

7-1-1960

Attitudes Toward the Use of Force and Violence in Thomas Muentzer, Menno Simons, and Martin Luther

Ralph L. Moellering
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moellering, Ralph L. (1960) "Attitudes Toward the Use of Force and Violence in Thomas Muentzer, Menno Simons, and Martin Luther," *Concordia Theological Monthly*: Vol. 31, Article 46.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol31/iss1/46>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Attitudes Toward the Use of Force and Violence in Thomas Muentzer, Menno Simons, and Martin Luther

A Comparative Study with Reference to Prevalent Contemporary Positions

By RALPH L. MOELLERING

PREFACE

THE treatise offered here seeks to extract and delineate, from three leading figures of the Reformation period, three basic attitudes toward the use of force and violence which have been, and continue to be, assumed by the followers of Jesus Christ. When Constantine first raised the Christian banner in front of his armies he was already tending in the direction of the first position exemplified most clearly in the career and theology of Thomas Muentzer. The Crusades, organized for the avowed purpose of wresting the Holy Land from the infidel Mohammedans, are the clearest medieval prototype of this "theology of violence," while the attitude of some American clergy during World War I is the most striking reverberation of this outlook in modern history. Those who would undertake a "holy war" to destroy atheistic Communism are the latest representatives of this school of thought.

When Menno Simons renounced the use of force under any circumstances he was reaffirming the minority opinion of scattered sects that persisted during the Middle

Ages. To a certain extent, at least, he was standing in the tradition of early church fathers, like Tertullian and Cyprian, who repudiated war with outspoken disapprobation. His emphasis on peaceful living and the relief of suffering has been inherited by the Mennonites, who bear his name, and by much of the thinking which is characteristic of present-day Christian pacifism.

Martin Luther's views on war and peace are those which predominated in the medieval church and were shared, with some minor variations, by Zwingli and Calvin. The classical church tradition inherited by some of the major American denominations, along with most Lutherans, Reformed, and Anglicans in Europe, has included willingness to fight in "just wars" while recognizing them as punishments for human sin. The interpretation of Luther on this point, as in so many areas, has been far from unanimous and unambiguous. Bishop Berggrav of Norway could quote Luther as favorable to his policy of resistance against tyrants. Dean Inge could argue that Luther's subservience to the state

paved the way for the deification of the state and the usurpation of power by Fascist-minded scoundrels. This seemingly interminable debate over the intent and implication of Luther's doctrine of church and state cannot be adequately treated within the compass of this paper. It must suffice to indicate that Luther represents a third and clearly distinguishable view on the use of force and violence which is significant for past, present, and future.

I. THOMAS MUENTZER, REVOLUTIONARY SPIRITUALIST OR SOCIALIST AGITATOR?

One of the most versatile and controversial figures to appear during the period of the German Reformation, Thomas Muentzer has been anathematized and praised, interpreted, and reinterpreted. His fiery and restless mind was embroiled with radical conceptions of the nature of Christianity. While Karl Holl has defended the thesis that he can be viewed as "the originator of Anabaptism" latter-day Marxists claim him as a precursor of modern socialism.¹ Robert Friedman, a Mennonite scholar, finds him so vulgar and fanciful that he doubts whether he can rightfully be classified as a Christian.²

Few have doubted the intellectual competence of Thomas Muentzer. Born in Stolberg in Thuringia, about five or six

years younger than Luther, he was equipped with a university education and familiarized with the Biblical languages, read patristic and scholastic theology, and was immersed in the writings of the German mystics. His voracious reading seems to have been stimulated by a desperate internal struggle. As a troubled soul in search of certainty he shifted from one position to another in an effort to resolve his personal conflicts.³

In 1513 he became a Roman Catholic priest and was soon promoted to be the provost of a monastery. In 1519 he became father-confessor of a nunnery. Momentarily he became an exuberant follower of Luther and joined the Wittenberger in helping to demolish the massive structure of the medieval church. Yet he began to move away from Luther almost as soon as he had found him. In 1520 he was a priest in Zwickau, where he was exposed to a revival of Taborite doctrines in the "prophecies" of Nicolaus Storch, who claimed to be the recipient of direct revelation and apocalyptic visions. Muentzer was attracted by the thought that God was communicating directly with His elect.⁴ Soon

³ Annemarie Lohmann, *Zur geistlichen Entwicklung Thomas Muentzers* (Leipzig und Berlin: Teubner, 1931), who characterizes the different stages in his spiritual pilgrimage until he emerges as an independent reformer: (1) Muentzer under spiritualist direction until 1521; (2) The formation of the new religious principle in the Prague Manifesto of November 1521; (3) Peaceful expansion and elaboration of his teaching, 1522 until July 1524; (4) Violent progression (September 1523, according to plan after July 1524) and the reaction to his teaching. All translations from the German are my responsibility.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16: "The Spirit is not revealed only in the written Word of the Bible, but it is poured out immediately into the soul of man."

¹ Two important Marxist studies in East Germany have been concerned with his role in the Peasant's Revolt as an anticipation of proletarian revolutions under capitalism: M. M. Simirin, *Die Volksreformation des Thomas Muentzer und der grosse Bauernkrieg* (a translation from the Russian, Berlin, 1952), and Alfred Meusel, *Thomas Muentzer und seine Zeit mit einer Auswahl der Dokumente des grossen deutschen Bauernkrieges* (Berlin, 1952).

² "Muentzer, Thomas," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, III (Scottsdale, Pa.: The Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), 785—789.

he was induced to share the conviction that the final Judgment was imminent.

Already during his "Zwickau period" some of the main outlines of Thomas Muentzer's attitude toward the use of force and violence began to take shape. He adopted and expanded Storch's expectation that the people chosen by God, the true Christians, would rise up and exterminate all the godless. These ruthless and destructive actions were necessary preliminaries to the second advent of Christ and the inauguration of the millennium. Contemporaries observed and lamented the change that had come over Muentzer. They detected a lust for blood which sometimes gave vent to sheer raving. The imagery of violence in the Book of Revelation took on a special significance for him, and he began to show a marked preference for dwelling on such incidents in the Old Testament as Elijah's slaughter of the priests of Baal, Jehu's slaying of the sons of Ahab, and Jael's assassination of the unsuspecting Sisera.⁵

Renouncing the pursuit of learning, the highly educated Muentzer now repudiated the ideals of the humanists and incessantly propagated his eschatological-centered faith among the impoverished miners and disgruntled weavers of Zwickau. Using the pulpit to utter fierce denunciations of the local Franciscans and opposing the preacher favored by the well-to-do burghers, he earned the enmity of the town council and was peremptorily dismissed. A popular uprising in his behalf was promptly subdued, and the turbulent rebel was compelled to take refuge in Prague.

⁵ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1957), pp. 252, 253.

At this new location Thomas Muentzer issued a manifesto announcing the formation of a new church in Bohemia which was to consist solely of the elect and which would depend for its guidance upon direct inspiration from God.⁶ His own role is now defined in terms of the parable of the wheat and the tares: "Harvesttime is here, so God Himself has hired me for His harvest. I have sharpened my scythe. . . ."⁷

Muentzer found Bohemia uncongenial to his bold declaration, and he was soon expelled. During Luther's absence at the Wartburg he lodged in Wittenberg with Carlstadt, who was in agreement with him in many respects but unwilling to follow him in his most extreme views. As a restless wanderer Muentzer moved from place to place in central Germany, sustained by a now unshakable confidence in his prophetic mission. Renouncing his academic degrees he signed his papers only as "Christ's messenger." His deprivations and sufferings he understood as strenuous training for his messianic task: "The living God is sharpening His scythe in me, so that later I can cut down the red poppies and the blue cornflowers."⁸

From Easter of 1523 until August 1524 Muentzer was a priest in Allstedt, a small town in the Harz mountains, where his preaching attracted large throngs from the neighboring mining districts. Here he manifested some of his diversified interest and ability by writing a number of liturgical tracts on Baptism and the German

⁶ Otto G. Brandt, *Thomas Muentzer: Sein Leben und seine Schriften* (Jena and Leipzig, 1933), p. 60: "Den wer den Geist Christi nit in sich spueret, ja der ihn nit gewiszlich hat, der ist nit ein Glied Christi, er ist des Teufels. . . ."

