, counterfeit Christian faith by going through real agony of heart, painful tribulation, and the consternation which inevitably follows. Then a man becomes very small and contemptible in his own eyes; to give the godless the chance to puff themselves up and strut around, the elect must hit the depths. Then he can glorify and magnify God and, with his heart-felt tribulation behind him, can rejoice whole-heartedly in God, his saviour. Then the great will have to give way to the lowly and be humiliated before the latter. O, if only the poor, rejected peasants knew how useful it would be to them” (p298).

This is the point at which – nearly, but not exactly – Müntzer’s theology meets social revolution. The peasants could benefit from knowing how to come to true faith through suffering; they do not as yet; and there is no suggestion that they inevitably will do so. They are still being held back by their material condition, just as much as the deceitfulness of their priests and scholars:

“They poke out their thin little tongues and speak in this dainty manner: ‘Search Scripture, for you seem to think, you presume to imagine, that you will gain your salvation there.’ For all their words and deeds ensure that the poor man is too worried about getting his food to have time to learn to read; moreover they have the nerve to preach that the poor man should let himself be flayed and fleeced by the tyrants. How on earth is he to learn to read the Scripture?” (p271f).

The *Vindication and Refutation* is even more explicit about the lot of the common man. This pamphlet even seems to echo some of the demands of the South German peasantry:

“Open your eyes ! 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 ! To add insult to injury,

they have God's commandment proclaimed to the poor: God has commanded that you should not steal. But it avails them nothing. For while they do violence to everyone, flay and fleece the poor farm-worker, tradesman and everything that breathes [...] yet should any of the latter commit the pettiest crime, he must hang. And Doctor Liar responds, Amen. 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).

(This last sentence has an echo, perhaps deliberate, of Luther's attributed '*Here I stand*'). Of all Müntzer's words until now, this single paragraph expresses his solidarity with the 'common man' more than any other. And it is not some kind of aberration; rather it is the logical outcome of the development of his theology against a background of social unrest. Hints of the accusation that the nobility are to blame for rebellion were already contained in Müntzer's letter to Friedrich the Wise; the charges of usury and theft were already present in his Prague pamphlet of 1521 and in his writings of 1523. With a man of Müntzer's radical beliefs, it would have been a surprise to find him *not* reacting to the background noise of peasant and plebeian revolt.

A number of his letters also reveal this new-found clarity about the Common Man. During the heady days of late July 1524, when Müntzer and his allies tried to deal with people from neighbouring Sangerhausen who had fled to Allstedt to escape the heavy-handed tactics of the local Catholic lords, he wrote a series of letters to Johann Zeiss, the representative of the feudal authorities in Allstedt. We have mentioned above the letter written on 25th July. Three days earlier, he wrote two letters to Zeiss in quick succession. These letters display a fascinating mix of diplomacy and apocalyptic zeal, and 'the common man' features quite prominently. In the first of the two letters, he had this to say:

“The fugitives will be arriving every day. Should we win the friendship of the tyrants by leaving the cries of the poor people unheard? That is hardly in accord with the gospel etc. I am telling you that it will set off a terrible collapse of law and order. You cannot go on turning a blind eye to the other territories, as has been customary. For it has become as clear as day that they

have absolutely no time at all for the Christian faith. As a result their power is at an end and will shortly be handed over to the common people.” (p.96)

As an appendix to that letter, Müntzer gives replies to four questions which Zeiss had posed (we no longer have those questions); this indicates that there was still a constructive dialogue between the radicals and the authorities – the situation was very finely-balanced. Therefore, a second letter, written later the same day, is couched in a slightly more conciliatory tone:

“Then I said, if the administrator of Sangerhausen or any other tyrants came here they should not think that their old tricks would be tolerated here since they had publicly set out to abolish the Christian faith, but that they would be throttled like mad dogs. There is no other way in which I can speak about the enemies of the Christian faith for I want to convince the whole world that they are demonstrably living devils. But the last thing I wanted was to heap on the pious administrators the fury of the common people. After all I have said in all my sermons that there are still pious ministers of God as the courts of the lords etc. I will not incite the poor people to stay here like a weight around our necks, embittering their enemies, but (advise them) to make their plans more wisely as and when it is beneficial to their cause and to ours.” (p.99)

This is a rather more ambivalent view of the ‘common people’ than we find almost anywhere else with Müntzer – it is clearly intended as a tactic to defuse a very explosive situation. But Müntzer’s expulsion from Allstedt shortly afterwards put paid to any hope of reconciliation.

