Reform or Revolution:

The Patristic and Apocalyptic paradigms in the German Protestant Revolution

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Introduction

The Protestant Reformation marked a fundamental shift in the consciousness of European life. The massive theological developments and changes in perspective upended a thousand years of relative religious, political, and economic orthodoxy. The Reformation's leaders are often viewed as trailblazing theological innovators, whose approach to their faith has had innumerable revolutionary consequences on Western thought. However, within the popular consciousness, it has often been underplayed how much its greatest thinkers were influenced by earlier Christian writing. Much has been said of Luther and Calvin's indebtedness to Augustine and the early Patristic fathers, but the analysis has rarely extended further. The theologians of the Reformation did not pull their language and thought out of nowhere. They lived within a thousand year theological milieu. The arguments they were able to construct, the language they could use to construct it, and the ways they responded to competing views were limited by their time and place in the history of Western Christian thought. If we think of the writings of these trailblazing theologians, following intellectual historian Quentin Skinner, as "interventions" within a long cultural dialogue, then it is necessary to analyze the stream from which they emerge and to which they contribute. To do this, we must trace their theological antecedents back to the earliest points of Christian thought and the theological paradigms from which they are descended. In particular, it is worthwhile to examine the genealogical origins of the arguments made by two of the German Reformation's most prominent figures: Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer. To do this, this paper will be using the theological paradigms identified by theologian Adam Kotsko in his book, *The Prince of this World*.

On the Usage of Paradigms

Prior to any actual discussion of the paradigms or the thought of either Thomas Muntzer or Martin Luther, it is important to understand the reasoning behind the usage of Kostko's paradigmatic method. Why is it pertinent in this discussion and what does it contribute to the existing scholarship? Traditional interpretations of the German Protestant Reformation do not follow a paradigmatic model. In his classic piece of scholarship on the Reformation, historian Diarmaid Maculloch traces the proto-Reformation figures, figures like John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, and Erasmus, paying special attention to the way thinkers like Luther and Müntzer were indebted to these specific thinkers and how they built upon existing theological themes and ideas.[1] In a similar vein, Quentin Skinner's work on the subject traces many of Luther and Muntzer political beliefs to specific theologians that influenced their political positions, finding in Müntzer a student of Joachim of Fiore and in Luther a student of Augustine in opposition to Aquinas.[2] However, this traditional view of theological development, as a series of specific named thinkers building upon one another's individual thoughts in an upward scaffold, misses a great deal of the story. The purpose of a paradigmatic approach is to identify that strand of Christian thought these writers fall into, not to identify the individual thinkers to whom they are indebted. One need not have read Augustine to fall into the Patristic paradigm and an Apocalyptic writer might never know Joachim. Rather, the importance is a shared set of assumptions, beliefs, and ways of reading scripture that are common to all within the paradigm. To make use of an analogy, it is to identify the river on which these theologians sail rather than the staircase they climb. A valid critique of the paradigmatic approach towards intellectual history can be mounted. It leaves out a

[1] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: a History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005)

[2] Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Vol. 2: the Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

great deal of the detail in regards to how the examined theologians adapted specific ideas from writers within the canon. It also squashes vast distinctions between theologians that happen to fall within the same tradition. However, the point of this discussion is not to invalidate the older method. Rather, a paradigmatic approach should be taken in concert with the older model, so as to best understand the breadth and diversity of Christian history intellectual history.

The Patristic and Apocalyptic Paradigms

Within his genealogy, Kotsko establishes a number of different paradigms for how Jewish, and later, Christian theology dealt with the problem of evil. While these paradigms have undergone significant development over the intervening centuries, their basic foundations remain largely the same and are visible in theology to the present day. For the purposes of this discussion, the two most pertinent are what Kotsko titles the "Apocalyptic" paradigm and the "Patristic" paradigm. Kotsko defines the Apocalyptic as one of the last Jewish paradigms to develop and the one from which Christianity splits off. Its origins are found within the period immediately following the loss of Israel and the beginning of the Jewish diaspora. As the Jewish community was faced with the fact that their homeland, gifted to them by God as part of their covenant with him, was taken from them by worldly powers, they were forced to question their preconceptions; they had to ask, "How could their all powerful, benevolent God allow their suffering?" How was it possible for a human empire to break a divine mandate and for God to allow the suffering of his chosen people in captivity? The resulting theological debates produced the Apocalyptic paradigm. Three key theological pillars underpin this paradigm: temporal power is unjust, a coming Apocalyptic reordering of the world is imminent, and the various classes of social elites are demonic.