⁷ Cohn, p. 255.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Mass. Like Luther, he married a former nun and reared children. Temporarily he appeared to be content to assume a more moderate position. As late as July 9, 1523, he sent a rather conciliatory letter to Luther. In the same year he wrote in an evangelical spirit to his brethren in Stolberg.⁹

This comparatively peaceful interlude was soon terminated. In the winter of 1523—24 Muentzer founded a strange conspiratorial society called the League of the Elect, designed to execute the program he had formulated at Prague—if necessary by force of arms. From this time on Muentzer seems to have lost touch with reality and embarked on a road of fanciful apocalypticism and uncompromising fanaticism which could only lead to ruination. Luther recognized this trend and began to refer to him as a *Schwaermer*.¹⁰

With a mixture of curiosity and alarm Duke John of Saxony came to Allstedt in July 1524 and asked Muentzer to preach a sermon. Taking his text from the second chapter of Daniel, Muentzer complied and took full advantage of the opportunity to expound his characteristic ideas and develop more fully what has been called his "theology of violence."

The princes are warned that they must choose between obedience to God or submission to the devil. The last of the world empires foreseen by Daniel is approaching its doom. The Satanic usurpers of God's domain must be overthrown and extinguished. Those serpents, the clergy, and those eels, the secular rulers and lords, contaminate one another in a squirming heap of corruption. That fainthearted and half-

way reformer in Wittenberg¹¹ lacks confidence in the living Spirit and is unwilling to carry through to its logical completion the movement which he has inaugurated. Luther has devised a comfortable reformation in which the stress is laid on individual salvation. A "honey sweet Christ" is made available through the simple process of personal faith in contradiction of the fact that the real Christ is the "bitter Christ," who can only be received as we become identified with Him in His sufferings. Those who would be saints of God must not shrink away from the dire prospect of bearing the cross. For the princes this means the unpleasant but unavoidable commission from God to purge the ranks of Christendom of its pretenders and impostors:

... Drive His enemies from the elect. . . . Don't give us any old jokes about how the power of God should do it without your application of the sword, otherwise may it rust away from you in its scabbard! . . . God is your protection and will teach you to fight against His foes. . . . The godless have no right to live except as the elect wish to grant it to them. . . .¹²

Indirect evidence related to Muentzer's position on the use of force is found in the letters addressed to him by Conrad Grebel and his friends from Zurich in September 1524. Addressing him as a beloved brother in Christ and commending him for

¹¹ Explicitly called Brother Fattened Swine and Brother Soft Life in the "Sermon Before the Princes," in George H. Williams, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, The Library of Christian Classics, XXV (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 66—69; cf. Carl Hinrichs, *Thomas Muentzer: Politische Schriften* (Halle, 1950), pp. 3—28, where detailed commentary is included.

⁹ Brandt, p. 62.

¹⁰ *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, III, 785.

his writings against "fictitious faith" and the ritualistic customs of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, these pacifist-minded Anabaptists nevertheless feel constrained to admonish him regarding some dangerous policies which they have detected and which they wish he would disavow. They cannot understand why he continues to tolerate chanting and the Mass. Moreover, they have been disturbed by reports that he advocates the use of the sword to protect the adherents of the Gospel. True believers are sheep likely to be slaughtered at any moment. "They must be baptized in anguish and affliction." Even under the Old Testament dispensation war was a misfortune. Now it is to be categorically renounced.¹³

The final objective of Muentzer, the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, which he had first announced in the Prague Manifesto, now became a burning passion for him. Having spurned the "spiritless flesh at Wittenberg," and having abandoned any hope of converting the rulers to his views, he turned to the peasant population as the only redemptive means available. A violent upheaval spearheaded by the common people would be necessary to dislodge the heathen princes and inaugurate the reign of God's saints.¹⁴

In the free imperial city of Muehlhausen

¹³ Williams, p. 80. The postscript or second letter to "Brother Thomas" was written after the Swiss evangelicals had heard about the bellicose sermon which Muentzer had delivered before the princes of Saxony. If the report is true they want him to know that they are offended, and they plead with him to abstain from any further utterances which would defend war.

¹⁴ Muentzer's attack on Luther, "Schutzrede wider das geistlose Fleisch zuo Wittenberg," Hinrichs, pp. 72—101; cf. Lohmann, pp. 65 to 68.

Muentzer found a large proportion of paupers who were susceptible to his tempestuous rabble rousing. Obsessed by his conviction that the destruction of the ungodly was impending, he patrolled the streets at the head of an armed band with a red crucifix and a naked sword carried in front of him.

On the title page of an incendiary pamphlet published at Muehlhausen Muentzer wrote:

Beware, I have put my words into thy mouth; I have lifted thee above the people and above the empires that thou mayest build and plant. A wall of iron against the kings, princes, priests, and for the people hath been erected. Let them fight, for victory is wondrous, and the strong and godless tyrants will perish.¹⁵

With the outbreak of the Peasants' War Muentzer proved himself a revolutionary in action, although he does not seem to have had a voice in the main uprisings in the south and west of Germany. His influence was limited to the Thuringian sector, where the peasants scoured the countryside, looting and burning monasteries and convents. In a letter sent to his followers at Allstedt he issued a call to arms:

I tell you, if you will not suffer for God's sake, then you must be the devil's martyrs. So watch out! Don't be so discouraged, indolent, do not show adulation for the perverse visionaries, the godless scoundrels. Start and fight the Lord's conflict. It is already overdue. . . . If there are but three of you who, confiding in God, seek only His name and honor, you will not need to

¹⁵ Quoted by Friedrich Engels, *The Peasants War in Germany* (New York: International Publishers, 1926), p. 69.

fear a hundred thousand. . . . Now go at them, go ahead, go ahead! The rascals are as dispirited as dogs. . . . Pay no attention to the lamentations of the godless! They will beg you in such a cordial way, and whine and cry like children. Don't show any pity. . . . Strike, go ahead, while the iron is hot! Don't let your sword get cold! Don't allow it to become feeble! . . . Throw their tower to the ground! As long as they are alive you will never get rid of your fear of men. One can't speak to you about God as long as they are reigning over you. Push ahead, attack, while you have daylight. God goes ahead of you, so follow, follow. . . .¹⁶

About 8,000 peasants finally grouped themselves into an ill-equipped army and appealed to Muentzer to provide them leadership. Comparing himself to Gideon, the ill-fated prophet left Muehlhausen with some 300 of his most devoted and rabid followers and joined the peasant camp at Frankhausen. Peasants from neighboring villages were threatened by force if they did not join the "army of the Lord." An urgent appeal was sent to the town of Erfurt for reinforcements, and defiant letters were sent to the enemy. To Count Ernest of Mansfeld Muentzer wrote:

Say, you wretched, shabby bag of worms, who made you a prince over the people whom God has purchased with His precious blood? . . . By God's mighty power you are delivered up to destruction. . . . The eternal, living God has commanded that you be removed from the throne of power which has been given to us. For you are useless to the Christian cause, you

¹⁶ Brandt, pp. 74, 75. Luther's much-quoted (often out of context) ferocious pamphlet *Against the Thievish, Murderous Hordes of the Peasants* can be better understood as a fearful reaction to Muentzer's threats.

are a harmful *Staubbesen* (birch rod) to the friends of God. . . .¹⁷

Philip of Hesse, strengthened by recruits from other princes, and with ample artillery, could afford to treat the unfortunate peasants with contempt. Nevertheless, terms for submission were offered; the chief demand being the surrender of Thomas Muentzer and his closest associates. In all probability the offer would have been accepted, but the self-acclaimed prophet made an impassioned plea in which he declared that God had spoken to him and had promised to catch the cannon balls of the enemy in his cloak sleeves. The effectiveness of the speech was enhanced by the appearance of a rainbow which, as the symbol on Muentzer's banner, was readily interpreted as a signal of divine approval.¹⁸ Confident that some stupendous miracle would occur to transform apparent defeat into sudden victory the peasants were singing "Come, Holy Spirit," when the impatient princes fired a salvo. The results were immediate and catastrophic: the disorganized peasants fled in panic, while the cavalry hunted them down and slaughtered them by the hundreds. Muentzer escaped, but his hiding place was soon uncovered. After being tortured he was beheaded in the camp of the princes on May 27, 1525.¹⁹

The memory of Thomas Muentzer has been preserved by friends and critics alike. Even though he never designated himself

¹⁷ "Muentzers Brief an Graf Ernst von Mansfeld," May 12, 1525, *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 78.