In a note to Christoph Meinhard, written in late November or early December 1524, Müntzer writes:

“I could certainly have started a fine old game with the folk from N[ürnberg] if I had wanted to stir up trouble [...] Many of the folk in N[ürnberg] urged me to preach, but I answered that I had not come to do that, but to testify to my faith in print. When the authorities heard of this, their ears began to jangle; for they love prosperous days. The sweat of the working people tastes sweet, sweet to them, but it will turn into bitter gall. And then no consultations or mock battles will avail them. The truth will out. No

counterfeit enthusiasm for the gospel will avail them. 'The people are hungry; they must eat; they intend to eat...' (p136).

The word '*hungry*' here almost certainly does not mean physical hunger, but rather hunger for the true faith. '*Sweat*', on the other hand, is very plainly just that. Spiritual upheaval and social upheaval are beginning to coalesce.

This shift in emphasis took place shortly before Müntzer encountered the rebellious peasants and plebeians of South-west Germany; after his return to Thuringia, in February 1525, the tone of his letters changed. Consider this, from his letter to the people of Allstedt, written on 26th April 1525: after noting that the peasantry in the Black Forest had risen, and that God ('the master') has "set the game in motion", he worries "that the foolish people will agree to a false treaty, because they do not yet realise the gravity of the situation." He encourages his supporters in Allstedt:

"Even if there are only three of you whose trust in God is imperturbable [...] you need have no fear of a hundred thousand. So go to it, go to it, go to it ! The time has come, the evil-doers are running like scared dogs ! [...] Alert the villages and towns and especially the mine-workers and other good fellows who will be of use. We cannot slumber any longer" (p141)

It is the time of the God-sent Apocalypse, the time for the faithful to rise up against the godless.

"Cast their tower to the ground ! As long as they live it is impossible for you to rid yourselves of the fear of men. One cannot say anything to you about God as long as they rule over you" (p142).

The rebellion, in Müntzer's eyes, is in support of God's onset against the godless; the benefit of revolt for the common man is not material improvement, but spiritual ascendancy.

Similar sentiments find expression in a letter to the people of Eisenach (not his supporters, but rather those impeding the just cause), on 9th May:

"God has moved the whole world in a miraculous way towards a recognition of the divine truth, and the (world) is proving this by its great and earnest zeal against the tyrants, as Daniel 7 says clearly: that power should be given to the common folk [...] It is as clear as day that God is very kindly letting his followers punish the adversaries only in respect of their property, by which they have hindered the kingdom [...] What possible chance does the common

man ever have to welcome the pure word of God in sincerity when he is beset by such worries about temporal goods?” (p150f).

The whole point of rebellion is not material improvement as an end in itself, but rather the improvement of conditions for establishing a correct relationship to God.

And similarly, rousing the people of Erfurt on the eve of battle, 13th May:

“If, then, you long for truth, then come and join us in the dance, for we want to tread it out evenly, so that we can really pay back those blasphemers of God for playing about with the poor Christian people as they have” (p159).

This letter is signed “Thomas Müntzer on behalf of the ordinary Christian people”.

Finally, and most dramatically, we have Müntzer’s letter to Albrecht, the brother of Ernst of Mansfeld, written from Frankenhausen on the 12th May. ‘Brother Albrecht’ is fiercely admonished for his Lutheran backsliding, but offered one final chance at reconciliation:

“If you will admit, Daniel 7, that God has given power to the common man, and appear before us to give an account of your faith, we will be glad to permit this and to regard you as our common brother. But if not, then [...] you know what to expect” (p157).