By far the most important theme within this paradigm is the timeline of history and the immediacy of the coming end times. As Kotsko states, "This Apocalyptic vision transforms the vagaries of geopolitics into a cosmic drama culminating in a final confrontation between the head of God's heavenly host and God's greatest political-theological rival."[3] It is from this paradigm that Christianity breaks off from Judaism and becomes its own religion. Within Kotsko's definition, Christianity is at all times Apocalyptic and the later Christian paradigms are ways of modifying this inherent attribute to move the date of the end time into a more distant future. Christ has, as the Messiah, set in motion the coming end times and his return becomes an event soon to come. This belief can be seen in the early Christian community, when it was a persecuted minority. Paul in particular believed that the return of Christ was an imminent event. It is from this standpoint that all later Apocalyptic thinking develops.

The Patristic is the first uniquely Christian paradigm, coming after the complete separation from Judaism. It emerged directly out of the Apocalyptic and was a response to a change in political standing within Christianity. Following the conversion of Constantine, Christianity was no longer a marginal, oppressed sect; it had become the religion of the empire. More importantly, how could a ruler who called himself Christian possibly be the cosmic enemy of Christ? Suddenly, Christianity was in power and in consequence, it no longer suffered under oppressive political structures that led to a call for God to judge the world. However, Christianity could not retreat into earlier Jewish paradigms that allowed for political power to be accepted. Christ was already recognized to have kicked off the Apocalyptic sequence and the messiah had been identified. Thus, Kotsko argues, the point of the paradigm itself, "Is to make peace with

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[3]Adam Kotsko, *The Prince of This World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 41.

earthly rulers in order to shift Christianity away from the unstable Apocalyptic paradigm and toward something like the relatively sustainable Prophetic paradigm."[4] The basic pillars of the Patristic paradigm are: the meaning of suffering is to demonstrate symbolic truths, the cosmic enemies of God are a definable grouping, usually Jews, women, pagans, or heretics of some kind, and an attitude of placation towards earthly rulers.

Thomas Müntzer

Thomas Müntzer was in many ways the archetypal Christian radical and Apocalyptic theologian. Born circa 1489, he was initially a close follower of Luther, before rebelling against Luther's comfort with earthly power. He would eventually be the chief theologian of the German Peasants' War, a massive uprising of peasants lasting between 1524 and 1525. He was executed after being captured in battle. Müntzer was highly educated and had an immense knowledge of the Bible and the history of the early Church. From these sources, he created a theology that could argue against the elite and powerful in society and preach the coming of apocalypse, after which would follow a glorious Christian golden age. As the great Marxist theologian Ernst Bloch said of him, "Müntzer could turn the Bible against Ahab and Jezebel, and even against Nimrod, in a way that would not have been possible with any other religious text."[5] In other words, he could use the Bible against the hierarchy of his society. His fitting in with the Apocalyptic paradigm is evident in three theological points: his attitude toward authority, who he attributes demonic heritage to, and the timescale for the coming end times.

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[4] Kotsko, *The Prince of this World,* 71.

[5] Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: the Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom* (London, NY: Verso Books, 2009), 14.

One evident feature of Müntzer's theology, which highlights its Apocalyptic origins, was his attitude towards authority both clerical and temporal. When it comes to temporal authority, Müntzer draws heavily on Paul, especially Romans 13, to develop a form of proto-social contract theory. Within Müntzer's theology, a prince is not a divinely ordained head of state, with a claim to power stemming directly from the will of God. Instead, a prince has been put into a position of power in order to serve the community and ensure its protection. As he stated, "Saint Paul also means this, for he says that the sword of rulers is given for the punishment of evildoers and to protect the pious, Romans 13."[6] A prince is therefore duty-bound to protect the Christian faithful from evil, specifically from non-Christian earthly powers. However, Müntzer modifies the typical reading of Paul and goes further, making an important distinction. While the sword has been given to a prince for him to enact his duties, it can also be taken away. Should a prince not be up to the task or, far worse, begin to unjustly punish the Christian elect he is duty-bound to protect, he has lost his claim to authority. Drawing on Luther, Müntzer begins from the understanding that the Christian is truly above any law but that of God, but that the Christian serves earthly authority out of a love for peace. But if a prince misbehaves and his rule becomes injurious to the public peace (and thus demonic), there is no law or tradition that can stop the Christian community from overthrowing their ruler and electing a new one (or even a new government). As he stated, "but if they do not do it (their duty), then the sword will be taken away from them."[7]

This proto-social contract theory also extends to the power of the clergy, who are equally likely to be in league with the Devil, according to Müntzer, as the princes. As he stated, "The

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[6] Thomas Müntzer, "The Sermon to the Princes" in *The Radical Reformation*, ed. Michael G.Baylor, 8th ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 28.