¹⁸ According to the *Histori Thomas Muentzers*, a work which was written while the story was still fresh in people's memory and which evinces a rather high standard of factual accuracy.

¹⁹ Cohn, pp. 269—271.

as an Anabaptist, he was regarded as the "evil genius" of the movement by Luther, Zwingli, and Bullinger. The debate is still raging as to what affinities of belief, and what historical contacts, can be demonstrated between the champion of the peasants, the Swiss evangelicals, and the Mennonites.

More astounding is the apotheosis which he has received at the hand of Russian and German Communists, from Engels through Kautsky to the present day.

Marxist apologists who have been engrossed in a search for historical precedents to modern Communism have been much attracted to a study and interpretation of Thomas Muentzer. His bristling defiance of the political and ecclesiastical order of his time has merited their applause. In his dependence on force and violence they see one who was a 16th-century revolutionary with tactics and objectives akin to their own. No less than the Swiss evangelicals, who were his contemporaries, they are eager to proffer him the hand of fellowship and call him comrade. The question continues to be debated: Was Muentzer a revolutionary spiritualist or a socialist agitator?

Writing in 1850 Friedrich Engels professed to find many parallels between the situation in Germany during the Peasants' War and the revolutionary movements which erupted in Europe in 1848. The numerous apocalyptic references in Muentzer's writings are dismissed as concessions made to the mentality of the people he was dealing with in a day when religious superstitions abounded and retained a tremendous hold on the imagination of the common people. "Under the cloak of Christian forms," opines Engels, "he preached a kind of pantheism . . . and at times even taught

open atheism." The Spirit, which is the only reliable interpreter of the Bible for Muentzer, is identified by Engels as human reason. The heresies concealed under Christian phraseology, according to this Marxist evaluation, include a denial of heaven and hell and a political program designed to implement an equalitarian commonwealth on earth. By the kingdom of God Muentzer understood a new ordering of society in which class differences would be dissolved and private property confiscated. All existing authorities who did not support the revolution were to be overthrown by force. Princes and nobles who did not surrender to the revolutionary regime were to be liquidated without mercy.²⁰

While admitting that Muentzer as a child of his age could not have a full insight into theoretical Marxism, Engels claims that he often "went far beyond the immediate ideas and demands of the plebeians and peasants." Just as farsighted Communists have always been in the vanguard of the trend toward socialism, so Muentzer molded a party out of the revolutionary elements that "still represented only a small minority of the insurgent masses."²¹

Echoes of Thomas Muentzer's attitude toward the use of force and violence are also found at times among professing Christians. Among the more weird and unusual sects one often finds apocalyptic imagery reminiscent of Storch and Muentzer. Rarely do they express a desire to take up arms themselves to usher in the kingdom of God, but the way they denounce existing authorities in state and church is similar to the verbal abuse which

²⁰ Friedrich Engels, pp. 65—68.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Muentzer heaped upon Luther and the princes. Although the theological views of Charles Russell and Judge Rutherford would depart in many respects from those of the most notorious radical reformer of the 16th century, there is much in the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses that may cause us to exclaim, "Shades of Thomas Muentzer!" Just as the false reformers and godless rulers had once combined ecclesiastical and political power to prevent the inauguration of the reign of God's saints and to enforce the oppression of the peasants, so in the 20th century we see the churches, commercial enterprises, and world empires allied to frustrate God's purposes and persecute Jehovah's Witnesses. Babylon, the mother of harlots (symbolic of religious power), is married to Satan. Rutherford wrote:

In these latter times the three elements, under the supervision of the devil, have united in forming the most subtle and wicked world power of all time. They operate under the title of Christendom, which is a fraudulent and blasphemous assumption that they constitute Christ's kingdom on earth.²²

The refusal of the Witnesses to bear arms and salute the flag is not due to any pacifist views but to their contention that the prevailing political powers are demonic. On the basis of an allegorical, and often fantastically farfetched, interpretation of prophecies (again akin to Muentzer) they foresee the final battle of Armageddon, in which Satan will marshal all his visible forces against Jehovah. In their vivid portrayal of this decisive clash between good and evil they picture the priests, politicians,

and capitalists from all the nations marshaling all their tanks, planes, and weapons of war and entering into the "Valley of Threshing." In Muentzer's vision the saints were required to bear the brunt of the battle. In Rutherford's scheme the faithful witnesses will occupy the mountainsides in the role of spectators, while Christ, the invisible field general of Jehovah, strikes down Satan's armies with the flail of destruction. The honor of Jehovah will be vindicated, the obstacles to the establishment of a theocracy will have been removed, and the cherished dreams of the Witnesses will be fulfilled.²³

The spirit of Thomas Muentzer and his "theology of violence," supposedly anchored to a more sane and solid tradition of faith and teaching, have at times found their way into "respectable" Protestantism. This has been especially true during periods of chaotic confusion and devastating wars, when emotions are likely to be charged with hatred and otherwise reasonable men lose their stability and restraint.

A particularly strong case could be presented for a resurgence of Muentzer's millennial and bellicose views as being widely exhibited in the United States during World War I. The parallel becomes most striking when we remember that both share a vision of a better world emerging from the use of force in God's name. Just as Thomas Muentzer could call upon the princes to use their power to uproot the godless and later mobilize the peasantry to wage war against their tyrannical oppressors, so American churchmen in 1917 and 1918 could call upon our citizenry to fight a "holy war" against the pagan Huns and

²² *Deliverance* (Brooklyn: The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society), p. 53.

²³ Rutherford, *Religion* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society), pp. 337-357.

the nefarious Kaiser. Just as the fiery preacher of Allstedt could dream of the rule of God's saints on earth, so the optimistic clergy during the first few decades of the 20th century could visualize God's will being "done on earth as it is in heaven" because the world would become "safe for democracy" and permanent peace would be assured. Somehow the contradiction between idealism and violence is passed over. Oddly enough even the ethics of Jesus are strained to conform to this position. That Jesus was a pacifist was categorically denied. J. Wesley Johnston of the John Street Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City affirmed: "Christ was the greatest fighter the world has ever seen." He was "the Lion of the Tribe of Judah," and "surely every believer in Christ . . . will unsheathe his sword and gladly give his life . . . to help win the fight against the forces of cruelty, abomination and hell."²⁴

The editor of the *Christian Register* (Unitarian) was sure that Jesus not only would endorse Christian participation in the war but also would eagerly join in the killing:

As Christians, of course, we say Christ approves (of the war). But would he fight and kill? . . . There is not an opportunity to deal death to the enemy that he would shirk from or delay in seizing! He would take bayonet and grenade and bomb and rifle and do the work of deadliness against that which is the most deadly enemy of his Father's kingdom in a thousand years. . . . That is the inexorable truth about Jesus Christ and this war; and we rejoice to say it.²⁵

²⁴ Quoted by Ray H. Abrams, *Preachers Present Arms* (New York: Round Table Press, 1933), p. 63.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Just as Muentzer had used preaching as the means for arousing the populace and bolstering their morale, so the crusading ministers in the United States used their pulpits to inflame passions and converted their churches into recruiting stations. The shameful behavior of much of the American clergy during our first intervention in a world conflict demonstrates that Christian leaders today are not immune to the ever-recurring temptation to achieve their goals by forsaking the sword of the Spirit and resorting to the tactics employed by men like Thomas Muentzer.