In the course of barely three short years, Müntzer’s developing theology kept pace with his political loyalties. The theology inevitably takes centre stage even at the very end. But in the final year of his life, in Allstedt and Mühlhausen, Müntzer begins to support the emerging rebellion of the peasantry and plebeians, sometimes without even any theological gloss. At his most ‘political’, he was a reformer, advancing complaints which did not go beyond those common in that period; however, the apocalyptic aspirations expressed in his theology led him to express demands and adopt positions that were nakedly ‘revolutionary’.

It is small wonder that his captors in the castle at Heldrungen forced him to confess the following article, in respect of the aims of a ‘league’ in Allstedt:

“All things are to be held in common [*omnia sunt communia*] and distribution should be to each according to his need, as occasion arises. Any prince, count, or gentleman who refused to do this should first be given a warning, and then one should cut off his head or hang him” (p437).

But what are we supposed to make of this confession? There is absolutely nothing in anything which Müntzer wrote, even in the very last hours of his defiance at Frankenhausen,

which prepares us for this confession. We have seen that Müntzer railed against usury and the oppression of the peasantry; but nowhere does he even hint at some form of early communism. Cutting off heads – yes; communism – no. We can only assume that the words were inserted into Müntzer's *Confession* by a nobility still recovering from several weeks of panic.

We must also scratch our heads over Müntzer's final letter, written from captivity to the people of Mühlhausen on 17th May. In this letter, he suggests that 'the people' have been self-seeking in their rebellion, and that this led to the defeat at Frankenhausen:

"It is God's good pleasure that I should depart hence [...] in recompense for certain abuses which the people embraced, not understanding me properly – for they sought only their own interests and the divine truth was defeated as a result [...] Dear brothers, it is crucial that the sort of disaster which befell the men at Frankenhausen should not be your lot, too; there is no doubt of its root cause: that everyone was more concerned with his own self-interest than in bringing justice to the Christian people. [...] I have often warned you that the only way to escape the punishment of God – which the authorities execute – is to recognise what harm will ensue [...] Therefore be on good terms with every man and do not embitter the authorities any more, as many have done by seeking their own interests" (p160f).

Just what are we looking at here? Is it the sincere repentance of a man recognising his disobedience to the authorities? Or is it a not-so-subtle warning to his parishioners in Mühlhausen to avoid any temptation to seek revenge and incur needless punishment? It is perhaps a rather academic question: Müntzer was by now captured and broken. His confession had been created, by hook or by crook, and was all ready for publication and for the edification of any would-be rebels. Müntzer's captors were never going to allow a letter with sentiments other than those expressed to be sent out of Heldrungen; it is worth remembering also that the letter is not in Müntzer's own handwriting, but in that of one Christoph Laue, who functioned as secretary to the nobility clustered eagerly around Müntzer at Heldrungen. So – a forgery of some sort? We will almost certainly never know. However, there is no surer way for people in power to defuse popular rebellion than by 'exposing' the inconsistencies and u-turns of popular leaders.

On balance, the confusing evidence from the days after the battle of Frankenhausen should, at the very least, be deemed inadmissible in any analysis of Müntzer's view of 'the common man'. Neither did he suddenly become a communist, nor was he suddenly smitten with regrets.

Before we turn to a quick assessment of Martin Luther's trajectory over the same period, mention should perhaps be made of something else that is frequently overlooked in Müntzer's theology. As we have outlined above, the 'elect', those people whom Müntzer considered to be possessed of the true faith and in harmony with God, were not in any way equated with 'the common people'. They formed instead a small group whose task it was to prepare the way for God's Apocalypse by agitating amongst the common people. Müntzer does not define their social status or their qualifications – beyond stating on several occasions that they need not have any academic qualifications at all.

However, they need not all be 'Christians' either.

