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Thomas Muntzer and the Radical Reformation

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Many scholars find no transcendent meaning in the religious history of early modern Europe, a world Latter-day Saints tend to see as a precursor to the Restoration. Looking backward from the vantage of the Restoration, however, one discerns commitment to Christ, willingness to sacrifice, and spirituality in the lives of those who defended saving principles at the cost of their lives. Admirable, meaningful examples of such individuals may be found among all three major divisions of Christianity in the early modern era (1500–1800): Catholics, Protestants, and Anabaptists. Radical reformer Thomas Muntzer was one of them. An early modern martyr, he foreshadowed the Restoration by teaching the radical notion that ongoing revelation was absolutely necessary for Christians. Some of Muntzer’s ideas continue to be evident in the Restoration.

Early Modern Martyrs

A Jesuit priest who embarked on an underground ministry in Elizabethan England, William Weston wrote in 1586 that “at no hour are we certain to survive, but as we make no account of living, the expectation of death only puts an edge on our zeal.”^[1] Weston was executed for his unflinching Catholic faith after spending nearly two decades in prisons on the Continent and in England, including five years (1598–1603) in London’s legendary Tower, during a self-sacrificing ministry. Weston was not alone. Scholars suggest that from 20 to 25 percent of the seminary priests who worked in the English underground were executed by officials of Queen Elizabeth I.^[2]

Studying Weston’s life introduced me to a generation of scholarship that is skeptical of the motives of early modern martyrs. Weston’s opponents included Marian exiles (Protestants who fled England for the Continent during the reign of Elizabeth’s Catholic sister, Mary, before returning to England under Elizabeth’s reign). Because Catholics and Protestants persecuted each other and both persecuted Anabaptists and all were remarkably certain of their respective causes, many scholars have given up on finding anything objectively admirable among the violent, dogmatic world of William Weston, Martin Luther, and Thomas Muntzer. But I suggest a perspective recently made credible by scholar Brad Gregory, namely, that the early modern martyrs shared much in common, and much of that they shared with the primitive Church. I found William Weston to be truthful and sincere to the point of self-sacrifice. I began to understand, as Brad Gregory has recently written, that “the underlying problem is less early modern invention and credulity than modern or postmodern skepticism and cynicism.”^[3]

Gregory’s resurrection of the lives and testimonies of the Catholic, Protestant, and Anabaptist martyrs of the early modern period convincingly shows believers that the martyrs, not their critics, more nearly understood things as they actually were and will be. Of the Dutch Anabaptist martyr Hans van Overdam, it was said, “Hans, dear, faithful Hans, from God you understood better what was to come than many of us understand about what is present.”^[4]

The martyrs understood that this world is not to be coveted. They understood the irrationality of setting one's heart on this world. Early modern martyrs knew with certainty that the only rewards worth pursuing are in heaven and that Jesus, their exemplar, marked the path and led the way. From prison in 1561, the Anabaptist Jacques de Lo wrote: "It is given to us by Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer and endure for him' [Philemon 1:29]. I am now experiencing the whole, for the four or five days that I am in prison . . . from day to day and from hour to hour I wait to be stretched on the rack like a parchment; I expect in the end a harsh and rigorous sentence, to be burned alive. These are frightful things to the flesh, and nevertheless my God has made it so that there is only jubilation and joy in me; when I think on the promises of Christ, when I meditate on this excellent saying of St. Peter [1 Peter 4:13–14], who said that in speaking about the afflictions of Christ, we must rejoice and are blessed, for the spirit of God rests on us—I have a consolation that outstrips all anxieties."^[5]

Brad Gregory, a most thorough scholar of early modern martyrs, writes: "When pushed to the edge, devout Christians could see more clearly the staggering power of God's word: a practical hermeneutics of the prison fused the relevant biblical passages into the only sensible framework within which to understand their experience. No matter how excruciating the temporal pain of torture and execution, God's promise of eternal joy had relativized it absolutely."^[6]

The early modern martyrs may not have understood doctrine the Restoration has clarified, but there would have been no Restoration without them. Moreover, the Restoration provides them posthumously the redemptive doctrine and ordinances they sought unsuccessfully in mortality. In 1834 the Prophet Joseph Smith borrowed a copy of *Foxe's Book of the Martyrs* from the Stevensons in Michigan. According to Edward Stevenson, when Joseph returned the book he said, "I have, by the aid of the Urim and Thumim, seen those martyrs, and they were honest, devoted followers of Christ, according to the light they possessed, and they will be saved."^[7]

Thomas Muntzer: Radical Reformer

Though not included in Foxes book, Thomas Muntzer gave his life for the most important principle of the Restoration.

