

Müntzer, Taubes, and the Anabaptists
Emancipatory History and Political Theology

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Abstract

The radical apocalypticism of the sixteenth century mystic and revolutionary Thomas Müntzer has served as an enduring resource for the political left, from early investigations by Engels and Bloch to the recent works of Alberto Toscano and Wu Ming. In one of his lesser-studied works – the 1947 dissertation *Occidental Eschatology* – Jewish philosopher Jacob Taubes places Müntzer at a key juncture in the history of eschatology, first by situating him at the end of the Reformation period, and then by connecting his revolutionary apocalypticism to the critiques of Hegel levelled by Marx and Kierkegaard. Like Müntzer for the political left, Taubes remains an important but underappreciated figure in the discourse on political theology, and he is usually included in the tradition that reads Saint Paul philosophically. However, Taubes’ work in *Occidental Eschatology* has not been given scholarly attention comparable to his lectures on Paul. In order to address this gap in the literature, this study aims to give a new perspective on Taubes as a philosopher of history, first by showing potentially surprising connections between Taubes’ *Occidental Eschatology* and the historiography of Anabaptism, and second by making suggestions about how Taubes’ distinctively emancipatory philosophy of history might contribute to thinking about time and history within contemporary political theology.

¹ The author would like to thank Dr. Dana Hollander and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and critiques.

And they won't be able to whip you any more, because you have the whip hand now; they won't be able to imprison you any more, because you have taken the prisons and removed the doors; they won't be able to kill you any more or steal from the Lord the devotion of His people, because His people have risen and turned their eyes towards the Kingdom. No one will be able to tell you, do this, do that, because now you will live in brotherhood and community, according to God's law. No longer will there be those who work the land and those who enjoy its fruits, because all will work the land and enjoy its fruits in community, as brothers. And the lord will be honoured because the lords are no longer there!²

The radical apocalypticism of the sixteenth century mystic and revolutionary Thomas Müntzer has served as an enduring resource for the political left, from Friedrich Engels' *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850), through Ernst Bloch's *Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution* (1921), to contemporary works like Alberto Toscano's *Fanaticism* and Wu Ming's introduction to the Verso edition of Müntzer's writings (2010).³ In one of his lesser-studied works – the 1947 dissertation *Occidental Eschatology* – the Jewish philosopher Jacob Taubes places Müntzer at a key juncture in the history of eschatology, first by situating him within the dissenting traditions of the Reformation period, and then by connecting his revolutionary apocalypticism to the critiques of Hegel set forth by Marx and Kierkegaard.⁴ Like Müntzer for the political left, Taubes remains an important but underappreciated figure for political theology, and he is usually included in the discourse that reads Saint Paul philosophically.⁵ However, when compared to *The Political Theology of Paul*, Taubes' work on the philosophy of history in *Occidental Eschatology* has not yet received substantial scholarly attention.⁶ In order to address this gap in the literature, this study aims to give a new perspective on Taubes as a philosopher of history, first by showing potentially surprising connections between Taubes' *Occidental Eschatology* and the historiography of Anabaptism, and second by making suggestions about how Taubes' distinctively emancipatory philosophy of history might contribute to thinking about time and history within contemporary political theology.

I will begin by situating the genre of *Occidental Eschatology* and discussing the murky relationship between prescription and description in Taubes' accounts of historical groups and figures, before moving to discuss Müntzer's importance for Taubes' overall project in *Occidental Eschatology*. I first give an account of Müntzer's importance within *Occidental Eschatology* by situating Müntzer as a key example in the framework of Taubes' distinctly emancipatory concept of history. After drawing out the tension between description and prescription, and establishing Müntzer's importance for the argument of *Occidental Eschatology*, I then examine how Taubes' descriptive conceit conditions his work on Müntzer in Book III of *Occidental Eschatology*. Taubes is a philosopher of history and not an historian, and yet, as I will demonstrate below, his account of Müntzer and the Anabaptists comes surprisingly close to the

² Luther Blisset, *Q*, 101.

³ Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*. Bloch, *Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution*. Toscano, *Fanaticism*, esp. 68-92. Wu Ming, "Introduction: Spectres of Müntzer at Sunrise / Greeting the 21st Century."

⁴ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*. Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie*. Further references appear in-text, abbreviated as *OE* followed by the page number of the English edition first and the German edition second.

⁵ See Badiou, *St. Paul*. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*. Eds. John D. Caputo and Linda Martín Alcoff, *St. Paul Among the Philosophers*.

⁶ Notable exceptions include Gold, "Jacob Taubes: Apocalypse From Below" and the collection *Abendländische Eschatologie: Ad Jacob Taubes*.

more nuanced view of Müntzer expressed in modern historical scholarship. By examining the subtlety of Taubes' account of Müntzer and the Anabaptists, and its surprising affinities with the work of contemporary historians of Anabaptism, this study aims not only to contribute to a deeper understanding of *Occidental Eschatology* itself, but also to hold up Taubes' emancipatory and partisan vision of history as a potential resource for contemporary political theologies.

Occidental Eschatology

Occidental Eschatology is a book about time and history, and the unavoidably apocalyptic and eschatological influences entangled with supposedly secular concepts of time and history. More than presenting an historical genealogy of eschatological thinking in European philosophies of history, *Occidental Eschatology* makes strong prescriptive assertions about time and history as philosophical concepts in themselves and asserts many politically charged theses. Throughout the book Taubes presents a genealogy of eschatology that is ostensibly framed as a descriptive enterprise. Book I begins with a series of declarations, such as “the subject of inquiry is the essence of history” rather than particular historical periods or events, and the claim that “it is in the Eschaton that history surpasses its limitations and is seen for what it is.” (*OE*, 3/11). Rather than using a personal authorial voice or a series of I-statements to make prescriptive statements about how themes like apocalyptic or history ought to be understood or contested (as contemporary philosophers of history tend to do), Taubes makes straightforward descriptive statements (like the aforementioned) about both the topics that he is concerned with and the thinkers whom he summarizes and periodizes.

Taubes' descriptive genealogy of concepts and thinkers contains and conceals many significant underlying prescriptions. In *Occidental Eschatology* Taubes obviously has a vision for how his readers ought to think about eschatology and history, and he valorizes certain concepts while critiquing others, rather than attempting to achieve an abstract position of distance. For example, Taubes privileges Israel over Rome in Book I, favors the Jews over the Romans in Book II, and lauds Müntzer over Luther in Book III, before attempting a synthesis of Kierkegaard, Marx, and Hegel at the conclusion of the work. Taubes' emphasis on Müntzer in Book III is one such notable prescription, for Müntzer does not number among the usual suspects in the philosophy of history, nor is Müntzer easy to appropriate positively because of his violence. Yet Taubes does so for very interesting and value-laden reasons, not least of which is that Müntzer represents precisely the confluence of revolutionary freedom and eschatological consciousness that defines *Occidental Eschatology* as a whole – a claim that I will now demonstrate through a reading of the text.

In Book I of *Occidental Eschatology* Taubes' defines history in terms of ‘apocalyptic,’ arguing that the “fundamental theme in apocalypticism” is a revolutionary and emancipatory freedom that is defined by a radical “negation” (*OE*, 9/19). For Taubes, the power of negation embodied in free revolutionary actions is itself constitutive of history, and here he shows his indebtedness to Hegel's dialectical account of negation (although later he will call on Marx and Kierkegaard to oppose Hegel's systematic impulse). Taubes further declares that “the essence of history is freedom,” and suggests that this freedom “lifts humankind out of the cycle of nature into the realm of history” (*OE*, 5/14 – translation altered). For Taubes, freedom and apocalyptic are inextricably linked, for apocalyptic points toward a time “when the structure of this world prison will burst apart” (*OE*, 9/19). Seeing apocalypticism as essentially revolutionary because of its hope for the transformation of the present, Taubes contends that “apocalypticism negates this world in its fullness,” standing against both law and fate (*OE*, 9/19). Furthermore, Taubes