For the most part ecclesiastical leaders learned their painful lesson through the disillusionment following World War I. Yet there was a tendency in some quarters to again view our entrance into World War II as a righteous cause meriting divine approval. Militant Dean Beekman, an Episcopal prelate, made 509 speeches in churches, colleges, and civic clubs around the country depicting the horrors of Nazism. After we became embroiled in the conflict his injunction was: "Don't pray for peace; pray for triumph."²⁶ Some Bible Fundamentalists, displaying an unmistakable Calvinistic strain commingled with certain Anabaptist traits, became so vociferous in their patriotism as to be on the verge of resurrecting the spirit of Thomas Muentzer. Apocalyptic references scattered throughout their publications made Hitler and Mussolini personifications of evils prophesied in Ezekiel and Revelation, or sometimes Stalin was announced as the Antichrist.²⁷

²⁶ Ralph Luther Moellering, *Modern War and the American Churches* (New York: The American Press, 1956), p. 60.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 67.

Wherever the churches or American religiosity tends to identify the United States with God's people, and its foreign policy with God's objectives in history, there is danger of reverting to a Muentzerlike theology of violence. Whenever Christians depict Soviet Russia as the center of all godlessness, and begin to talk about "preventive warfare," we may be sure that the spirit of Thomas Muentzer is again rising to haunt and disturb us. Deplorable as it may be, the position he assumed on the use of force by Christians has not yet been obliterated.

II. MENNO SIMONS, ADVOCATE OF CHRISTIAN PACIFISM OR POLITICAL IRRESPONSIBILITY?

The most outstanding Anabaptist leader of the Low Countries during the 16th century, and the progenitor of a movement which has persisted to this day in America and Europe, was Menno Simons, born 13 years after Luther and about 7 years younger than Muentzer. At the age of 28 he was ordained as a priest at Utrecht. Doubts regarding transubstantiation were early planted in his mind by the Sacramentists, clergy in the Netherlands under the influence of Cornelius Hoen.²⁸ To resolve his inner conflicts Menno turned to a diligent study of the Scriptures. He acknowledges that he found enlightenment in the writings of Martin Luther which came to his attention. His estrangement from the Roman Church was a gradual development. Disturbed by the execution of an itinerant tailor in a neighboring city for the offense of being rebaptized, he began to examine

the Bible on this point, and soon found himself questioning the validity of infant Baptism. Unsatisfied by the explanation of the reformers, he found himself out of harmony with Lutherans and Zwinglians as well as with the Romanists. About 1531 he reached "the momentous decision" that Baptism on confession of faith alone was Scriptural, but it was five more years before he was willing to risk an open break with the church which had nurtured him.²⁹

His willingness to assume an independent status was accelerated by his revulsion to the violent spirit displayed by the "perverted sect of Muenster." Menno was deeply shaken by the debacle of the radical followers of Melchior Hoffmann. Some of the more zealous and pious members of his own parish were swept away by the fanaticism of the Muensterite delusion. His own brother seems to have been among those who supported a teaching of vengeance and liquidation of the ungodly. Deeply distressed by these abominable doctrines, he tried desperately to counteract their pernicious influence with public denunciation from the pulpit and pastoral visits on the members of his flock.³⁰

A sharp polemic written at this time and directed against "the blasphemy of Jan van Leiden" begins to delineate his position against war and violence as instruments to which Christians may resort for the righting of wrongs or for the establishment of a theocracy on earth. There is only one true King and Lord, Jesus Christ, who possesses all authority in heaven and on

²⁸ Hoen's views regarding the Lord's Supper were published in Switzerland by Zwingli at the very time that Menno was tormented by doubt. They were publicly repudiated by Luther at the Marburg Colloquy.

²⁹ Biography of Menno Simons by Cornelius Krahn, *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, III, 577—583.

³⁰ John Horsch, "Menno Simons' Attitude Toward the Anabaptists of Muenster," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, X (1936), 55 ff.

earth.³¹ The church is His spiritual kingdom, within which love and peace prevail. Those who advocate the use of force to consummate the rule of God have broken their covenant relation with the Lord.

Referring to the armor of the Christian according to Ephesians 6 Menno reminds his readers that "the weapons of our warfare are not carnal." The only security guaranteed the follower of Christ is to be armed with the sword of the Spirit against the wiles of the devil. The person who wants to abide in Christ must take up his cross and follow after Him. All the injunctions of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount implying nonresistance (turn the other cheek, love your enemies, be perfect) must be taken seriously. This is the true voice of Christ, which must be heeded.

Quoting St. Paul, Menno affirms that the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance. It is always wrong to return evil for evil. The ideal is to live peaceably with all men. Give place to wrath and leave vengeance to the Lord. Overcome evil with good. We should pattern our mind after that of Jesus Christ, and we observe that He "was minded to suffer." If we are to be patient "until the coming of the Lord, then surely it is forbidden to fight, inasmuch as the Lord is not yet come."³²

In flat contradiction to the views of Thomas Muentzer, Menno insists that we cannot arrogate to ourselves the authority

to be God's angels who root up the tares. Some say that the Lord wants to punish Babylon and Christians are to be His instruments, but Christ must return for the final Judgment before His enemies are castigated.³³

At first thought it may seem inconsistent in Menno's writings to discover that such an uncompromising advocate of passive resistance does not shrink from dwelling on the torments of the eternally damned. Even though men should not lift a finger to resist the encroachments of evil it is fully within the province of God to mete out an unmitigated punishment of the fiercest type imaginable. Unless people are born again in this life they will be hurled into the bottomless lake of fire and brimstone in the next life.³⁴

We are likely to wonder whether Menno and his followers were not unconsciously tempted to find a sinful compensation, if not secret delight, in the thought that their enemies who abuse them now find the tables turned in the hereafter as they squirm in the miseries of eternal hellfire.

The climax in Menno's spiritual conflict came with the tragedy at the Old Cloister,

³³ Ibid., pp. 46, 47.

³⁴ Cf. his vivid description of the horrible punishments meted out by God's vengeance on the evil and impenitent, in the *Complete Works of Menno Simons*, pp. 202, 203, 205: "In the 'terrible, unbearable judgment' the persecutors of the Anabaptists will be told, 'Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.'

"Then shall your laughter be changed into weeping, your joy into sorrow, your abundant earthly life into everlasting death, your luxury into eternal woe, your pride into dust and worms, your violence into suffering, your beauty into ugliness, and your cruel and unmerciful tyranny be rewarded with unquenchable hellfire." Cf. "Defense to All Theologians," *ibid.*, p. 538.

³¹ Jesus is identified with Melchisedek, king of Salem (peace). He is the Second David and the fulfillment of many prophecies from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah which speak of the peaceful rule of King Messiah. Cf. "The Blasphemy of John of Leiden" in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, 1956), pp. 38 ff.

³² Ibid., p. 45.

near Bolsward, when some 300 misguided zealots imbued with the revolutionary fervor of the Muensterites lost their lives. "The blood of these people," he said, "became such a burden to me that I could not endure it nor find rest in my soul."³⁵ No longer could he evade his responsibility of helping the erring sheep. Turning to God with sighs and tears, pleading for forgiveness and courage, he had his conversion experience.