Muntzer died for the idea that "all true parsons must have revelations, so that they are certain of their cause."^[8] Latter-day Saints refer regularly to what scholars term the magisterial reformation as an antecedent to the Restoration. By "magisterial," scholars mean the work of Luther, Calvin, and other reformers who were content to work within the political structures of their time and places and who did not advocate sweeping political change as part of their reforms. Comparatively little has been said about the significant role of the Radical Reformation, including reformers like Thomas Muntzer. Like *Dark Ages* or *Enlightenment*, the term *radical* prejudices all that follows it for good or evil, depending on one's preconceived notions. By *radical* in this context, scholars refer to the idea that society needed a complete restructuring in anticipation of the impending Millennium, and that required new revelation. Though carnal security militates against it, this belief should resonate with Latter-day Saints.

Born in the country town of Stolberg in the Harz, Thuringia (now central Germany), about 1489, Muntzer was a toddler when Columbus landed in the Americas. Little is known of his early years. He attended university, probably at Leipzig

and Frankfurt, becoming master of arts and bachelor of holy scripture, and he was ordained a priest before 1514.^[9] Between then and Luther's controversial critique of the Catholic sale of indulgences in 1517, Muntzer too became part of a popular reform movement. His views were shaped by widespread frustration with the Catholic Church hierarchy. As Goertz explained, "The reproach was heard everywhere, that the shepherds had abandoned the sheep, had led them astray or had crept in like thieves in the night into Christ's sheep pen and had harried the frightened flock. They were flaying and fleecing the sheep, it was said; they did not serve, but ruled. Christ himself did not rule, he served. . . . And so an anticlerical climate developed, in which sermon, propaganda and agitation worked for a renewal of Christianity and in which Luther's slogan of the priesthood of all believers' ignited like the veritable spark in the powder keg. It

initiated the social dissolution of the clerical estate in countless towns and territories.”^[10] Muntzer shared the Lutheran laity’s distaste for priestly privilege and abuse of power.

His chief critique of the clergy came of the hypocrisy inherent in their lip service to the written word of God and yet

denial of what Muntzer called the “living word of God.”^[11] Speaking in Prague in 1521, Muntzer criticized clergy who would not confess the need for continuing revelation. “These villainous and treacherous parsons are of no use to the church in even the slightest matter,” Muntzer wrote, “for they deny the voice of the bridegroom, which is a truly certain sign that they are a pack of devils. How could they then be God’s servants, bearers of his word, which they shamelessly deny with their whore’s brazenness? For all true parsons must have revelations, so that they are certain of their

cause.”^[12] This seemed the logical extension of Luther’s critiques, but as Muntzer became more outspoken Luther retreated from the implications of his own conversion experience, however it may have come, and “did not share

Muntzer’s belief that the Holy Spirit gave new revelations in the present.”^[13]

Muntzer wrote admiringly to Luther in 1523, assuming a shared sense of mission and explaining a guarded but certain faith in continuing revelations. Luther used a term that translates to *fanatic* to describe such faith, though, as his biographer Richard Marius notes, “In many respects the *Schwärmer* [fanatics] were much more akin to the disciples of

the New Testament church than Luther’s carefully regulated institution in Wittenberg.”^[14] As Muntzer went from one pastorate to another, gaining popular support but upsetting the political status quo wherever he went, “the conviction

grew in him that God still spoke directly through his chosen prophets.”^[15]

In 1523 Muntzer received a temporary post at St. John’s Church in Allstedt, where “his preaching pleased the people but

frightened the local count, Ernest of Mansfield, who reported his concern to the Elector,” Frederick the Wise.^[16] In Allstedt, Muntzer married, banned infant baptism, and taught that the wine and bread of the Eucharist were not the real presence of Christ but emblems of His sacrifice. In March 1524 Muntzer’s followers destroyed the nearby Mallerbach Chapel and its icons, including an image of the Virgin reputed to have healing powers. The miners of Allstedt loved Muntzer in proportion to the fear he instilled in the politically powerful. Frederick the Wise and his brother Duke John Frederick, crown prince of Saxony, saw the political implications of Muntzer’s testimony. As Michael Baylor wrote, revelations pose “a special threat to the existing authorities, and, conversely, the political use of dreams [revelations] had an obvious affinity for oppositional or revolutionary politics. This was simply because revelatory dreams represented an alternative authority, one that was by its very nature unchallengeable. Neither human traditions nor

traditional interpretations of Scripture could counter the mandate of direct and personal divine revelations.”^[17] Political authorities rarely appreciate rev-elators since prophetic authority rests solely on revelation and revelation trumps all other authority. So it is no surprise that even as Muntzer’s views were received well by ordinary people, authorities objected. Saxon crown prince John Frederick “and members of his court came to a castle near Allstedt and ordered

Muntzer to appear and preach before them” in July 1524.^[18] He chose as his text an exposition of the second chapter of Daniel.