There is necessarily some confusion in Müntzer's writings about 'Christianity' and 'Belief'. The word *Christianity* has two quite distinct meanings – firstly, the common usage, which defines the Christian Church, as established in the countries of Europe; secondly, a more elite usage, which defines the *true faith* as it should be. But the two do not, in Müntzer's eyes, coincide. After all, it is necessary for the elect to actually lose all their faith before they can attain the new faith; similarly, 'Christianity' (common usage) needs to be brought down before 'Christianity' (elite usage) can arise.

In the middle of this process of destruction and re-creation, however, is a small gap which permits others – Jews, Moslems and heathens – to enter and become 'the elect' as well. There are small hints of this throughout the years 1521 to 1525 – from the argument in the *Prague Manifesto* that

“there is no doubt that the Turks and Jews would like very much to hear our invincible ground [*for belief*], as would many of the elect” (p369),
through the description of the necessary stage of 'unbelief' in *On Counterfeit Faith*:

“none will recognise that when they first came to faith, they were on the same level as Turks, pagans, Jews and all unbelievers” (p219).

In Müntzer's highly provocative letter to Ernst of Mansfeld, of 22 September 1523, he threatens:

“I will have my books accusing you translated into many tongues, and let Turks, pagans and Jews know you for the unbalanced, insane person that you are” (p66).

But the suggestion that the ‘elect’ need not be Christian becomes quite explicit in his letter to Friedrich the Wise, of August 1524:

“The Christian faith which I preach may not be in accord with that of Luther, but it is identical with that in the hearts of the elect throughout the earth, Psalm 67. For even if someone were born a Turk, he still has the beginning of the same faith, that is, the movement of the holy spirit [...] So if I am to be brought to trial before the Christian people then an invitation, announcement and communication must be sent to every nation, to those who have, in faith, endured trials quite beyond their strength...” (p111).

Quite what Müntzer’s contemporaries and parishioners made of his surprising accommodation of the terrible Turk, not to mention the Jew and the pagan, is unknown. It is rather a modern view. But, importantly, it defines the ‘elect’ more clearly – they can come from anywhere in the world, anywhere in society.

In establishing how Müntzer came to side with the rebels in 1525, one other aspect of his trajectory needs to be considered. Between 1519 and 1525, the radical preacher spent most of his life in an urban environment, rarely for more than a few weeks at a time, and never – unless circumstances obliged him to – did he spend time in the company of university scholars, far less the nobility of Germany. He made a point of avoiding the university environment, where Luther and his supporters flourished: such ‘scholars’ figured at the very top of his list of people to be shunned and condemned. If he ever sought spiritual companionship at all, it was amongst the poorer townspeople – like Storch in Zwickau, or Pfeiffer in Mühlhausen. His few attempts to meet Luther to debate theology were rebuffed by Luther himself. He corresponded with other radicals such as Karlstadt or Grebel, but never established common ground with them.

Similarly, he neither sought nor gained the protection or patronage of the nobility. On the only occasion when he had the undivided attention of the Saxon princes, he urged them to join with him in suppressing the godless – or be condemned by God.

Müntzer found his support in the urban craftsmen, the people of Thuringia who flocked to his reformed Allstedt Mass, lay-preachers and radicals. Certainly, individuals from other strata in society occasionally looked favourably towards him; but such mass support as he gained – and sometimes lost again – came from the ‘common man’. It is therefore of little surprise that when these same people gravitated towards rebellion, Müntzer went with them. Not blindly, but knowingly.