[7] Müntzer, "The Sermon to the Princes," 30.

priests and all the evil clergy are snakes, as John the Baptist calls them, and the temporal lords and rulers are the eels, as is symbolized by the fish in Leviticus."[8] One of his chief critiques of the clergy as they existed in his time comes directly out of the early Apocalyptic Church of the first century. As he stated directly, "The downfall of the Church came about because the people neglected to exercise their right to elect their priests. And it has not been possible to hold a true council since the onset of such negligence."[9] Thus, it is the breakdown of electoral selection of the clergy that has led to the decline of the Church since the first few centuries. For Müntzer, it is this democratic process of clerical selection that ensured that the Christian community, upon which all power rests, had leaders of the faith that best represented their interests and were prepared for the imminent Apocalyptic sequence. Without this selection, the clergy have become self-serving and academic, uncommitted to the needs of the community. And, as far as Müntzer was concerned, the clergy in his time have turned against the Christian elect and have become, like the princes, agents of the Devil. In light of this stance, Müntzer offered himself up for selection by the people as to whether or not he speaks for their interest, saying, "I want to be prepared, if in Church the people question me in the pulpit, to do enough to satisfy each and every one. If I cannot demonstrate such a skillful mastery of the truth, then may I be a child of both temporal and eternal death."[10]

Another important marker of Müntzer's theological origins was his view of suffering. Within the Apocalyptic paradigm, the suffering of the truly Christian community is justified on the basis of an immediate judgment. Cruelty and suffering committed on the part of earthly

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[8] Müntzer, "The Sermon to the Princes," 25.

[9] Thomas Müntzer, "The Prague Protest" in *The Radical Reformation*, ed. Michael G.Baylor, 8th ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 9.

[10] Müntzer, "The Prague Protest", 10.

authority become irrelevant as God will soon punish these oppressors. True believing Christians are suffering now, but this proves their commitment to God and that he will soon make this injustice right. Müntzer wholly takes up this position while adding his own features to it. Within Müntzer's theology, it is only through suffering that one can attain a connection with God. As he stated, "For God speaks only in the suffering of creatures, a suffering which the hearts of the unbelievers do not have because they become more and more hardened."[11] Through suffering (specifically suffering that results from external actors or other things outside of the believer's control), they attain a connection to God and a feeling of imminent presence within them. The holy spirit fully enters the suffering believer and they have a feeling of certainty in the presence of God. These individuals are who Müntzer calls "the elect," the chosen who suffer for God's love. What is crucial in this frame is that the believer has a self-evident experience of the divine, without the need for any earthly intermediary to mediate. This includes the clergy. Moreover, continuing his anti-clerical critique, Müntzer believed that the clergy have lost a connection with God due to a lack of suffering. As he stated, "They also suffer no tribulation of faith in the spirit of the fear of God, so they are on their way into the fiery lake."[12] Thus, the clergy who do not suffer as the true believer suffers are doomed to hell where their true allegiance lies. This conception of suffering as the necessary path to God fits within the Apocalyptic paradigm. Suffering as a result of tribulations of spirit and especially under unjust authority do not disprove God, but in fact enhance the argument that this suffering is a sign of elected status. It is through this that God communicates his immediate intent to pronounce judgment. It's important to note that Müntzer never mentions any authority figure as suffering, while he routinely characterizes

[11] Müntzer, "The Prague Protest," 5.

[12] Müntzer, "The Prague Protest," 5.

the poor as suffering under unjust rule. Thus, his implicit assumption is that the privileged life of the princes and the clergy does not result from divine selection, but instead suggests allegiance to demonic power.