From this time on he openly attacked the evils of Romanism. His complete secession from the church followed after about nine months. Exactly when he was rebaptized is not clear. During the next year he retired from active life to contemplate the implications of his decision. Then he accepted ordination as an elder in the Anabaptist brotherhood of northern Holland, where he labored from 1536 to 1543. His writings were not learned treatises but simple books which represented sincere efforts to meet the immediate needs of the common man. The remaining 18 years of his life were devoted to building up the church in northwest Germany, where persecution was not so severe.³⁶

Present-day Mennonites claim to find their origin in the movement initiated by Conrad Grebel and his colleagues in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1525, and they recognize Obbe Philips as the earliest organizer of the Anabaptists in Friesland, but they are proud to be named after Menno Simons, for they esteem him as "the heaven-sent leader who rallied the scattered

brethren and gave them the leadership in faith and spirit and doctrine which they needed." Scorning "dungeon, fire, and sword," he brought them through their great tribulation.³⁷

Not a systematic theologian of great merit, Menno merely projected his vision of two fundamental Biblical ideals, a concept of practical holiness and an emphasis on the church as a voluntary association kept under constant surveillance by the leaders and preserved under discipline by rigid application of the ban. Christianity related to everyday life meant for him the resolute abandonment by Christ's followers of all carnal strife and violence, indeed the use of force in any manner. For him the church was the representative and agent of Christ on earth, and as such it must preserve itself unstained by the contaminating and degrading influences of the political order. A thoroughgoing separation from the sin of the world necessitated a repudiation of armed conflict.

In his treatise on "The New Birth" Menno Simons indulges in a typical stern denunciation of sin and demands a heartfelt religion rather than one which becomes absorbed in the attraction of external ceremonies. Those who have received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit are inwardly purified and will accede without qualification or compromise to the absolute ethic of nonresistance. The life of love does not allow for retaliatory acts. The children of peace are concerned with eliminating human suffering, not with adding to the brutalities of the world. They should be eager to give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty. The regenerated people of God "have beaten their swords into plowshares

³⁵ Harold Bender, "A Brief Biography of Menno Simons" in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, p. 12.

³⁶ To find the peace he desired, however, he was compelled to flee from place to place. From 1546 to 1561 he was in the territory of Holstein.

³⁷ Bender, p. 28.

and their spears into pruning hooks and know war no more."³⁸

In the "Foundation of Christian Doctrine" Menno warns, "Let everyone be careful lest he transgress in the matter of the sword, lest he perish with the sword."³⁹ The weapons of Christians are not instruments for breaking down the walls and gates of cities and causing human blood to be "shed in torrents like water." Christian reliance should be placed solely on the inward Baptism with Spirit and fire, which alone can overthrow the citadels of Satan. Physical force must be repudiated "even if we should be torn into a thousand pieces, and if as many false witnesses rose up against us as there are spears of grass in the field and grains of sand upon the seashore." The use of iron and metal implements of warfare are left in the hands of the ungodly, "who, alas, regard human blood and swine's blood about alike." Patience is the best weapon of defense, Christ is an impregnable Fortress, the Word of God is a sword, and victory is assured by "a courageous, firm, unfeigned faith in Jesus Christ."⁴⁰

In commenting on Abraham's admirable faith Menno Simons might be expected to be embarrassed by the narrative in which the patriarch resorted to armed intervention and killed four marauding kings in order to rescue his nephew Lot. But Abraham is lauded for his implicit trust in the living God and for daring to risk his life. "This is an example to all the spiritual children of Abraham that they should so

love their brethren." In no way does this imply, however, that Christians are permitted to use force even if they found their fellow believers in such dire straits as Lot. Our ethical imperative is to "suffer patiently and not fight and do battle with swords and muskets." The only positive action which we can take is to open our doors to war refugees and heal the wounds of the victims of violence. Here the pattern is set for the contemporary leadership of peace churches in alleviating the sufferings of war refugees. "We should risk our lives for the brethren" even if we know in advance that we are endangering ourselves.⁴¹ Evidently Menno would have found it possible to give physical sustenance to someone taking part in an underground resistance movement to political tyranny or to offer aid to escapees from East Berlin.

Some observers may wonder whether there is not an inconsistency between the peace ethic and the Mennonite insistence on the vigorous use of the ban. While rejecting any use of physical force, apparently even to prevent the worst crime, the Anabaptists are willing to impose the most severe kind of church discipline. This may raise the question in some minds whether the worst anguish that can be inflicted upon a fellow human being is always physical pain. What about the mental torture accompanying social ostracism? Would a whipping or a gun wound be worse than to be treated with disdain by the members of your own family?⁴²

³⁸ "True Christian Faith," *ibid.*, p. 347.

³⁸ *The Complete Works of Menno Simons*, p. 94.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁴² "Admonition on Church Discipline," *ibid.*, p. 412: "Do not have anything to do . . . with people who . . . reject and separate themselves from the body of fellowship of Christ, no matter

The Anabaptists believed that there were significant distinctions to be observed between the old and new covenants. The original agreement which God decreed involved a theocracy. In the days of ancient Israel the covenant people were justified in using force. The body of believers and the body politic were identical. The sword of Israel, however, was not bequeathed to the church of Christ but to worldly governments.

Thus Menno and his Anabaptist followers do not think it is incongruous to require unexcepting nonresistance to evil on the part of believers while granting the state the right to use "police power" to preserve law and order. The Mennonites are far from being anarchists. In accord with Romans 13 they agree that the Christian should render honor and obedience to the government. But this does not make it obligatory that Christians fight in Caesar's armies. When faced with induction into the armed forces there is a higher law at stake. Obedience to God takes precedence over compliance with man-made laws. The Christian cannot administer justice in the state; that is not his calling. The real foundation for Christian ethics is found in Romans 12, where retribution is left in God's hands. Let the Christian limit himself to a program of charitable activity; let him overcome evil only by doing good.

whether it be father or mother, sister or brother, man or wife, son or daughter. . . ."

It should be noted that Menno uses a distinctly evangelical approach toward the use of the ban, emphasizing that it is intended to save and not destroy the offender. Late in his life he was drawn into a controversy on the subject of church discipline which embittered his last years. In the heat of polemical debate he felt compelled to adopt a more stringent position than he had originally held.

Whoever has the inward peace of Christ will banish all thought of violent action.⁴³

Is Menno promoting the most desirable form of pacifism? Will adherence to his principles be an effective witness that tends to curb evil, or will it lead to political irresponsibility? What if all Christians refused to participate in the affairs of government? Are they not then surrendering by default to demonic powers? These are some of the ever-recurring criticisms that dispute the soundness of this position. Is it possible to withdraw from a corrupt world in such a way that the "pure Christian" is not tainted by it? As thoughtful modern pacifists have been compelled to admit—nonparticipation in military combat does not exempt the pacifist Christian from all guilt in what is transpiring.

Menno is eager to be exonerated from all charges of complicity with dangerous radicals like the Muensterites. Doctrines which stir up sedition and polygamy are abominations and patent heresies. "We hate and reprove (in evangelical fashion, that is) those that fight with the sword, steal, rob, or in any manner wrong anyone on earth. . . ." ⁴⁴ His repeated complaint is that those who would judge his followers as tumultuous are the very ones who give unqualified endorsement to the bloody wars of their emperors, kings, and princes. Some of his antagonists he accuses of courting the favor of the powers that be even to

⁴³ "Brief and Clear Confession," *ibid.*, p. 423. Cf. "Reply to False Accusations," *ibid.*, pp. 548—550: "The office of the magistrate is ordained by God, but 'Love compels us respectfully and humbly to show all high officials . . . how they should rightfully execute their office.' Authorities are reprimanded for trying to adjudicate that which 'belongs exclusively to the eternal judgment of the Most High God.'"

