

## Reimagining God's Kingdom: Engels and Müntzer

It is a curious development that Thomas Müntzer came to occupy such a place of honor in Marxist thought.<sup>1</sup> Müntzer strikes a somewhat sad figure as a historical hero. He led a revolt that ended in disaster and the deaths of thousands of German peasants. In 1525, Müntzer managed to escape the bloody Battle of Frankenhausen with his life, but survived for only a short period thereafter. Following his defeat, the authorities tracked down Müntzer, coerced a confession from him through torture, beheaded him, and put his body on display as a warning to anyone else contemplating rebellion.<sup>2</sup> Müntzer met this fate while fighting for greater equality in the distribution of property, which is the primary reason for his appeal in the Marxist tradition. During his short revolutionary life, he relentlessly attacked those with wealth and power. Yet intermingled with this rhetoric was a deep religiosity at odds with Marxism's avowed atheism. Still, a no less canonical figure than Friedrich Engels lauds Müntzer as a forerunner to Marxism, whose one fatal flaw was leading a revolution far ahead of its time.

Engels easily could have dismissed Müntzer as a religious fanatic. Hope in the imminent arrival of Christ's kingdom pervades Müntzer's writings and helped motivate his revolutionary actions. When he took up arms, he did so

<sup>1</sup> For more on Müntzer's role in the history of Marxism, see Abraham Friesen, "Thomas Müntzer in Marxist Thought," *Church History* 34, no. 3 (1965): 306–27; and *Reformation and Utopia: The Marxist Interpretation of the Reformation and Its Antecedents* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> For more on Müntzer's life, see Michael Baylor, "Introduction," in *Revelation and Revolution: Basic Writings of Thomas Müntzer*, trans. and ed. Michael Baylor (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1993), 13–46; Abraham Friesen, *Thomas Muentzer, a Destroyer of the Godless: The Making of a Sixteenth-Century Religious Revolutionary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); and Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer: Apocalyptic Mystic and Revolutionary*, trans. Jocelyn Jaquiere and ed. Peter Matheseon (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993).

with the conviction that God would lead the peasants to victory over the corrupt ruling authorities and, in the process, realize his kingdom on earth. Such religious baggage fails to deter Engels from taking a keen interest in Müntzer, most notably in his 1850 work *The Peasant War in Germany*.<sup>3</sup>

Müntzer's transformation into a Marxist hero, largely spurred by Engels's praise of him, offers an example of how Christian apocalyptic thought becomes secularized. Here a secular thinker directly engages with a figure in the Christian apocalyptic tradition, as well as texts from that tradition like the book of Revelation.<sup>4</sup> Engels's study of apocalyptic thought leads him to conclude that aspects of it prove valuable for interpreting politics. His writings thus provide fertile ground for exploring apocalyptic thought's appeal for politics, even to thinkers without strong religious commitments.

Toward that end, the first step is to understand Müntzer's vision for apocalyptic change and its parallels to Marxism. In his writings, Müntzer espouses a cataclysmic understanding of apocalyptic thought, in which God uses crisis to wipe away earthly corruption and usher in his perfect kingdom. Related beliefs are found in Marxist thought, with the twist that economic rather than divine forces guide crisis to the ideal society where the proletariat will rule. Through his interpretation of Müntzer, Engels strengthens the parallels between Marxism and Christian apocalyptic thought. According to Engels, when Müntzer seeks after the kingdom of God, he is actually pursuing a communist ideal that emphasizes economic rather than spiritual renewal.

It is important to exercise caution when identifying links between Marxism and Christian apocalyptic thought. Some try to undermine Marxism's credibility by dismissing it as a secularized version of Christian eschatology.<sup>5</sup> Such criticisms often lack textual evidence and resort to extraordinary interpretive leaps to make their case. In response, some argue that we would be better off abandoning the premise behind the criticism – that Marxism is indebted to apocalyptic thought for its theory.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, that view proves less than satisfying. It is true that interpretations motivated by ideology sometimes use the concept of secular apocalyptic thought as a weapon to undermine Marxism rather than as a tool to better

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 10 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1978), 397–482.

<sup>4</sup> Engels, "The Book of Revelation," in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 26 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 112–17; and "On the History of Early Christianity," in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 27 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 445–69.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Murray Rothbard, "Karl Marx: Communist as Religious Eschatologist," *Review of Austrian Economics* 4, no. 1 (1990): 123–79.

<sup>6</sup> See Roland Boer, "Marxism and Eschatology Reconsidered," *Mediations* 25, no. 1 (2010): 39–59.

understand it. But denying *any* meaningful connection between Marxism and Christian apocalyptic thought also has drawbacks. That interpretation fails to make sense of why thinkers like Engels repeatedly return to Christian apocalyptic thought as an interpretive lens for understanding politics.

Here the goal is to stake out a more compelling approach. Though Karl Marx and Engels do not draw directly on Christian apocalyptic belief to develop Marxism, these two systems of thought share key features with each other. Specifically, the concept of crisis plays a key role in resolving a tension inherent in Marxism: its dual commitment to offering a theory that is both utopian and feasible. In Marxism and the Christian apocalyptic tradition, crisis brings utopia within reach. That shared feature helps explain why Engels finds elements of Christian apocalyptic thought appealing, and why such thought interests secular thinkers engaged in the task of imagining a path to the ideal state.

#### MÜNTZER'S VISION FOR APOCALYPTIC CHANGE

When writing about Müntzer, Engels stresses that much of his thought was at odds with Christian orthodoxy. He certainly has good reason to see many aspects of Müntzer's thought as radical. But, as we will see, Engels goes beyond just arguing that Müntzer pushes the bounds of orthodoxy. He claims that Müntzer may have left Christianity behind altogether. Müntzer's own writings fail to back up this interpretation, however, and make clear that his apocalyptic vision remains thoroughly Christian in its assumptions.