The clearest sign of Müntzer's Apocalypticism was his belief that the final Apocalyptic battle is just around the corner. Every other part of his theology is centered around the basis that the final confrontation between God and the Devil will happen in his lifetime and that it is necessary to begin to prepare for this coming battle. In his sermon, *The Prague Protest*, Müntzer made his preparedness clear when he said, "The time of harvest is at hand! Thus God himself has appointed me for his harvest. I have made my sickle sharp, for my thoughts are zealous for the truth and my lips, skin, hands, hair, soul, body, and my life all damn the unbelievers."[13] It is important to note two points from this statement. First, the usage of the word harvest is a common Apocalyptic reference, which gains importance from the context that Müntzer believed that the wheat, representative of the Christian elect, must be separated from the larger majority that is the chaff, those who Müntzer believes are not true Christians. Secondly, Muntzer's preparing his own sickle for the harvest highlights the fact that he is prepared for a final battle, one in which he will be pitted against evil in a literal combat. The outcome of this fight is never in question for Müntzer. As he stated, "The elect must clash with the damned, and the power of the damned must yield before that of the elect."[14] The outcome has been decided simply by the fact that one side is the chosen of God and the other is inherently and irrevocably damned. Nor does he at any point doubt the immediacy of the coming battle. As he stated, " it is true-and I know it to be true-that the Spirit of God now reveals to many elected pious people that a

[13] Müntzer, "The Prague Protest," 10.
[14] Müntzer, "The Prague Protest," 7.

momentous, invincible, future reformation is very necessary and must be brought about."[15] This fight is the final, necessary confrontation that the entire rest of the history has led up to and Müntzer saw himself at the head of this final wave.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther's importance to the Protestant Reformation is uncontested. Born in 1483, Luther perhaps more than any other theologian of his time is responsible for the spread of the Reformation. When he died in 1546, the reforming movement he had helped to father had spread across Western Europe. However, Luther's legacy has always been contentious. He has been at times "the fomenter of revolt, or hero of conscience, or even a champion of autocratic and oppressive government."[16] Luther's comfort with temporal power is the source of much of the disagreement and remains the most controversial part of his character, along with his profound anti-semitism. However, it is important to recognize Luther within the wider Christian intellectual milieu around him. Indeed, Luther was emblematic of the Patristic paradigm that he developed from and made contributions to, especially in his views of earthly authority, outside groups, and the coming end times.

An unfortunate sign of Luther's Patristic influence was his view of who the enemies of the Christian community are. As previously stated, with the off-loading of evil from earthly authority, a new target had to be found as a threat to true-believing Christianity. Luther finds this target in the Jewish community. Drawing on early Patristic fathers, Luther adopts the standpoint that the Jews' refusal to accept Christ as the Messiah, in the face of what Luther considered

[15] Müntzer, "The Sermon to the Princes," 24.

[16] Jarrett A. Carty, "Radicalism and Resistance." In *God and Government: Martin Luther's Political Thought*, 85 (Montreal; Kingston; London; Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), Accessed May 17, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1vjqqg5.9.

overwhelming evidence, is a sign of a demonic inclination. They have, in effect, lost their chosen status and have been replaced by the gentile Christian elect as the chosen people. In one particular passage in Luther's work *The Jews and Their Lies* he makes it clear who he believes the Jewish people are really loyal too: "You are of your father the Devil. It was intolerable to them to hear that they were not Abraham's but the Devil's children, nor can they bear to hear this today."[17] It is their fundamental attachment and loyalty to the Devil, according to Lutther, that keeps the Jewish people from converting. Not only are they unjustly reluctant to convert, Luther believed, but they are also actively working to subvert the true Christian message. As Luther stated, "I would not have believed that a Christian could be duped by the Jews into taking their exile and wretchedness upon himself. However, the Devil is the god of the world, and wherever God's word is absent he has an easy task, not only with the weak but also with the strong." It is through this "duping" by the Jewish people that the world has gone wrong for the Christian community. He continues, "Therefore be on your guard against the Jews, knowing that wherever they have their synagogues, nothing is found but a den of devils in which sheer self glory, conceit, lies, blasphemy, and defaming of God and men are practiced most maliciously and veheming his eyes on them."[18] One aspect that especially marks Luther as fundamentally Patristic was his solution to this problem. He says,"I wish and I ask that our rulers who have Jewish subjects exercise a sharp mercy toward these wretched people, as suggested above, to see whether this might not help (though it is doubtful)."[19] This request that earthly authority exercise power within a religious realm not only highlights how much of a threat Luther believed the

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[17] Martin Luther, *The Jews and Their Lies,* Jewish Virtual Library. Accessed April 17, 2020. https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/martin-luther-quot-the-jews-and-their-lies-quot.