⁴⁴ "Reply to Gellius Faber," *ibid.*, p. 715.

the extent of betraying innocent Anabaptists "who would rather die than willfully transgress the Word of the Lord. . . . By so doing you open the doors wide to the rapacious rulers to rob such pious souls and to the bloodthirsty to murder them."⁴⁵

At least in his verbal assaults on his opponents Menno Simons was not always meek and mild. In an outburst of inflamed passion he writes: "Shame yourselves, O callous, perverted men. . . ." ⁴⁶ The magisterial reformers have churches filled with:

The immoral, the impenitent, the sensual, the perverts, yes, of the bloodthirsty wolves, lions, bears, basilisks, serpents, and fiery flying dragons. . . . In truth, I know not how the Behemoth of hell could rant in a more devilish and cruel fashion than you or your members who pose as the Church of Christ.⁴⁷

The disciples of Menno Simons are not encouraged to go out of their way to seek martyrdom. Where they know that secrecy is necessary to preserve their lives they

⁴⁵ "Epistle to Micron," *ibid.*, p. 924. To Martin Micron he addresses the lament: "[I am] hated of the world because of this defaming, false, bloodthirsty writing and shouting of the learned ones, who for the sake of their poor bellies teach the broad, easy way with all the false prophets. . . . But what will help? The innocent, defenseless Lamb must be hated and murdered in His members," p. 926. Cf. "Reply to False Accusations," *ibid.*, pp. 556, 557: He complains that established churches and their antecedents have given a Christian sanction to plunder, bloodshed, and violence of all kinds. They have induced rulers to take up arms against one another until they "have shed human blood like water, torn the hearts from each other's bodies, and have made countless harlots, rogues, widows, and orphans." He finds their crimes depicted in Rev. 17:6 and 18:20.

⁴⁶ "The New Birth," *ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

are not urged to "come out in the open" with their teachings. Moses, Jeremiah, Elijah, and St. Paul are cited as Biblical examples of men who fled from certain death at the hands of their enemies. To be sure, God rescued some of His saints with extraordinary miracles, but these instances of supernatural intervention cannot always be anticipated even by the most faithful men. In keeping with the spirit of *Gelassenheit* which characterizes this group they will not venture a daring, aggressive proclamation of their tenets. They are willing to endure suffering if it comes their way, but they have a natural human eagerness to avoid persecution if possible.⁴⁸

Mennonites always find the classic example for nonresistance in Jesus, who told Peter to return his sword to his sheath. They are chagrined by the vehemence with which he cleansed the temple. Even the crucifixion of Jesus sometimes seems to be interpreted as the tragic martyrdom of the foremost pacifist of all time. We should seek to emulate Jesus, who "willingly yielded His life."⁴⁹ In what the translator considers a corrupt text some allowance would seem to be made for the defensive use of weapons:

Touching weapons, the elders are unable to consider it impure when a believer traveling on the roads, according to the conditions of the land, carries an honest staff or a rapier on his shoulder, according to the custom and the manner of the land. But to carry weapons of defense and to present them according to the command of the magistracy, this the elders

⁴⁸ "Reply to False Accusations," *ibid.*, p. 573.

⁴⁹ "Exhortation to a Church in Prussia," *ibid.*, p. 1031.

do not consider permissible—unless it be in case of soldiers on guard.⁵⁰

The position set forth by Menno Simons in rejecting all forms of force and violence has been preserved for 400 years and is still maintained by those present-day Christians who bear his name as well as by other so-called "peace churches." A conference of Mennonites held at Emden in East Friesland passed the following resolution in determining how to treat those members who had given offense by taking part in drilling for military service:

If a brother has taken part in this, he shall desist from it, confess to sorrow for the offense and ask the forgiveness of God and the church before he may be recognized as in peace with the church.⁵¹

The short Mennonite Confession of 1591, called the Concept of Cologne, contains the statement: "No vengeance is permitted; nay, it is forbidden, not only with outward weapons but also to give railing for railing."⁵² With slight exceptions these principles were firmly upheld by all Mennonites who survived persecution during the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 19th century, however, the refusal to bear arms was modified among European Mennonites everywhere except in Russia. In America the immigrant groups from the "peace churches" succeeded, for the most part, in not deviating from their original ideal. Both world wars resulted in defections among the members, and those who remained unmoved by the call to arms were

⁵⁰ Article VIII, "The Wismar Articles of 1554," *ibid.*, p. 1042.

⁵¹ Quoted by John Horsch in "A Historical Survey of the Position of the Mennonite Church on Nonresistance," in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, I (July 1927), p. 19.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

harassed and subjected to abuse of all kinds. Meanwhile Mennonite theologians continue to argue in defense of their historical position.⁵³

The Church of the Brethren, the Quakers, and pacifist-minded Christians within all the major denominations stand in the tradition of Menno Simons in their renunciation of armed intervention as a legitimate Christian approach to the security and welfare of nations. This absolute ethic of nonresistance has taken on new cogency with the threat of a nuclear holocaust. Pacifism once again appeals to many as a valid Christian alternative to mutual obliteration, in which resistance and massive retaliation may seem utterly gruesome and futile.

III. MARTIN LUTHER, THEOLOGICAL GIANT OR FORERUNNER OF NAZISM?

Martin Luther, who outlived Thomas Muentzer by 21 years and passed away 15 years before Menno Simons, was, despite his break with Rome, an advocate of gradual and peaceful change. Conservative in his theological reformation, he was even more cautious in his attitude toward the political realm. Living in semifeudal Germany he accepted the established order as ordained by God and was reluctant to advocate any drastic innovations.

As an avid reader of Augustine, Luther was impressed by his elaboration of Ambrose's theory of a *iustum bellum*. Defense against barbarians and brigands sounded like a commendable Christian undertaking. In Luther's day the infidel Turks were menacing the Christian civilization of western

⁵³ One of the standard works used in Mennonite colleges and seminaries today is Guy Hershberger's *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1955).

Europe. Force and violence were unavoidable in a sinful world where external invasion had to be repelled and internal insurrection suppressed. Unlike either Thomas Muentzer or Menno Simons Luther did not deviate from the traditional concept of a just war. Throughout his career he consistently held that it is permissible for a Christian to bear arms if the cause for which he fights is righteous before God. Luther was as much opposed to Muentzer's fanaticism, which would wield the sword to expedite the advent of God's kingdom on earth, as he was to Anabaptist nonresistance, which would stand by and permit the enemy to plunder and kill without reprisals.

When Luther was asked to tender advice on a new city constitution for Erfurt he made three distinctions. First of all, there are certain aspects of political life in which Christians have a right and a responsibility to make definite demands. If these are not met satisfactorily Christians are in good conscience obligated to resist. There is a second sphere within which Christians may make recommendations according to what they deem desirable, but they do not insist on compliance with these requests. Thirdly, there is a neutral area in which one course of action cannot be advocated as indubitably preferable to another. These issues may be safely relegated to lawyers and princes to be decided by sound reason.⁵⁴

Unlike many of his latter-day "descendants" who have assumed his name, Luther did not draw a rigid line of separation between church and state. Secular authority

is one of the natural divinely instituted orders. It stands under the judgment of God no less than does the ecclesiastical realm.⁵⁵ Luther never said that the church should have no interest in political matters. On the contrary, the Christian must be free to resist breaches of the Decalog as they occur in the social structures around him. In his books, letters, and sermons Luther frequently dealt with public morals. Everything from drinking to foreign policy, and including riots, welfare of the poor, banking, rents, and imports, came under his surveillance and elicited opinions from his pen. Economic practices which he regarded as unchristian, such as usury and various forms of exploitation, he opposed.

Luther was conservative in his outlook on government because of his great appreciation for stability and good order. Almost any kind of oppression, it seemed to him, was preferable to outright anarchy and civil war. Nothing did he dread more than revolution and internal strife, which helps to explain why he was so alarmed by the peasant uprising. An imperfect state was always better than no state at all.

Unlike Muentzer Luther was a realist who had a much more profound understanding of the evil propensities inherent in all humanity, whether they be princes, burghers, or peasants. He had no illusions about the perfectibility of man under any kind of temporal rule. Yet he was not a gloomy pessimist. With a deep eschatological consciousness he was convinced (as was Muentzer) that the end of the world was imminent.⁵⁶ But his low estimate of

⁵⁴ H. H. Kramm, "Luther's Teaching on Christian Responsibility in Politics and Public Life," *Lutheran Quarterly*, III (1951), 308, 309, 309.