With no subtlety Muntzer declared that the kingdoms of this world crumble as nothing and predicted that the fate Daniel foresaw for Nebuchadnezzar awaited his hearers unless they heeded the living word of God. “In such momentous and dangerous matters as those which true preachers, dukes, and princes have to deal with,” he said, “it would never be possible to guard themselves securely against error on all sides, and to act blamelessly, if they did not rely on

revelations from God.”^[19] Muntzer implied strongly that he was a new Daniel, positioned to reveal God’s mind to Saxony’s political elite. When Muntzer had the sermon printed, Luther came out in opposition, leveling the same criticisms that had earlier been directed toward himself. Violence followed as Muntzer’s supporters were killed and

threats of retribution were sounded by the outspoken Luther. When support dwindled, however, Muntzer left Allstedt for Mulhausen, a free imperial city in central Germany in a politically precarious position, which Muntzer exploited, along with other radicals, in order to “institute the rule of God on earth: ‘the people will go free and God alone will be their Lord,’” he wrote. He wanted a theocracy that would “resolve the duality between secular rule and spiritual power and burst open the walls of an Imperial city.”^[20]

He and others led popular uprisings against political and spiritual oppression. Hessian and Saxon soldiers brutally put down the rebellion, however, and delivered Muntzer to the princes. Under torture he confessed to sedition and recanted his most revolutionary ideas. Finally, though, he wrote, “I, too, am heartily content that God has ordained things in this way.” He lamented only that the people were not yet ready for the kingdom and that the princes must continue to rule.^[21] Muntzer was beheaded on May 27, 1525, outside Mulhausen, where his impaled head and body were displayed as a warning to agitators who might trumpet the idea that all true parsons must have revelations or who dared to act courageously on the best light available in a darkened world.

Setting the Stage for the Restoration

In Thomas Muntzer one finds remarkable foreshadowing of the ministry of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Revelation was fundamental to both, and both suffered for that testimony. The “world”—using that term as it is used in Joseph’s revelations to mean *the fallen earth* (D&C 1:16; 2)—cannot tolerate the Spirit of God, Muntzer taught. Joseph was called to gather the elect, a mission Muntzer felt called to as well. “But who were the Elect? In Muntzer’s view they were those who had received the Holy Spirit or, as he usually called it, ‘the living Christ.’”^[22] “In brief,” said Muntzer, “each person must receive the holy spirit . . . otherwise he neither hears nor understands the living God.”^[23] So both Muntzer and Joseph equated election with hearing the voice of Christ (D&C 29:7). Joseph received revelation affirming that the Church was both true and living, a reference to ongoing revelation as opposed to denying the power of godliness, a point Muntzer would no doubt appreciate. Muntzer spoke often of the “living word of God,” God’s “living finger,” and His “living voice.”^[24] He resonated with the words of another revelator, Daniel, and focused on chapter 2 especially. In verse 44 he thought he saw a mirror of his own time: “And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.” Daniel 2:44 was a favorite text of Joseph Smith, who was no less revolutionary than Thomas Muntzer and suffered no less for it.

A “Court of Inquisition,” as Parley Pratt called it, “inquired diligently into our belief of the seventh chapter of Daniel concerning the kingdom of God, which should subdue all other kingdoms and stand forever.” The judge presiding over the Richmond, Missouri, hearing in November 1838, Austin A. King, regarded literal belief in Daniel’s prophecy as “a strong point for treason.”^[25] Joseph did not escape the next charge of treason. He was being held for treason in June 1844 when a vicious lynch mob butchered him as violently as Muntzer had been. That was a few weeks after Joseph began to organize the kingdom Daniel foresaw and promised it would revolutionize the whole world.^[26]

Daniel’s prophecy of the kingdom was a favorite text for leaders of the Church in nineteenth-century Utah and continued to be among the most popular themes in twentieth-century conference addresses.^[27] Introducing the October 2003 general conference, President Gordon B. Hinckley evoked this text again, leaving little doubt that Joseph Smith began what Muntzer longed for and that ongoing revelation to living prophets continues to establish a kingdom that will “stand forever” in contrast to all other short-lived kingdoms. Said President Hinckley: “It was said that at one time the sun never set on the British Empire. That empire has now been diminished. But it is true that the sun never sets on this

work of the Lord as it is touching the lives of people across the earth.

“And this is only the beginning. We have scarcely scratched the surface. We are engaged in a work for the souls of men and women everywhere. Our work knows no boundaries. Under the providence of the Lord it will continue. Those nations now closed to us will someday be open. That is my faith. That is my belief. That is my testimony.