While Müntzer was gradually moving towards solidarity with the rebels, Martin Luther was heading in exactly the opposite direction. In early May of 1525, Luther called publicly and famously on the princes and their soldiers to use the utmost force against the rebellious peasantry:

“Take pity on the poor people. Stab them, smite them, strangle them, whoever you might be. If you lose your life in doing so, good for you, for you can never earn a more blessed death, for you will die in obedience to God’s word and commandment [...] and in the service of the love of your neighbour, whom you will rescue from the chains of Hell and the Devil.”²

It is not within the scope of this essay to examine how, when and why Luther arrived at this position that was so starkly opposed to that of Müntzer; it may suffice to point readers at Luther’s letter *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* of 1520, in which he states quite clearly that

“since the temporal power is established by God for the punishment of the wicked and the protection of the pious, then this office should be left to perform its duty unhindered by anyone, be they Pope, Bishops, priests, monks, nuns or anyone else.”³

This was a position from which he never shifted. And one on which he showed remarkably little remorse: in a letter dated 30th May 1525, to Nicholas Amsdorf, he wrote the following:

“My opinion is that it is better all the peasants be killed than that the magistrates and princes perish, because the peasants took the sword without

² See Martin Luther, Weimarer Ausgabe (WA), Band 18, Weimar 1888, pp.344-361. All quotations from the works of Luther, here and following, are translated from the German by the author of this present article.

³ See Martin Luther, WA, Vol 6, pp381-469

divine authority. The only possible consequence of their satanic wickedness would be the satanic devastation of the kingdom of God, and even if the princes of this world go too far, nevertheless they bear the sword by God's authority. Under them it is possible for both kingdoms to exist. Therefore no pity, no patience is due the peasants, but the wrath and indignation of God and men should be visited upon those men who heed no warnings and do not yield when just terms are offered them, but with satanic fury continue to confound everything such are the Franconian and Thuringian peasants. To justify them, to pity them, to favor them, is to deny and blaspheme God and to try to pull Him down from heaven.”⁴

When Luther wrote to the princes of Saxony in June of 1524, warning them of Müntzer and his activities, he worried:

“Satan never lets the rascal be seen, for that would be to give too much away. What might the spirit [i.e. Müntzer] unleash if he wins the support of the common people?”

He saw that inaction would lead to rebellion:

“I 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.” ⁵

Over the course of the next ten months, Luther was consistent in his defence of the established social order. Wherever and whenever peasants and plebeians turned to him for advice, he supplied it readily – and not necessarily agreeably. For example, in his formal reply to the people of Erfurt, who had sent him their ‘Articles’ or demands in early May 1525, he chastised them as follows:

“There is nothing in these articles except the view that every man should profit for himself and live as he pleases, the lowest should become the highest and vice versa [...] which is quite against both God and reason.” ⁶

⁴ *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, Vol.2, Lutheran Publication Society, p320. C.M.Jacobs, P.Smith (eds). Philadelphia 1918

⁵ See Martin Luther, WA, Vol 15, pp199-221

⁶ See Martin Luther, WA, Vol 18, pp.531-540

In his commentary on the April 1525 'Treaty of Weingarten', a rather hasty agreement between the Swabian League of the nobility and various south-west German peasant armies, he sternly reminded his readers that God himself had said

“whoever takes up the sword shall die by the sword. And St Paul also said:

‘He who resists the rulers also resists the commandment of God’.”

In case this message did not come through clearly enough, he signs off by stating:

“Any peasant who is found [*amongst the rebels*] or is killed there will be seen as a disloyal, perjured, robbing, murdering, blasphemer of God and enemy of Christ; and must be slain.”⁷

The truly terrible climax of Luther's campaign against rebellion came with his pamphlet *Against the Rebellious Peasants*, written and published in early May 1525. His unwavering position, that the temporal rulers were set in place by God, reached the only conclusion possible in the crisis: he called for the merciless destruction of the peasantry:

“Therefore, anyone who can should smite, strangle and stab, secretly or openly, and remember that there can be nothing more poisonous, harmful or devilish than a rebellious man. He should be killed like a mad dog. If you do not strike him then he will strike you and the whole country with you. [...] So the rulers should just press on and strike in with a good conscience, for as long as their veins carry blood. For it is their advantage that the peasants have a bad conscience and an unjust cause; any peasant who is hereby killed will lose both body and soul and eternally be the devil's. But the rulers have a good conscience and a just cause and can say to God with a confident heart: See, my God, you have made me a Prince or a lord, of that I have no doubt, and you have given me the sword to take up against the wicked, Romans 13.”⁸