⁵⁵ George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics* (New York: The American Press, 1954), pp. 120—141.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 156—185.

the potential goodness of human institutions did not drive him into the fatal error of the *Schwaermer* who wanted to renounce them and become God's instruments for eradicating them. Even if the state cannot bring paradise on earth, it can prevent earth from becoming hell. And as long as this present world stands it will be the Christian's responsibility (in contradistinction to Menno Simons) to assist the prevailing regimes in maintaining the best possible ordering of society by discharging their civic obligations; by performing their God-given duties in the station where they find themselves, as parent, ruler, preacher, or servant. Until or unless the government demands something clearly contrary to the will of God it is to be obeyed.

The weakness in Luther's presentation is that he seems to provide no guidance for the Christian who is tyrannized by a secular authority which is no longer performing the functions delegated to governments by God. When temporal rulers pass laws or issue edicts which are in conflict with our duty to God the Christian must refuse to obey. Even then, Luther warns, we are not to make matters worse by committing sabotage, murdering tyrants, or staging revolutions. What if the corruption and abuse of political power become intolerable and only drastic, violent intervention would appear able to remedy the situation? Disciples and interpreters of Luther can only conjecture as to what he might say and do. Some indicate that his response would be passivity and nonresistance — leave it in the hands of God and pray for an alleviation of the distress. Others, like Bishop Berggrav of Norway, would retort:

It is a positively frightful misrepresentation of Lutheran doctrine to assert that "wild conquerors" or "despotic revolution-

ists" should come into the possession of power. It is high time that such views be plainly labeled as heretical. . . . When a government becomes lawless and acts with arbitrary despotism, the result is a demonic condition, that is to say, the government is godless. To obey such a satanic government would be nothing short of sinful. . . .⁵⁷

The disagreement between Luther and Menno Simons becomes abundantly clear when we examine his oft-quoted treatise *Whether Soldiers Too Can be Saved*. Unlike Menno the Wittenberg Reformer does not disparage the occupation of the soldier as such. To bear arms can be a God-approved calling if the person is godly and performs his duties in the right way. Like any other calling it can be abused if it is held by a non-Christian.⁵⁸ Even slaying and robbing, however, can be a work of love. Just as a physician has to cut off a diseased limb in order to save the body, so the soldier may be compelled to punish the wicked in order to restore peace for law-abiding citizens. If all people were devoted to the preservation of peace, war would be the worst plague conceivable on earth, but what are Christians to do if others begin to steal, outrage women, and commit murder?

Biblical narratives are related to justify war. Many of the stories in the Old Testament, such as the warrior David repelling

⁵⁷ Quoted from an address delivered before the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in 1952, *Proceedings*, pp. 76—85.

⁵⁸ *Works of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia ed., 34 ff. [It can be a Christian work of grim and unpleasant necessity to abide by military law and serve as a soldier who slays or harms others.] [Of course] "if the person engaged in it is wrong and bad" [it is bound to be sinful].

the Philistines, illustrate divine approval of war under certain circumstances. When John the Baptist called upon the soldiers to repent, he did not compel them to abandon their profession. When Christ was on trial before Pilate He mentioned that if He were exerting temporal power His servants could rightfully fight for His release.⁵⁹

According to Luther, there are lawless men who must be restrained by force "like wild horses and dogs, and where this does not help they must be put to death by the worldly sword."⁶⁰ In keeping with Saint Peter's admonition we are obligated to submit to the ordinances of kings and princes.⁶¹ Even if the government perpetrates an injustice, "as the king of Babylon did to the people of Israel, yet God would have it obeyed, without treachery and deception." The commandment "Thou shalt honor thy father and mother" by analogy can be extended to all authorities that God places over us, including ecclesiastical and secular powers. Luther could not imagine a Christian evading all authority; and as a result of his bitter experiences with the papal regime, he was convinced that spiritual power was more subject to abuse and corruption than temporal power. Secular authority cannot rob people of their faith; therefore it need not be resisted even when it does wrong. But spiritual authority must be vigorously opposed when it contradicts God's Word and misleads people into false doctrine.⁶² Under Luther's dom-

ination his Reformation carefully abided by this distinction.

Yet the German Reformer does not hesitate to give counsel to the princes and admonish them. The same general rule which he has laid down for their subjects also applies to them. They should be more willing to endure evil than turn to violence even if it means loss of temporal advantage and property. War should be only a last resort after every possible means of arbitration has failed. Caesar Augustus, Luther agrees, spoke prudently when he said: "War is like fishing with a golden net; the loss risked is always greater than the catch can be." A prince who rules according to his own mad will is like a driver who will lead everyone into a smashup.⁶³

Contrary to the opinion of some of his detractors Luther never conceded unlimited authority to the princes and never demanded blind and unquestioning obedience from the common people. When a ruler is in the wrong, Luther clearly asserts, civic disobedience is the Christian duty. We cannot violate our conscience and offend God by upholding a sinful decree. The crucial and difficult question to be decided, however, is how does a person know whether the government's action is right or wrong? "I answer, As long as they cannot know, nor find out by any possible

should remember that the power of the government, 'whether it do right or wrong,' cannot harm the soul, but only the body and property; unless indeed it should try openly to compel us to do wrong against God or men, as in former days when the magistrates were not yet Christians. . . . For to suffer wrong destroys no one's soul. . . ." P. 264: "[Christians should not endure it and keep silent if spiritual power so much as] departs a hair's breadth from its own duty."

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 37.

⁶⁰ *Treatise on Good Works*, I, 200.

⁶¹ 1 Peter 2:13, 14: "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right."

⁶² *Treatise on Good Works*, p. 263: "We

means, they may obey without peril to their souls."⁶⁴

Luther severely criticized the Council of Nicaea because of its opposition to war. The decree forbidding Christians to perform military service on pain of seven years' penance proved to him the fallibility of church councils:

If a king or prince has to fight and defend himself in a just war, he has to take what soldiers he can get. But if these volunteers are condemned, what will become of emperors, kings and princes, now that there are no soldiers to be had except volunteers? Tell me, are the lords to fight singlehanded or weave strawmen to oppose their enemies?⁶⁵

When the Holy League of Nuremberg appeared to threaten the Lutherans with war, Luther was of the cautiously conceived judgment that the Protestants could rightfully resist this alliance of princes. However, he warned the Smalcaldic League against waging a preventive war, which would make them morally culpable. They must await some overt act of aggression by the Roman Catholic princes before striking back. After consulting with the jurists of Wittenberg, and being assured that they were on safe ground according to the laws of the empire, Luther and his fellow theologians, Jonas, Bugenhagen, Amsdorf, and Melancthon, agreed that a war of self-defense was permissible.⁶⁶

Luther did not object to a war of defense

⁶⁴ "Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," *Works of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia ed., III, 270.

⁶⁵ "On the Councils and the Church," op. cit., V, 156—158.

⁶⁶ H. Richard Klann, "Luther on War and Revolution," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY* (May 1954), 353—366.

against the Turks, but it should not be undertaken as a Christian crusade under the direction of the papacy. Christians should fight "in humility and obedience to God's command", with their minds centered on protecting people rather than seeking honor or booty.⁶⁷ One of Luther's chief criticisms of the Koran was that it sanctions the use of the sword to spread its tenets.⁶⁸

Luther refuses to permit the temporal powers to intrude in the spiritual domain with the exercise of force. Those who have fallen under the ban are not to be coerced with weapons of war. To wield the sword is the right of the emperor, kings, and princes. The spiritual estate is forbidden to employ it.⁶⁹

Occasionally Luther inculcates the virtue of cross-bearing in a way which would appeal to Menno Simons, while it would most assuredly arouse the ire of Thomas Muentzer. Even if the ban is unjustly imposed it should be endured. Christ teaches us "to love chastisement, pain, and even death, and not to fear them." People should be reminded that the power of the ban, if wrongly used, cannot harm them, but must always be beneficial to the soul. If the burden becomes too heavy, "then try to escape from it with meekness, not with revenge and retaliation by word or deed." Whether pious or wicked rulers use the rod of chastisement, God will give it a salutary effect. We should not be incited to rebellion against authority because it is abused by some. We should

⁶⁷ "On War Against the Turk," op. cit., V, 110.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 96 ff.

