

Matthias Riedl

"The Charismatic Sword - Thomas Müntzer's Theology of Violence"

The paper focuses on Thomas Müntzer's "Sermon to the Princes" (1524). It challenges the two dominant narratives about the rebel, the Marxist and the Lutheran, and attempts a new evaluation of the historical, biographical, and intellectual context of Müntzer's sermon and its complex narrative structure. The aim is to analyze the peculiar double nature of the text as a pious treatise on mystical experience and as an unconcealed call to mass murder.

Müntzer's "Sermon to the Princes" marks a turning point in the history of apocalyptic thought. The catastrophic transformation of a religiously and politically corrupted old world into a theocratic new world had been part of the apocalyptic imagery all along; but Müntzer presents this transformation in an unprecedented way as revolutionary and violent action, as a synergistic action of God and man. The divinely given sword is a key symbol in this context. It not only signifies the religious justification of violence but also counters the medieval doctrine of the two-swords and Martin Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms. The oneness of the sword symbolizes the unity of spiritual and temporal power, of divine and secular government.

Dr. Matthias Riedl is an associate professor of history and director of the Center for Religious Studies at Central European University, Budapest. Earlier he taught at University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany, and Duke University, USA. His research interests are in the intellectual history of Western Christianity, with a focus on the relation of religion and politics. He wrote a monograph on the 12th century apocalyptic writer Joachim of Fiore, edited many volumes in the field of comparative religious studies, and published numerous articles on the history of religious and political thought. Currently, he is writing a book about the radical reformer Thomas Müntzer.