Luther returned to the theme shortly after the defeat of the Thuringian peasantry in late May of 1525, after the blood of thousands of peasants had been so justly shed. There is a note of regret – but no remorse – in the words of his pamphlet *A Terrible History and Judgment of God on Thomas Müntzer*:

⁷ See Martin Luther, WA, Vol 18, pp.335-343

⁸ See Martin Luther, WA, Vol 18, pp.344-361

“I ask the lords and nobles for two things: firstly that, where they are victorious, it is incumbent on them not to be overbearing, but rather to fear God who can punish them. For if God gave them victory, he did not do so because they were just and pious but because [...] God was punishing the peasants for disobedience and blasphemy in all their misdeeds. Secondly, that they should be merciful to those they have captured or who surrendered, just as God is merciful to those who surrender and humble themselves before him. They should do this, in order that the weather does not change and God gives the peasants victory instead.”⁹

His attitude to the peasantry has not altered, although he is clearly shaken by the amount of blood that has been shed. And it is of note that he still fears that the Common Man may not yet be defeated.

Curiously, Luther seems to have reached a political stance diametrically opposed to Müntzer's, but for a very similar underlying reason. In his pamphlet against the *Rebellious Peasants* he ends up thus:

“But if anyone thinks this is too severe, then let him reflect that rebellion is intolerable and that the destruction of the world is to be expected at any moment.”

Like Müntzer, like many others of that era, Luther had an expectation of the imminence of Apocalypse. For Luther, at the ‘end of time’, it behoved the common man not to suddenly come over all rebellious; for Müntzer, precisely the opposite was requisite. For some contemporaries, this expectation of an ultimate crisis took very odd forms: Prince Friedrich the Wise of Saxony, shortly before his death in early May 1525, had this to say:

“Perhaps we have given cause to the poor people for this uprising, in particular by forbidding the word of God [...] If God wills it, so it shall be that the common man will rule.”¹⁰

Doubtless, had he died a month or so later, once the rebellion had been successfully put down, he might have changed his tune. But his fatalism speaks volumes.

⁹ See Martin Luther, WA, Vol 18, pp.362-374

¹⁰ Akten zur Geschichte des Bauernkrieges in Mitteldeutschland, Vol.2, eds. G.Franz / W.P.Fuchs, Jena 1942, p91

So what have we learned about Thomas Müntzer's championing, or otherwise, of the cause of the Common Man?

Firstly, while having evident sympathies for the ordinary people, whom he regarded as grievously deceived and abandoned in a state of ignorance by the Roman – and later the Wittenberg – church, Müntzer was more concerned with the theology which would improve the state of the faith in individuals. The salvation of the world would never come through 'mass action', but rather through the spiritual suffering of individuals.

Secondly, as the crisis in social relationships unfolded over the years 1521 to 1525, so did Müntzer's use of the word 'poor' begin to encompass not just the spiritual condition of the people, but also their economic status. However, it has been demonstrated above that the incidence of such a usage of the word was quite small.

Thirdly, he considered the revolts and rebellions which broke out in both urban and rural areas not just as an expression of material discontent, but as a defining phase in preparing the world for the imminent rule of God. He looked beyond the rebellion to a time of new relationships between people and a new relationship between Man and God.

Fourthly, he had moved almost exclusively in the social circles of the 'common man' for almost a decade; here it was that he found consistent support. He had no connections or loyalties to the Lutherans or the ruling authorities. It therefore made absolute sense that he should support the 'common man' in an uprising.

Lastly, but most significantly, it must be considered that when the social crisis broke he took his stance with the rebels, not out of fear, nor unwillingly, but rather in recognition that the rebellion was a potential driving-force for good. In May 1525, Müntzer stood with the lowest members of society, Luther with the highest. Ultimately, our actions are what define us, not our words.

“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 !”