Within the context of the Reformation, Müntzer is part of what is called the Radical Reformation. This movement believed that initial reformers, like Martin Luther, did not go far enough in their calls for religious and political change. The Radical Reformation was incredibly diverse, consisting of figures who often disagreed with each other.<sup>7</sup> This diversity has led to confusion over Müntzer's thought, with the labels applied to him ranging from atheist to Anabaptist.<sup>8</sup>

Müntzer's ties to the Anabaptists are tenuous. It is true that he rejects the practice of infant baptism, thus embracing a core tenet of Anabaptism.<sup>9</sup> But

<sup>7</sup> For more on the Radical Reformation, see the anthology by Michael Baylor, ed., *The Radical Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> For a survey of Marxist interpretations of Müntzer, especially as he relates to the Anabaptists, see Abraham Friesen, "The Marxist Interpretation of Anabaptism," *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies* 1 (1970): 17–34.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Müntzer, *Protestation or Proposition*, in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, trans. and ed. Peter Matheson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 191.

there is no evidence that Müntzer participated in the practice of believers' baptism – the most distinctive feature of the Anabaptist movement – where one would be baptized as an adult in a public profession of faith and sign of joining the church.<sup>10</sup> A 1524 letter to Müntzer from Conrad Grebel and the Swiss Brethren, who initiated the practice of believers' baptism, reveals the differences between them. Though Grebel and his companions praise some of Müntzer's teachings, like his rejection of infant baptism and condemnation of church corruption, they find fault with his endorsement of violence and other aspects of his theology.<sup>11</sup> The Swiss Brethren certainly had an interest in Müntzer, but some of his beliefs – most notably his reliance on the sword to advance God's kingdom – differ in important respects from those of the mostly pacifist Anabaptists.

The historian William Estep uses the term “inspirationist” to describe Müntzer, which provides some clarity in distinguishing him from the Anabaptists.<sup>12</sup> Müntzer does not reject the Bible's authority, but does emphasize the Holy Spirit as a source of inspiration and revelation that continues to speak to God's elect. For inspirationists like Müntzer, relying solely on the Bible proves insufficient for learning God's truth in all its fullness.

This feature of Müntzer's thought comes under harsh criticism from Luther and other contemporaries. Luther scoffs at the idea that a heavenly spirit inspires Müntzer's teachings, calling any spirit in him “evil,” whose fruits are “the destruction of churches and cloisters.”<sup>13</sup> Despite this criticism, it is important to keep in mind that Müntzer understands his belief in inspiration as wholly compatible with scripture. Indeed, his writings are littered with scriptural references offered as evidence for his claims. Scripture from his perspective shows that God's spirit, not theologians, must be the source of truth for believers. In his *Manifest Exposé of False Faith*, Müntzer writes: “Everyone must receive the knowledge of God, the true Christian faith, not from the stinking breath of the devilish biblical scholars, but from the eternal, powerful word of the father in the son as explained by the holy spirit . . . Eph[esians] 3.”<sup>14</sup> By carefully listening to and sharing the message of God's

<sup>10</sup> William Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Conrad Grebel et al., “Letter 69,” in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, trans. and ed. Peter Matheson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 121–30.

<sup>12</sup> Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 22–23.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, *Letter to the Princes of Saxony Concerning the Rebellious Spirit*, trans. Conrad Bergendoff, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 40, ed. Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 52.

<sup>14</sup> Müntzer, *A Manifest Exposé of False Faith*, in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 298.

spirit, Müntzer believes that he is one of the faithful few following the Lord and not deaf to his voice.

For Müntzer, it is clear that God's spirit is communicating to him an apocalyptic vision for society. This idea pervades both his early and late writings. In Müntzer's view, he is among God's elect living at a critical juncture in history. Soon God will no longer tolerate earthly corruption and will intervene to cast down the wicked to establish his kingdom. This basic insight appears in the *Prague Manifesto* from 1521, Müntzer's first major work. There he writes: "[E]rrors [in the church] had to take place so that all men's deeds, those of the elect and those of the damned, could flourish freely until our time when God will separate out the tares from the wheat."<sup>15</sup> Müntzer infuses this parable from Matthew 13:24–30 with added urgency by proclaiming that it will be realized in "our time." He also believes that he has a special role to play in the upcoming harvest: "The time of harvest has come! That is why he [God] himself has hired me for his harvest. I have sharpened my sickle, for my thoughts yearn for the truth and with my lips, skin, hands, hair, soul, body and life I call down curses on the unbelievers."<sup>16</sup>

So Müntzer sees himself as God's chosen agent to advance his kingdom, whose violent arrival is imminent. In fact, his vision for societal transformation embodies all the elements of cataclysmic apocalyptic thought – beliefs in present corruption, impending crisis, a divine force guiding crisis, and finally utopia in the form of the kingdom of God.<sup>17</sup>

Müntzer's writings make clear that he views society as plagued by deep and entrenched corruption. A letter from 1521 proclaims that the "time of the Antichrist is upon us."<sup>18</sup> For Müntzer, the world has entered a period of corruption foretold by scripture, where the godless rule both inside and outside the church. People find themselves living under "unintelligent rulers who offend against all equity and do not accept the word of God."<sup>19</sup> False priests exude an air of learning, but in fact are "lacking in judgment," as they lead many astray with their sham authority to teach scripture.<sup>20</sup> Given its pervasiveness among those in authority, the corruption of Müntzer's day puts enormous pressure on people to turn away from God.

In his bleak account of society, Müntzer sees a silver lining. Present corruption provides an opportunity for the elect to sharpen their faith and

<sup>15</sup> Müntzer, *Prague Manifesto*, in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 370.

<sup>16</sup> Müntzer, *Prague Manifesto*, 371.

<sup>17</sup> For more on cataclysmic apocalyptic thought, see Chapter 2.

<sup>18</sup> Müntzer, "Letter 25," in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Müntzer, *A Manifest Exposé of False Faith*, 286.

<sup>20</sup> Müntzer, *A Manifest Exposé of False Faith*, 292.

prove their commitment to God. Indeed, in Müntzer's view, true faith only comes through enduring severe trials and persecution. As he puts it in *On Counterfeit Faith*, "Hell has to be endured, before one can take due precautions against its engulfing gates, with all their wiles."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in a letter from 1524, he writes: "One has to walk in the mortification of the flesh every single moment; in particular our reputation has to stink in the nostrils of the godless. Then the person who has been tested can preach."<sup>22</sup> This vivid imagery emphasizes to the elect that they must leave behind creature comforts and dreams of gaining respect from society's ruling powers. God uses evil in the world to break the faithful until they wholly submit to him. He "makes the tyrants rage more," stresses Müntzer, "so that the countenance of his elect is covered in shame and vice and they are driven to seek the name and glory and honour of God alone."<sup>23</sup> In the midst of such corruption, the elect ultimately reach a point where nothing – from "tyrants" to a "sack of gunpowder" – can stop them from venturing their "body, goods and honour for the sake of God."<sup>24</sup>

This conflict between the elect and the godless gives birth to crisis and violence. The coming crisis will be bloody and plunge society into great upheaval, but is necessary according to Müntzer. Corrupt rulers currently in place lack legitimacy, and God will not allow them stay in power forever. "A true Christianity for our days," writes Müntzer, "will soon be in full swing despite all the previous corruption."<sup>25</sup> Before true Christianity arrives, the authority of corrupt rulers will crumble – a prediction Müntzer makes by drawing on the apocalyptic book of Daniel. The demise of the final corrupt empire foretold in Daniel "is now in full swing."<sup>26</sup> The event that deprives the wicked of authority once and for all has already begun in Müntzer's view.