“The little stone which was cut out of the mountain without hands is rolling forth to fill the earth (Daniel 2:31–45; D&C 65:2).”^[28]

This prophetic declaration echoes and confirms Joseph Smith’s 1842 testimony that “the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and

sounded in every ear.”^[29] From Joseph Smith to Gordon B. Hinckley, that work has been presided over on earth by living prophets who receive the living word for which Thomas Muntzer sacrificed so much. Muntzer would have appreciated both the tone and the content of a revelation Joseph received in October 1831: “Hearken, and lo, a voice as of one sent down from on high, who is mighty and powerful, whose going forth is unto the ends of the earth, yea, whose voice is unto men—Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

“The keys of the kingdom of God are committed unto man on the earth, and from thence shall the gospel roll forth unto the ends of the earth, as the stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth.

“Yea, a voice crying—Prepare ye the way of the Lord, prepare ye the supper of the Lamb, make ready for the Bridegroom.

“Pray unto the Lord, call upon his holy name, make known his wonderful works among the people.

“Call upon the Lord, that his kingdom may go forth upon the earth, that the inhabitants thereof may receive it, and be prepared for the days to come, in the which the Son of Man shall come down in heaven, clothed in the brightness of his glory, to meet the kingdom of God which is set up on the earth.

“Wherefore, may the kingdom of God go forth, that the kingdom of heaven may come, that thou, O God, mayest be glorified in heaven so on earth, that thine enemies may be subdued; for thine is the honor, power and glory, forever and ever. Amen” (D&C 65).

Both Joseph Smith and Thomas Muntzer died for the ideas contained in those verses. They, along with many other martyrs, envisioned a better world, one governed by revelation dictated in the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ. They looked for a classless society of the elect presided over by the living God. They both died before their radical, apocalyptic visions were realized. Perhaps the price they paid will spur us to deeper commitment to the living word and the revealed commands to be one (D&C 38:26–27) and to gather the elect (D&C 29:7). Meanwhile, under the direction of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his successors in the presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the “stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth” (D&C 65:2). “May the kingdom of God go forth, that the kingdom of heaven may come” (D&C 65:6), that He whose right it is may reign as King of kings (Revelation 17:14), and that those who were “beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God” may reign “with Christ a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4). Therefore, “come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

^[1] Philip Caraman, ed., *William Weston: The Autobiography of an Elizabethan* (New York: Longmans, 1955), 55.

^[2] Patrick McGrath estimated that one-fourth of the seminary priests to work in the English underground were executed. Christopher Haigh’s estimate of one-fifth is probably more accurate, but only a little less grim for William Weston (Patrick McGrath, “Elizabethan Catholicism: A Reconsideration,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 35 [July 1984]: 425; and Christopher Haigh, “Revisionism, the Reformation and the History of English Catholicism,”

Journal of Ecclesiastical History 36 [July 1985]: 401–2).

- [3] Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 21.
- [4] Cited in Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 125.
- [5] Cited in Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 128.
- [6] Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 129.
- [7] Cited in Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph the Prophet and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1893), 6.
- [8] Thomas Muntzer, “The Prague Protest,” in *Revelation and Revolution: Basic Writings of Thomas Muntzer*, trans, and ed. Michael G. Baylor (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 1993), 55.
- [9] Hans-Jurgen Goertz, *Thomas Muntzer: Apocalyptic Mystic and Revolutionary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 35.
- [10] Goertz, *Thomas Muntzer*, 25–26.
- [11] Muntzer, “The Prague Protest,” 55.
- [12] Muntzer, “The Prague Protest,” 54–55.
- [13] Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 406.
- [14] Marius, *Martin Luther*, 397.
- [15] Marius, *Martin Luther*, 398.
- [16] Marius, *Martin Luther*, 398–99.
- [17] Michael G. Baylor, “Dreams and Politics in the Sixteenth Century: Thomas Muntzer’s Theory of Dream Interpretation,” unpublished paper, 12.
- [18] Marius, *Martin Luther*, 400.
- [19] Cited in Baylor, “Dreams and Politics,” 11.
- [20] Goertz, *Thomas Muntzer*, 173.
- [21] Cited in Goertz, *Thomas Muntzer*, 188–90.
- [22] Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 253.
- [23] Muntzer, “The Prague Protest,” 53.
- [24] Muntzer, “The Prague Protest,” 55.
- [25] Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, comp. Parley P. Pratt Jr., 4th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950), 211–12.

[26] Andrew F. Ehat, “‘It Seems like Heaven Began on Earth’: Joseph Smith and the Constitution of the Kingdom of God,” *BYU Studies* 20, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 253–79.

[27] Richard C. Galbraith, “Scriptural Index to the Journal of Discourses,” published privately by the author, 21; used courtesy of Richard C. Galbraith. Richard C. Galbraith, “Scriptural Index to *Ensign* General Conference Reports April 1971–October 2000,” published privately by the author, 8; used courtesy of Richard C. Galbraith.

[28] Gordon B. Hinckley, “The State of the Church,” *Ensign*, November 2003, 4–5.

[29] Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932–51), 4:540.