[18] Luther, *The Jews and Their Lies*

[19] Luther, *The Jews and Their Lies*

Jews are to the Christian community, but also highlights how the Patristic paradigm relates itself to structures of earthly authority.

The most obvious sign of Luther's Patristic heritage was his view of earthly power. According to Jarrett Carty, "...in Luther's thinking, the temporal kingdom was exclusively the realm of coercive force"[20] As someone who was deeply influenced by the early fathers of the Church, he lifted quite a few of his positions straight from them. The most significant was his belief in what earthly power is for and where it draws its legitimacy. As he said, "and so it is sufficiently certain and clear that it is God's will that worldly power and dominion have been established to punish evildoers and protect believers."[21] Thus, earthly power exists to protect the Christian community. But most importantly, it is divinely appointed. It is thus not something that can be overthrown at will. At the same time, Luther also believed that Christians, as good servants, are duty bound to serve earthly power. As he stated "Next you ask whether then a Christian may exercise state power and so punish evildoers… To which I answered,… That you are obliged to serve and promote public authority as much as you can, with your body, possessions, respect, and soul."[22] It becomes the duty of the Christian to back temporal power, to assist in its task, and to protect it from attempts to overthrow it.

One of the most distinct signs of Luther's Patristic heritage was his perception of the Apocalyptic timeline and the human role in bringing it about. As stated previously, the Patristic paradigm worked to put off Christianity's fundamental Apocalyptic roots and to push back the

[20] Jarrett A. Carty, "Luther's Political Thought." In *God and Government: Martin Luther's Political Thought*, 38 (Montreal; Kingston; London; Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), Accessed May 17, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1vjqqg5.7.

[21] Martin Luther, "On the Power of the State" in *Reformation Thought: an Anthology of Sources*. Ed. Margaret L. King (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016), 57.

[22] Luther, "On the Power of the State", 59.

end of days. The coming of the Kingdom of God became an event we have no control over or at least very little. Additionally, the hopes for a better world were offloaded into the afterlife, with a better kingdom come on Earth being replaced by a kingdom come in Heaven. Luther fully adopted this view stating, "The Kingdom of God will surely come even without our asking; but we ask in this petition, then will come also to dwell within us."[23] The Apocalyptic event becomes subject to the ruling of God and we are left here, to hope that a fragment of the Kingdom can live in us through faith. Indeed, the actions of the true Christian and their effect on the approaching end times become almost negligible. We can only gradually approach goodness and the kingdom, but never reach personal perfection. As Luther stated, "It would indeed be fine if you were solely an internal man and became completely spiritual and internal, but this will not happen until Judgment Day. On earth there is and will continue to be only a beginning and an increase, which will be completed in the next world."[24] Thus, we can only expect moderate reforms to ourselves and our souls in this world, a gradualist change.

Conclusion

It is important to understand thinkers as individuals and appreciate their individual achievements and insights. However, it is equally useful and important to look at them as part of a long running historical dialogue, one in which traditions of thought reappear frequently. This is especially true for the Reformation. As William Plez says of most of the existing research into the Protestant Reformation, "What these mountains of books, articles and essays often overlook

[23] Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism" in *Reformation Thought: an Anthology of Sources*. Ed. Margaret L. King (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016), 63.

[24] Martin Luther, "On the Freedom of a Christian" in *Reformation Thought: an Anthology of Sources*. Ed. Margaret L. King (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016), 51.

is that the Reformation was a process, not an event."[25] Luther and Müntzer were individuals living at a moment in which they, more than most individuals of their time, had a direct influence on the outcome of history. But they were part of a process, a working out and consideration of what Christianity was that stretched back to the religion's earliest years. Thus, the usage of paradigms allows us to not only better understand individual thinkers like Luther and Müntzer, but to better analyze the course of Christian intellectual history running up to the present day.

[25] William A. Pelz,"The Other Reformation": Martin Luther, Religious Dogma and the Common People." *In A People's History of Modern Europe*, 20 (London: Pluto Press, 2016), Accessed May 17, 2020. doi:10.2307/j.ctt1c2crfj.6.

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