His enthusiasm for societal upheaval elicits the rebuke of his contemporaries. The reformer Johann Agricola condemns him for breathing out "nothing but slaughter and blood."<sup>27</sup> Luther, never shy in his criticism of Müntzer, calls him the "archdevil who rules at Mühlhausen, and does nothing except stir up robbery, murder, and bloodshed."<sup>28</sup> In Müntzer's defense, there are instances

<sup>21</sup> Müntzer, *On Counterfeit Faith*, in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 223.

<sup>22</sup> Müntzer, "Letter 49," in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 76–77.

<sup>23</sup> Müntzer, "Letter 41B," in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 62.

<sup>24</sup> Müntzer, "Letter 53," in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 84.

<sup>25</sup> Müntzer, *A Manifest Exposé of False Faith*, 312.

<sup>26</sup> Müntzer, *Sermon to the Princes*, in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 244.

<sup>27</sup> Johann Agricola, "Letter 21," in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, trans. and ed. Peter Matheson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 30.

<sup>28</sup> Luther, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, trans. Charles Jacobs, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 46, ed. Robert Schultz (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967), 49.

where he counsels restraint. For example, in a 1523 letter to followers at Stolberg, he urges them to refrain from rebellion.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, despite the occasional calls for peace, violent language runs throughout Müntzer's writings. In a 1524 letter he proclaims: "[T]he time has come when a bloodbath will befall this obstinate world because of its unbelief."<sup>30</sup> His celebration of violence alarms rulers fearful that the Reformation will turn into widespread rebellion. Müntzer, though, sees no reason to fear the violent crisis beginning to engulf society, for he is assured that it will bring the elect to power.

His optimism about the coming crisis stems from his conviction that it is part of a divine plan. The violence and upheaval starting to break out during his lifetime are not without purpose, but signs that God is intervening to make way for his kingdom. In this final stage of history, Müntzer emphasizes that the elect will be active participants in making God's kingdom on earth a reality. Initially, he believes that a few righteous rulers will rise up to defend the elect, dispatch the wicked, and help bring about God's kingdom. Yet if the princes fail to seize this opportunity, God will find others to do his work.

Müntzer communicates this warning to Frederick III, Elector of Saxony: "[T]he people . . . should love princes rather than fear them: Romans 13. Princes hold no terrors for the pious. But should that change, then the sword will be taken from them and will be given to the people who burn with zeal so that the godless can be defeated, Daniel 7; and then that noble jewel, peace, will be in abeyance on earth. Revelation 6."<sup>31</sup> Whereas Luther cites Romans 13 – "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities . . . [which] have been instituted by God" – as a general command for subjects to obey their rulers,<sup>32</sup> Müntzer focuses on what he sees as the conditional nature of this command.<sup>33</sup> The people should obey *only if* their rulers act as God's servants and, in Paul's words, "are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad" (Romans 13:3).<sup>34</sup> Princes are called as God's servants to implement his plan for the end times, yet if they fail to, God will empower others to carry it out.

Müntzer expresses this point most forcefully in his *Sermon to the Princes*, preached to Duke John of Saxony and his son John Frederick in 1524. The sermon makes an urgent plea for the princes to delay no longer in taking

<sup>29</sup> Müntzer, "Letter 41B," 61–64.

<sup>30</sup> Müntzer, "Letter 55," in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 90.

<sup>31</sup> Müntzer, "Letter 45," in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 69.

<sup>32</sup> Luther, *Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia*, trans. Charles Jacobs and Robert Schultz, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 46, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Baylor makes this point. See Baylor, "Introduction," in *Revelation and Revolution*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> New Revised Standard Version.

action. The time has come for them to “sweep aside those evil men who obstruct the gospel” and to take “them out of circulation!”<sup>35</sup> Violent imagery runs throughout the sermon, as Müntzer argues that it is the duty of godly princes to slaughter corrupt religious authorities.<sup>36</sup> He offers himself to the princes as a “new Daniel” who will help them “grasp the plight of the Christian people” persecuted by false clergy and criminals.<sup>37</sup> If the princes truly comprehend the depths of current corruption, they will embrace their role as God’s chosen instruments to drive “his enemies away from the elect.”<sup>38</sup> Godly princes are best positioned to carry out “in a fair and orderly manner” this important task. But if they fail to do so, cautions Müntzer, “the sword will be taken from them.”<sup>39</sup>

This attempt to rally the princes to action ultimately fails. As a result, Müntzer loses all hope that they will lead the way in fulfilling God’s plan for apocalyptic change. The princes become part of the corruption he sees all around him: “they do violence to everyone, flay and fleece the poor farm worker, tradesman and everything that breathes,” while hanging the poor who “commit the pettiest crime.”<sup>40</sup> One of his later letters uses vivid imagery from Ezekiel 39 to describe the fate awaiting corrupt rulers: “God instructs all the birds of the heavens to consume the flesh of the princes.”<sup>41</sup> Such disillusionment leads Müntzer to place his hope in the people and conclude it is God’s plan “that power should be given to the common man.”<sup>42</sup> But the people must seize the opportunity before them, and not let the “sword grow cold” in dispatching the godless.<sup>43</sup>

On the other side of all this bloodshed lies utopia, God’s perfect kingdom. This aspect of Müntzer’s apocalyptic vision is the one least developed in his writings. He dedicates most of his energy to urging the elect to take dramatic action to topple corrupt rulers and bring about God’s kingdom. Assured of the kingdom of God’s imminent arrival and its worthiness as an object of sacrifice, Müntzer feels little need to speculate at great length on what it will look like.

<sup>35</sup> Müntzer, *Sermon to the Princes*, 246.

<sup>36</sup> For more on the role of violent language in Müntzer’s *Sermon to the Princes*, see Matthias Riedl, “Apocalyptic Violence and Revolutionary Action: Thomas Müntzer’s *Sermon to the Princes*,” in *A Companion to the Premodern Apocalypse*, ed. Michael Ryan (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 260–96.

<sup>37</sup> Müntzer, *Sermon to the Princes*, 246.