⁶⁹ "Treatise Concerning the Ban," op. cit., Vol. II, p. 38.

yield to God's will "and leave the mighty to His sword and judgment." As we humbly acquiesce in an illness God sends us, so we must submit to an evil government.⁷⁰

In any critical appraisal of Luther's attitude toward the use of force and violence we may be inclined to wonder whether he was not unconsciously tempted to write so much in favor of temporal government, and to endorse its use of war, because he felt the urgent need to protect the gains which had been registered by his reformatory efforts. By providing a rationale for the political *status quo* he was helping to silence his papal foes who would have jumped at an opportunity to discredit him as a dangerous and seditious agitator. Could Luther have afforded to alienate the power structure of his time? If he had advocated pacifism, he could not have used the protection of the princes, he might have been eliminated from the scene along with Muentzer and the Anabaptists, and the entire Reformation might have been forcibly suppressed.⁷¹ What is most unfortunate is the way succeeding generations of Lutherans have pounced upon statements (often out of context) which were addressed to the particular situation Luther found himself in and have made them normative for all conditions and all places.

Another criticism which may possibly

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 45—50. Cf. p. 51: "The world is far too wicked to be worthy of good and pious lords, it must have princes who go to war, levy taxes, and shed blood, and it must have spiritual tyrants who impoverish and burden it with bulls and letters and laws. . . . To resist them is nothing else than to resist God's chastisement."

⁷¹ "That Soldiers Too Can Be Saved," *op. cit.*, p. 38 "[If we admitted that war was wrong] we should have to give way on all other points and admit that the use of the sword is entirely wrong."

be leveled against Luther is that his sanction of a just war was an oversimplified solution for his own day, and it is even less relevant to recent modern wars or future atomic warfare. He presses his point in this way:

For what is just war except the punishment of evildoers and the maintenance of peace? . . . In a just war one punishes at one time a whole great crowd of evildoers who are doing harm in proportion to the size of the crowd.⁷²

If one criminal can be punished by execution, so the argument runs, an aggregation of evildoers can be killed in warfare. But who represents the righteous side of a war evoked by a complexity of causes and wreaking havoc for all the participants? Were the victims of the atomic bomb really receiving their proper punishment in a just war?

Luther was averse to the use of conspiracies and plots to undermine a rival regime. It strains our imagination to see him encouraging a plot against Hitler's life or offering support for De Gaulle's French resistance movement. Conversely, it is a foul calumny to denominate him as the "forerunner of Nazism."⁷³ His vitriolic attacks on the Jews which provided verbal ammunition for German anti-Semites are inexcusable tirades and uninhibited outbursts of anger, but they must be examined in the light of his personal experiences, the theological polemic in which they are imbedded, and the total attitude of his entire lifetime toward the Jews, which included

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Peter F. Weiner, *Martin Luther: Hitler's Spiritual Ancestor*. Weiner's denunciation of Luther is upheld by Liam Brophy in "Luther, Hitler, and Chaos," *Hibernia* (Dublin: March 1946).

remarkable pleas for tolerance and sincere prayers for their conversion.⁷⁴

Luther wisely resisted the temptation to degrade the Gospel into a handbook of social politics. His insight excelled that of both Thomas Muentzer and Menno Simons in perceiving that no social structure or church constitution as such is unqualifiedly Christian and prescribed by the Bible. For this reason too he had to oppose the *Schwaermerei* of Muentzer. As long as the peasants presented their grievances in a peaceful petition he could sympathize with their plight and remonstrate with the princes. As soon as they resorted to war and crime, burned whole cities, and tortured innocent citizens to death, he felt that it was the duty of the established powers to restore law and order, and to do it by every means possible, although it was unavoidably cruel and severe.

Luther's attitude toward the use of force in combating heresy is a complicated issue which cannot be adequately summarized in a few sentences. At times, especially during his earlier life, he maintained that the peaceful persuasion of the Gospel is all that can be used. Except in the case of criminals and anarchists who may be prosecuted under state laws, he would not use physical punishment to eradicate false doctrine. "To burn heretics is against the will of the Holy Spirit." People who hold erroneous opinions and lead ungodly lives may be excommunicated from the church, but this expulsion should not be accompanied by any civil disadvantage. Those who have been excommunicated may be

⁷⁴ Ralph Luther Moellering, "Luther's Attitude Toward the Jews," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY* (December 1948; January and March, 1949).

allowed to hear sermons so they can be reconverted, but they should be excluded from the Lord's Table.⁷⁵

One of the gigantic "ifs" of history might be a conjecture as to what would have happened if Martin Luther had become acquainted with the peaceful Anabaptists by personal association instead of mistakenly categorizing them by rumor and reputation among the fanatics like Thomas Muentzer and the leaders of the Muenster debacle. That he would have disapproved of their sacramental views can be assumed without fear of contradiction, but that he would have clamored for their execution, if he had fully understood their position, is doubtful, to say the least.

Luther's outlook on the use of force and violence is a third alternative, clearly distinguishable from that of Thomas Muentzer and Menno Simons. It would be hard to exaggerate the tremendous influence it has had in forming the convictions of countless Christians on this crucial ethical issue. Broadly speaking, though there are points of disagreement and deviation, his stand is comparable to that of Calvin and most Anglican divines. Thus, if we are reducing Christian attitudes toward war and pacifism to three major divisions, the one represented by Luther has always commanded the majority opinion in Christendom. Most consistently, and even more rigorously than the Reformers ever intended, it has been adopted and codified by theologians of the Lutheran communion. Typical is a tract entitled *War and Christianity* and written by Theodore Graebner. After quoting the pertinent paragraphs

⁷⁵ Luther is not as lax in church discipline as men like Menno Simons were induced to believe. Cf. Kramm, pp. 312, 313.

from the Lutheran Confessions, he defends the distinction between a just and an unjust war and insists that Lutherans should render loyal and patriotic service in accord with Romans 13.⁷⁰ This is the underlying attitude which, though it is being questioned in some quarters, still predominates among Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians, and is held by numerous other Christians in the United States and throughout the world.

Berkeley, Calif.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Journals

- CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, XXV (May 1954).
The Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. III.
The Mennonite Quarterly Review, Vols. I, X.

II. Primary Sources

- Brandt, Otto G. *Thomas Muentzer, Sein Leben und seine Schriften*. Jena and Leipzig, 1933.
 Engels, Friedrich. *The Peasant War in Ger-*

⁷⁰ Moellering, *Modern War and the American Churches*, pp. 35, 36.

many. New York: International Publishers, 1926.

Hinrichs, Carl. *Thomas Muentzer, Politische Schriften*. Halle, 1950.

Lohmann, Annemarie. *Zur geistlichen Entwicklung Thomas Muentzers*. Leipzig, 1931.

Luther, Martin. 6 vols. Holman Edition, *Works of Martin Luther*. Philadelphia.

The Complete Works of Menno Simons. Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956.

Rutherford, Judge. *Religion*. Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.

Williams, George H. "Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation," Part I in *Spiritual and Anabaptist writers*, The Library of Christian Classics, XXV. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957. Pp. 17—293.

III. Secondary Sources

Abrams, Ray H. *Preachers Present Arms*. New York: Round Table Press, 1933.

Cohn, Norman. *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1957.

Forell, George W. *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics*. New York: American Press, 1954.

The Mennonite Encyclopedia, Vol. III. Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1957.

Moellering, Ralph Luther. *Modern War and the American Churches*. New York: American Press, 1956.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

LEWIS W. SPITZ, professor, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.

RALPH L. MOELLERING, campus pastor, Berkeley, Calif.

FREDERICK W. DANKER, associate professor, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.

ROBERT D. PRBUS, assistant professor, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.