<sup>38</sup> Müntzer, *Sermon to the Princes*, 247.

<sup>39</sup> Müntzer, *Sermon to the Princes*, 250.

<sup>40</sup> Müntzer, *Vindication and Refutation*, in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 335.

<sup>41</sup> Müntzer, “Letter 89,” in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 157.

<sup>42</sup> Müntzer, “Letter 91,” in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 159.

<sup>43</sup> Müntzer, “Letter 75,” in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 142.

He does predict that, when the elect sacrifice and suffer for God's sake, they will "lay hold on the whole wide world, which will acquire a Christian government that no sack of gunpowder can ever topple."<sup>44</sup>

#### ENGELS ON RELIGION AND APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT

So despite his radicalism, Müntzer remains thoroughly Christian in his worldview and vision for the future – his writings leave little doubt on this point. Shortly we will turn to how Engels interprets and transforms Müntzer. But before doing so, it is important to examine Engels's own views on religion and apocalyptic thought, for they serve as the interpretative lens through which he studies Müntzer.

It comes as little surprise that, as an atheist, Engels is often dismissive toward religion. Nonetheless, his articles "The Book of Revelation" and "On the History of Early Christianity" show a genuine interest in apocalyptic belief. These different currents in Engels's thought result in a perspective that rejects religion's truth while recognizing its power, especially when it takes apocalyptic form.

Historical materialism provides the foundation for how Engels understands religion. This perspective sees economic relations as producing moral and religious beliefs that usually legitimize existing political and economic structures.<sup>45</sup> In the hands of the oppressed classes, morality and religion can become an outlet to express discontent with existing power relations. These beliefs, however, lack a feasible program to transform power relations so that they benefit the poor.<sup>46</sup>

As the capitalist system comes under increased strain and history marches toward a world embodying Marxist ideals, Engels is confident that religion eventually will become a vestige of the past. Religion, he argues, "will be no lasting safeguard to capitalist society. If our juridical, philosophical, and religious ideas are the more or less remote offshoots of the economical relations prevailing in a given society, such ideas cannot, in the long run, withstand the effects of a complete change in these relations."<sup>47</sup> This position

<sup>44</sup> Müntzer, "Letter 41B," 63.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 36; and Engels, "Engels to Joseph Bloch," in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 49 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2001), 35.

<sup>46</sup> Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 25 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987), 86–88.

<sup>47</sup> Engels, "Introduction to the English Edition (1892) of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*," in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 27, 300–1.

aligns with an idea advanced by Marx early in his writings: “To abolish religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand their *real* happiness.”<sup>48</sup> In short, the realization of Marxist principles will render religion obsolete by meeting people’s real needs, which religion has repeatedly failed to do.

Though Marx and Engels fundamentally agree in their views on religion, the latter’s writings reveal greater engagement with and curiosity in the subject. Notably, Engels exhibits an enduring interest in apocalyptic thought. Beyond just his study of Müntzer, he repeatedly returns to apocalyptic texts like the book of Revelation.

Based on the research available to him at the time (later discredited),<sup>49</sup> Engels takes Revelation to be the earliest Christian literature to survive.<sup>50</sup> To him, Revelation represents “with the most naïve fidelity” the ideas at the core of early Christianity.<sup>51</sup> He sees much in Revelation to commend, which is lost in later forms of Christianity. As he argues in “On the History of Early Christianity,” Revelation is gritty and combative, a feature it shares with modern socialists:

Here we have neither the dogma nor the morals of later Christianity, but instead a feeling that one is struggling against the whole world and that the struggle will be a victorious one; an eagerness for struggle and a certainty of victory which are totally lacking in the Christians of today and which are to be found in our time only at the other pole of society, among the socialists.<sup>52</sup>

Engels also conveys this idea in “The Book of Revelation,” where he notes that early Christianity and modern socialism both captivate the attention of the masses through a message “opposed to the ruling system, to ‘the powers that be.’”<sup>53</sup>

So Engels’s affinity for Revelation is evident from the parallels he draws between early Christianity and modern socialism. Both appeal to the oppressed and persecuted by offering a path to salvation that previously seemed beyond reach. Engels strikes a hopeful tone when noting that socialism looks destined to follow and surpass Christianity in its ability to spread throughout the world:

<sup>48</sup> Marx, “Introduction to *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*,” in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 176.

<sup>49</sup> Most biblical scholars today believe that Revelation was written decades after Paul’s letters and Mark, the New Testament’s earliest gospel. See Michael Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), NT 240, 420.

<sup>50</sup> Engels, “On the History of Early Christianity,” 468–69.

<sup>51</sup> Engels, “On the History of Early Christianity,” 454.

<sup>52</sup> Engels, “On the History of Early Christianity,” 457.

<sup>53</sup> Engels, “The Book of Revelation,” 113.

[I]n spite of all persecution, nay, even spurred on by it, [Christians and socialists] forge victoriously, irresistibly ahead. Three hundred years after its appearance Christianity was the recognised state religion in the Roman World Empire, and in barely sixty years socialism has won itself a position which makes its victory absolutely certain.<sup>54</sup>

Engels recognizes in early Christianity, especially in its apocalyptic beliefs, the power to spur a worldwide movement. This appeal resembles what drives people to join the growing socialist movement, even in the face of persecution.

It is important not to overstate Engels's appreciation for and interest in Christian apocalyptic thought. Engels never implies that the claims in Revelation are valid. In fact, he takes a dismissive attitude toward much of the book. He scoffs at commentators who "expect [Revelation's] prophecies are still to come off, after more than 1,800 years," given that its author thought the realization of his predictions were "at hand."<sup>55</sup> Engels also argues that biblical criticism has revealed the origin of all John's images and signs, showing his "great poverty of mind" and "that he never experienced even in the imagination the alleged ecstasies and visions he describes."<sup>56</sup> While noting some redeeming aspects of Revelation and early Christianity, Engels never deviates from his underlying skepticism toward religion.

The greatest limitation that Engels identifies in Christian apocalyptic thought is not its bizarre imagery and prophecies, but its failure to prioritize the transformation of *this* world. Practices resembling socialism did appear in early Christianity, notes Engels. Yet these practices remained limited because early Christianity focused not on accomplishing "social transformation in this world, but in the hereafter, in heaven, in eternal life after death, in the impending 'millennium.'"<sup>57</sup> From Engels's perspective, any ideology that downplays the importance of addressing injustice in the present is impoverished and should be rejected.

In sum, Engels does find value in Christian apocalyptic thought – specifically, in its power to inspire challenges to those in power. But this tradition of thought, like other forms of religious thought, ultimately falls short in specifying a concrete program to remedy the ills that prompt people to turn to religion in the first place.

<sup>54</sup> Engels, "On the History of Early Christianity," 447.

<sup>55</sup> Engels, "The Book of Revelation," 115.

<sup>56</sup> Engels, "On the History of Early Christianity," 462.

<sup>57</sup> Engels, "On the History of Early Christianity," 448.

## REINTERPRETING THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Given Engels's view that Christian apocalyptic thought fails to provide meaningful guidance in the present, it seems that he would find little value in its ideal of the kingdom of God – the ultimate end toward which history is moving according to the Christian perspective. Yet when Engels turns his attention to Müntzer, he comes across a conception of the kingdom of God that intrigues him. As Engels interprets him, Müntzer reimagines the kingdom of God as a communist ideal that inspires societal transformation. By using apocalyptic thought to fight economic exploitation, Müntzer overcomes a common concern with such thought – its purported lack of concern for addressing injustices here on earth. Engels thus finds in Müntzer's thought an apocalyptic vision that earns his respect.

In his work *The Peasant War in Germany*, Engels opts for an understanding of Müntzer that heightens his appeal within Marxism. According to this view, Müntzer largely abandons Christianity and comes close to embracing atheism. Engels paints a portrait of Müntzer no longer bound by Christianity and the Bible, but guided by reason alone:

His philosophico-theological doctrine attacked all the main points not only of Catholicism, but of Christianity generally. In the form of Christianity he preached a kind of pantheism, which curiously resembled modern speculative contemplation and at times even approached atheism. He repudiated the Bible both as the only and as the infallible revelation. The real and living revelation, he said, was reason, a revelation that has existed at all times and still exists among all peoples. To hold up the Bible against reason, he maintained, was to kill the spirit with the letter, for the Holy Spirit of which the Bible speaks is not something that exists outside us – the Holy Spirit is our reason.<sup>58</sup>

This convenient interpretation makes it easier for communists to identify with Müntzer. Engels himself makes this connection: “As Müntzer's religious philosophy approached atheism, so his political programme approached communism.”<sup>59</sup> The more atheist Müntzer appears, the more appealing his thought becomes from a Marxist perspective. And toward that end, Engels transforms Müntzer from a religious zealot confident he was fulfilling biblical prophecies into a Marxist hero guided by reason in his fight against irrationality and economic exploitation.

<sup>58</sup> Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 421–22.

<sup>59</sup> Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 422.

With this carefully crafted interpretation, Engels portrays Müntzer as a visionary, one of the few Reformation figures who pinpointed the real sources of the conflict. According to Engels, the religious wars of the sixteenth century were in reality “class struggles . . . clothed in religious shibboleths.”<sup>60</sup> In the midst of this struggle, Müntzer represents for Engels the first to give voice to those factions in society without property. Whereas his contemporaries were concerned with protecting the status quo or pursuing apocalyptic fantasies, only in Müntzer’s teachings does one find “communist notions” calling for radically altered property relations.<sup>61</sup>

When emphasizing Müntzer’s egalitarian commitments, Engels does bring attention to a real element of his thought. In his writings, Müntzer passionately condemns existing property relations and their immense harms on the peasant class, which explains why Engels is drawn to him. According to Müntzer, princes fall into the same category as robbers and thieves because they steal from the poor and claim all creatures on earth to be their property.<sup>62</sup> Such views elicited the ire of authorities, evident from the charges against him. These included starting a revolt “with the aim of making all Christians equal” and creating a community where all “things are to be held in common and distribution should be to each according to his need.”<sup>63</sup> Engels may exaggerate in places, but he is correct in stressing Müntzer’s concerns with the oppressive nature of existing property relations.

These concerns lead Engels to conclude that Müntzer understands the kingdom of God differently from his predecessors. It is here that Engels takes the most liberties in his interpretation of Müntzer. Engels starts from the assumption that Müntzer equates faith and reason. He then proceeds to argue that, for Müntzer, reason makes individuals “godlike and blessed. Heaven is, therefore, nothing of another world and is to be sought in this life. It is the mission of believers to establish this Heaven, the kingdom of God, here on earth. Just as there is no Heaven in the beyond, there is also no Hell and no damnation.”<sup>64</sup> Müntzer, as construed by Engels, sweeps away Christianity’s otherworldly distractions to focus on the heart of the matter: creating a radically new society that realizes heaven in the here and now.

In addition to locating Müntzer’s vision for God’s kingdom on earth, Engels claims that this kingdom embodies communist ideals. Müntzer’s political program, writes Engels, is “a brilliant anticipation of the conditions for the

<sup>60</sup> Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 412.

<sup>61</sup> Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 415.

<sup>62</sup> Müntzer, *Vindication and Refutation*, 335.

<sup>63</sup> Müntzer, “Interrogation and ‘Recantation’ of Müntzer,” in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 436–37.

<sup>64</sup> Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 422.

emancipation of the proletarian element that had scarcely begun” during his life. This program specifically takes the form of a call for “the immediate establishment of the kingdom of God on Earth, of the prophesied millennium.” By kingdom of God, continues Engels, Müntzer “meant a society with no class differences, no private property and no state authority independent of, and foreign to, the members of society. All existing authorities, insofar as they refused to submit and join the revolution, were to be overthrown, all work and all property shared in common, and complete equality introduced.” Müntzer is not content just to pray and hope for this ideal, but commits to “overthrow or kill” all who stand in its way.<sup>65</sup> For Engels, Müntzer transforms the kingdom of God into an ideal that promotes revolution on earth.

For Engels, Müntzer’s ideas were ahead of his time – in fact, *too far* ahead of his time. During the Reformation, property relations had not developed and reached a point of crisis where a figure like Müntzer could successfully launch a revolution in line with Marxist principles. As Engels puts it, “Not only the movement of his time, but also the age, were not ripe for the ideas of which [Müntzer] himself had only a faint notion. The class which he represented was still in its birth throes. It was far from developed enough to assume leadership over, and to transform, society.”<sup>66</sup> Müntzer stands as an early harbinger of the modern proletarian movement.<sup>67</sup> Yet the “chasm between his theories and the surrounding realities” proved too great for Müntzer, which is why his revolutionary program ultimately failed.<sup>68</sup>

Engels’s interpretation of Müntzer has proven incredibly influential, ensuring the German reformer a place of honor in the communist tradition. Statues, stamps, and other imagery from the communist era in East Germany, for instance, celebrate Müntzer as a hero and patriot (see Figure 5.1). Though successful in bringing greater attention to Müntzer, Engels’s account has the weakness of putting forward a portrait of Müntzer at odds with the reformer’s own writings. Engels asserts that the dominant culture at the time forced Müntzer to conceal his doctrines in “Christian phraseology.”<sup>69</sup> But he offers no evidence for this claim, and it is difficult to square with Müntzer’s heavy reliance on scripture and claims to be God’s chosen servant. If Müntzer’s faith is an act, it certainly is an elaborate one, for he never shows any hints of deviating from it in his public life or private writings.

<sup>65</sup> Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 422.

<sup>66</sup> Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 470.

<sup>67</sup> Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 24 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), 287; and *Dialectics of Nature*, in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 25, 318.

<sup>68</sup> Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 471.

<sup>69</sup> Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 422.



FIGURE 5.1 East German stamp of Thomas Müntzer  
 This stamp from the communist era portrays Müntzer as a “German patriot”<sup>70</sup>

A more parsimonious explanation is that Müntzer’s frequent references to God and scripture stem from sincere Christian beliefs. As the earlier overview of Müntzer’s thought makes clear, a Christian apocalyptic worldview permeates his writings. It is true that Müntzer calls for radical change on earth, as Engels notes. But for Müntzer, such change is possible only because God is empowering the elect to realize his kingdom. Nothing in Müntzer’s writings suggests that he abandons his Christian faith in favor of atheism. So rather than give the most accurate account of Müntzer’s thought, Engels molds it to make it compatible with Marxism.

#### THE INADEQUACY OF UTOPIAN SOCIALISM

Engels secularizes Müntzer by downplaying the Christian elements in his thought and reinterpreting his conception of the kingdom of God. Below we will explore *why* Engels would interpret Müntzer in this way. But to answer that question, first it is important to understand parallels between Marxism and Christian apocalyptic thought. The goal here is not to repeat the facile criticism that Marxism lacks originality and just repackages Christian apocalyptic beliefs. It rather is to identify

<sup>70</sup> The stamp is from the American Philatelic Society’s reference collection and the photo is by Mackenzie Jones.

points of convergence between Marxism and apocalyptic thought so as to highlight what makes Müntzer's thought appealing to Engels.

The parallels between Marxism and cataclysmic apocalyptic thought emerge most prominently in Marx and Engels's criticism of what they call utopian socialism. In the *Communist Manifesto*, they describe utopian socialists as rejecting "all political, and especially all revolutionary, action; they wish to attain their ends by peaceful means, and endeavour, by small experiments, necessarily doomed to failure, and by the force of example, to pave the way for the new social Gospel."<sup>71</sup> In their view, utopian socialism takes a naïve understanding of social change: someone just needs to come up with the right idea and implement it peacefully and gradually, starting with small experiments, then the ideal society will follow. This approach, warn Marx and Engels, ignores the decisive role that economic forces play in shaping history.

In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels contrasts utopian socialism with scientific socialism, which for him is Marxism. He dismisses utopian socialists for seeing no connection between their theories and "the chain of historical development." From their perspective, they "might just as well have been born 500 years earlier, and might then have spared humanity 500 years of error, strife, and suffering."<sup>72</sup> This understanding of social change, which takes a reformer's eureka moment as the impetus for such change, strikes Engels as hopelessly simplistic. He instead stresses that society advances toward the ideal as a result of changing economic forces. For theorists committed to scientific socialism, their duty is to understand those forces, how they develop, and what impact their future development will have. When economic forces are examined through a Marxist lens, the transition to the ideal society ceases to be as convenient and smooth as utopian socialism suggests.

Marxism offers a scientific approach to understanding socialism and its development, argues Engels, grounded in two concepts: historical materialism and surplus value.<sup>73</sup> Historical materialism expresses the idea that "the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in man's better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange."<sup>74</sup> Importantly, Marxism takes economic and political crisis as an inescapable part of the transition to socialism.

Why is crisis inevitable? The answer lies in the other concept Engels singles out: surplus value. Capitalists amass wealth by extracting surplus value from

<sup>71</sup> Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 6 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), 515.

<sup>72</sup> Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 288.

<sup>73</sup> Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 305.

<sup>74</sup> Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 306.

their workers – that is, the value of workers' labor that exceeds their pay.<sup>75</sup> Competition puts pressure on capitalists to increase their profits and technology makes each worker more productive, which together lead to the extraction of more and more surplus value from the workers. This exploitation ensures an increasingly impoverished proletariat relative to the bourgeoisie, as the wealth gap and antagonism between the two classes grow. These economic developments set in motion a crisis for capitalism – the rise of the bourgeoisie's "own grave-diggers," as the *Communist Manifesto* puts it.<sup>76</sup> The growing wealth gap that comes with modern industry produces a proletariat more acutely aware of its exploitation. Moreover, proletarians work closely together in factories, which makes it easier for them to organize. Eventually, the power of the proletariat overwhelms the capitalist system, resulting in a revolution where the "proletariat seizes political power and turns the means of production into State property."<sup>77</sup>

There is, of course, much debate in Marxist theory on what exactly the crisis and revolution leading to capitalism's collapse will look like. At the time of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, Marx and Engels envisioned socialism coming "only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions."<sup>78</sup> Within Marxism, Vladimir Lenin's theory of revolution – outlined on the eve of the Russian Revolution in *The State and Revolution* – argues perhaps most strongly that socialism only comes through violence. The "liberation of the oppressed class," writes Lenin, is possible only with a "violent revolution" and "the destruction of the apparatus of state power which was created by the ruling class."<sup>79</sup> The crisis giving birth to the communist state, in Lenin's view, is necessarily a violent revolution led by the vanguard of the proletariat. Regardless of whether Leninism is a perversion of Marxism or its fullest realization, it is hard to deny that there are resources in Marx and Engels's writings – which Lenin cites at length – for making the case that the communist revolution comes violently.

A few passages by Marx and Engels leave open the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism, at least in some places. Speaking in 1872, Marx identifies several nations – America, England, and perhaps Holland – "where the workers may achieve their aims by peaceful means."<sup>80</sup> Similarly, Engels speaks

<sup>75</sup> Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 305.

<sup>76</sup> Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 496.

<sup>77</sup> Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 320.

<sup>78</sup> Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 519.

<sup>79</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, trans. Robert Service (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 9.

<sup>80</sup> Marx, "On the Hague Congress," in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 23 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988), 255.

glowingly of advances made by communism in the wake of universal suffrage. He notes the irony of communists – “the ‘revolutionaries,’ the ‘overthrowers’” – “thriving far better on legal methods than on illegal methods and overthrow.”<sup>81</sup> So there also are resources in Marxist theory for the view that nonviolent revolution can bring about socialism.

Still, granting the possibility of nonviolent revolution does not eliminate crisis’s role in Marxism. According to Marxist theory, human welfare does not improve gradually and steadily. Instead, social, political, and economic conditions must worsen before they can get better. Exploitation of the workers increases as capitalism develops, before culminating in a crisis that brings the communist ideal within reach. Regardless of whether the revolution is peaceful or violent, crisis is unavoidable in the Marxist understanding of how history unfolds.

Marxism’s reliance on crisis to explain social change gives it a structure with similarities to cataclysmic apocalyptic thought. From the Marxist perspective, corruption infects capitalist society in the form of widespread exploitation of the working class. This exploitation ultimately proves unsustainable, as the antagonism between the proletariat and bourgeoisie reaches a crisis point that sets in motion capitalism’s collapse. What ensues is more than mere chaos, since economic forces empower the proletariat to take the reins of political power. The dictatorship of the proletariat ends economic exploitation and brings to a close the long history in which one class oppressed another. With the arrival of communism, the state eventually withers away and the Marxist vision of utopia becomes a reality. In sum, the Marxist understanding of social change – corruption, crisis, economic forces guiding crisis to its intended end, and utopia – contains all the elements of cataclysmic apocalyptic thought in secular form.

#### ENGELS, MARXISM, AND APOCALYPTIC HOPE

To suggest that Marxism shares features with Christianity – in particular, apocalyptic thought – is by no means a new claim. Numerous interpreters make this claim, which often serves the goal of criticizing Marxism. With varying levels of sophistication, political theorists, theologians, and others make the case that Marxism’s ties to religion are deep and inescapable. The diverse charges leveled against Marxism include that it is a philosophy motivated by apocalyptic hope,<sup>82</sup> the exhortations of

<sup>81</sup> Engels, “Introduction to Karl Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850*,” in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 27, 522.

<sup>82</sup> Richard Arneson, “Marxism and Secular Faith,” *American Political Science Review* 79, no. 3 (1985): 639; Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 200; Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical*

a prophet,<sup>83</sup> a secularized religion,<sup>84</sup> a Christian heresy,<sup>85</sup> and the god that failed.<sup>86</sup> Abraham Friesen sums up the perceived connection between Marxism and Christian apocalyptic thought, evident in the former's fascination with figures like Müntzer: "The ultimate goal of Müntzer and Marx were identical, but the means of arriving at the goal were different. Would God or man overcome tensions in society and establish the Kingdom of God on earth? . . . One could quibble over the means, but the goal remained the same."<sup>87</sup> At its heart, argues Friesen, Marxism is a utopian philosophy like apocalyptic Christianity. It only departs from Christianity in its belief that human forces, not divine ones, will realize the ideal society.

Some object to this characterization of Marxism. Roland Boer rejects the notion that there are significant ties between Marxism and apocalyptic thought.<sup>88</sup> This "infamous" charge (in Boer's words) certainly catches people's attention.<sup>89</sup> As "soon as one raises the question of Marxism and religion in a gathering," writes Boer, "at least one person will jump at the bait and insist that Marxism is a form of secularised eschatology . . . . These proponents argue that Jewish and Christian thought has influenced the Marxist narrative of

*Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 251; Friesen, *Reformation and Utopia*, 236–39; John Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), 134–42; Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 33–51; Reinhold Niebuhr, "Introduction," in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), vii–xiv; John Roberts, "The 'Returns to Religion': Messianism, Christianity and the Revolutionary Tradition. Part I: 'Wakefulness to the Future,'" *Historical Materialism* 16, no. 2 (2008): 59–84; Rothbard, "Karl Marx: Communist as Religious Eschatologist"; and David Rowley, "'Redeemer Empire': Russian Millenarianism," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 5 (1999): 1592.

<sup>83</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Rise, Growth, and Dissolution. Volume 1: The Founders*, trans. P. S. Falla (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 375.

<sup>84</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity: History and Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 68–70; Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History: A Study of Modern Despotism, Its Antecedents, and Its Literary Diffractions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 245; Gareth Jones, "How Marx Covered His Tracks: The Hidden Link between Communism and Religion," *Times Literary Supplement* 5175 (2002): 14; and David McLellan, *Marxism and Religion: A Description and Assessment of the Marxist Critique of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 161.

<sup>85</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth Publishers, 1995), vi.

<sup>86</sup> Richard Crossman, ed., *The God that Failed* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949).

<sup>87</sup> Friesen, *Reformation and Utopia*, 239.

<sup>88</sup> Boer is not the first to object to this characterization of Marxism. See also Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 14–15.

<sup>89</sup> Boer, *Criticism of Earth: On Marxism and Theology IV* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 289.

history, which is but a pale copy of its original.” That argument, he continues, usually “is used as ammunition in the hands of conservative and liberal critics.”<sup>90</sup>

In Boer’s reading of Marx and Engels, such criticism has little textual basis. Of the two, Engels shows more interest in apocalyptic thought, evident in his writings on Revelation and Müntzer. But once you dig into these texts, contends Boer, it becomes clear that “Engels was not the conduit for eschatological or apocalyptic themes in Marxism.” As evidence, Boer cites Engels’s conclusions on the book of Revelation: “By the 1850s, Engels . . . argued that [Revelation] was a purely historical text, giving us a window into early Christianity.”<sup>91</sup> So according to Boer, Revelation for Engels amounts to nothing more than a historical artifact, which has little influence on his philosophy.

Boer makes several compelling points when casting doubt on the idea that Marxism is apocalyptic Christianity in secular garb. He is right that such criticisms often are reactionary attacks with little interest in better understanding Marxism.<sup>92</sup> Given Marxism’s claims to be scientific, comparing it to religious belief is an easy way to discredit it. Boer is also right to emphasize that there is no evidence that Marx and Engels appropriate elements from Christian apocalyptic thought when formulating Marxism. The suggestion that Christian apocalyptic thought provides the foundation for Marxism is speculation with little textual evidence. Marx and Engels never explicitly draw on Revelation or other apocalyptic writings when developing Marxism’s core concepts. There are good reasons, then, for Boer’s skepticism.

But in expressing this skepticism, Boer defends conclusions that prove too strong. He argues that the apocalyptic beliefs of Revelation are merely historical artifacts with little relevance to Engels’s understanding of politics in the Industrial Age. For Boer, Engels’s real interest in Revelation lies in identifying the book as the earliest Christian writing, which best captures Christianity’s revolutionary nature.<sup>93</sup> It is here that Boer’s interpretation goes awry, for he assumes that Engels sees the revolutionary elements in Revelation and early Christianity as *distinct from* their apocalyptic elements. If Revelation best captures the heart of early Christianity in Engels’s view, that suggests he understands early Christianity as fundamentally apocalyptic in its outlook.

<sup>90</sup> Boer, *In the Vale of Tears: On Marxism and Theology V* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 219.

<sup>91</sup> Boer, *In the Vale of Tears*, 225.

<sup>92</sup> See, e.g., Rothbard, “Karl Marx: Communist as Religious Eschatologist.”

<sup>93</sup> Boer, *Criticism of Earth*, 290.

In fact, for Engels, it is precisely Christianity's apocalyptic outlook that made it revolutionary. He makes that argument in "On the History of Early Christianity." This work notes that Revelation relentlessly attacks the ruling powers, whose corruption stands in sharp contrast to God's ideal kingdom. By urging people to reject the corrupt present and set their sights instead on the ideal to come, early Christianity inspired masses of followers in the midst of crisis and persecution. This feature of early Christianity, argues Engels, resembles the process by which modern socialism achieves explosive growth. Despite being persecuted, socialists – like the early Christians – are thriving and positioning themselves to take over society.<sup>94</sup>

He echoes this point in his introduction to Marx's *Class Struggles in France*, one of Engels's last writings before his death in 1895. The text concludes by discussing Christianity's ability to flourish in the midst of crisis, while suggesting that the socialist movement has this same strength. The passage captures Engels's fascination with the power of apocalyptic hope:

It is now, almost to the year, sixteen centuries since a dangerous party of overthrow was likewise active in the Roman empire. It undermined religion and all the foundations of the state; it flatly denied that Caesar's will was the supreme law; it was without a fatherland, was international; it spread over the whole empire, from Gaul to Asia, and beyond the frontiers of the empire. It had long carried on seditious activities underground in secret; for a considerable time, however, it had felt itself strong enough to come out into the open. This party of overthrow, which was known by the name of Christians, was also strongly represented in the army . . . . The Emperor Diocletian . . . stepped in with vigour, while there was still time. He promulgated an anti-Socialist – I beg your pardon, I meant to say anti-Christian – law. The meetings of the overthrowers were forbidden, their meeting halls were closed or even pulled down, the Christian emblems, crosses, etc., were, like the red handkerchiefs in Saxony, prohibited. Christians were declared ineligible for holding public office; they were not to be allowed to become even corporals . . . . Christians were forbidden out of hand to seek justice before a court. Even this exceptional law was to no avail. The Christians tore it down from the walls with scorn; they are even supposed to have set fire to the Emperor's palace in Nicomedia in his presence. Then the latter revenged himself by the great persecution of Christians in the year 303 A.D. It was the last of its kind. And it was so effective that seventeen years later the army consisted overwhelmingly of Christians, and the succeeding autocrat of the whole Roman empire, Constantine, called the Great by the priests, proclaimed Christianity the state religion.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Engels, "On the History of Early Christianity," 447.

<sup>95</sup> Engels, "Introduction to Karl Marx's *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*," 523–24.

Engels highlights how socialism mirrors early Christianity. Despite constant attacks from the ruling powers, Christianity's apocalyptic message found a way to triumph. Socialism will also triumph, but its victory will be far more complete and lasting. For Engels, the key difference between these movements is that modern socialism, unlike early Christianity, is correct in its prescriptions and vision for social change. Whereas early Christianity ultimately failed, modern socialism will succeed in realizing its ideal.

If we are going to take seriously Marx and Engels's thought and not read into their writings Christian influences that are never mentioned, as Boer rightly suggests, we also have to take seriously their texts that *do* directly engage with Christian thought. Though Engels understands Christian apocalyptic beliefs as myths that generate false predictions, he also goes out of his way to draw parallels between such beliefs and socialism. It is not an offhand observation he makes once and quickly abandons. Rather, he repeatedly returns to this idea, from his account of Müntzer in 1850 to his writings on early Christianity in the 1890s just before his death. Clearly, Engels finds in Christian apocalyptic thought insights relevant to modern socialism.

Despite its errors, apocalyptic thought contains a kernel of truth from Engels's perspective: it identifies crisis as the vehicle through which the oppressed and powerless will finally triumph. This idea from early Christianity inspires many, but ultimately fails because Christianity sets its focus on heaven above rather than on earth below. In contrast, Engels finds in Marxism a scientific explanation for how crisis will liberate the oppressed classes. Marxism fully embodies a truth that only appears in incomplete and mistaken form in early Christianity.

So Christian apocalyptic thought does not serve as a hidden source of inspiration for Marxist thought – a position that Boer rightly rejects. A more accurate interpretation is that apocalyptic Christianity's understanding of social change shares features with Marxism. Engels appreciates these similarities without subordinating his philosophy to Christian thought.

Some may see Engels's interest in the Christian apocalyptic tradition as having little importance to his overall thought and Marxism generally – it represents little more than an idiosyncratic curiosity. But it is a mistake to dismiss Engels's engagement with apocalyptic thought too quickly, for it offers insights into Marxism. A vision for social change with parallels to apocalyptic thought offers a strategy for reconciling competing goals within Marxism – outlining a political theory that is both utopian and feasible. Marxism purports to present a vision of the ideal society that is actually achievable. Marxism, like Christian apocalyptic thought, solves the problem of the vast gap between the

corrupt present and ideal future by identifying crisis as the vehicle for radically transforming society and bringing the ideal within reach.

Ultimately, hope in the power of crisis, like that found in apocalyptic thought, is an inescapable element of Marxism. Engels seems to recognize this point, noting the seeds of Marxism's truth and power in inchoate form in early Christianity. Engels sees within apocalyptic thought the power to inspire dramatic political action in pursuit of an ideal, even when it seems hopelessly far away. Perhaps for this reason, he continually returns to Christian apocalyptic thought as a source of insight for understanding the socialist movement of his day. When encountering such thought, he refuses to entirely reject it or temper its utopian aspirations. Instead, he transforms apocalyptic thought – most obvious in how he reinterprets Müntzer's understanding of the kingdom of God – and puts its ideas in the service of earthly rather than heavenly aims.