defines the negating freedom of history as that which “can only reveal itself in apostasy [*Ab-fall*],” for anything less would remain “subject to the necessity of God and nature” (*OE*, 5/14). But the negation of God and the negation of Nature are not the same for Taubes. Influenced by Hans Jonas, Taubes sets forth a gnostic vision in which God and world are in stark opposition – but an opposition that is disturbed by the promise of an apocalyptic turning point in which God will appear in power (*OE*, 10/20).

Taubes’ concept of history is distinctly emancipatory and contingent upon the existence and willful use of human freedom. He writes that “only humankind’s answer [*Ant-wort*] to the word of God, which is essentially a negative one [*ein Nein* {a ‘no’}], is evidence of human freedom.” (*OE*, 5/14 – translation altered). In order for there to be history at all, humankind must answer God negatively. This no-saying is not just directed toward God, but also, in different ways, toward ‘nature’ and ‘world.’ While the negation of the world is already present within the apocalyptic promise of change here and now, for Taubes the negation of nature also takes place within the gnostic paradigm. Taubes writes that “the gods of nature are the Baals,” but he wants to negate this naturalistic framework that “keeps [*bannt*] all events within a cycle in which everything flourishes and fades,” with his own teleological, eschatological, and apocalyptic counter-vision (*OE*, 11/21). The revolutionary acts of the free human will that constitute history negate God with a negative answer, and negate the cyclical eternal return of nature with a teleology, but negation also founds history in a third way: through the negation of established political and social powers, such as that of the church or the state. Taubes finds exemplary historical instances of this kind of no-saying in Israel, Thomas Müntzer, and the Anabaptists.

For Taubes, “Israel is the restless element in world history, the leavening that first actually produces history” (*OE*, 16/27). Countering the repetitive pagan cycles, “Israel breaks through the cycle of this endless repetition, opening up the world as history for the first time” (*OE*, 16/27). For Taubes, the cycle-breaking negation of Israel opposes the world as it stands, and this alienation and opposition to the world stands in continuity with the God who is alien to the world (*OE*, 17/29). Opposing the world and its political powers with the ‘no’ of human freedom is something exemplified by God’s initial alienation from the world, and Israel’s subsequent opposition to the world. This opposition to the world by cycle-breaking means is also something that Taubes finds in Müntzer’s revolutionary activity. Where Israel “breaks through the cycle of this endless repetition [of the eternal recurrence of the same], opening up the world as history for the first time” (*OE*, 16/27), the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Müntzer “bursts the established horizons of a cycle of life” (*OE*, 85/115). It is no coincidence that the same terms are used by Taubes to refer to Israel and Müntzer, for both exemplify the different ways that humankind says ‘no’ to God, to the cycles of nature, and to established political powers.⁷ Before moving on to examine how this concept of emancipatory history is developed in the rest of the book, however, it bears considering the sources and influences that underpin Taubes’ understanding of time and history.

Taubes’ initial claim that history is freedom follows a paragraph that quotes from Nicolai Berdyaev’s 1923 book *The Meaning of History*. In the book, Berdyaev argues (among other things) that “there would be no history without freedom” and furthermore that “the freedom of

⁷ It is possible however, that Taubes’ negation of established political powers exceeds Müntzer’s in intensity, for Taubes remains suspicious of church and state authorities, while Müntzer appeals to the dukes of Saxony, asking them to recognize him as the new Daniel. See Müntzer, “Sermon to the Princes,” 110. Müntzer’s appeal to the princes to support him has also been the subject of debate within the Marxist historiography of the Radical Reformation. See Friesen, *Reformation and Utopia*, 60, 220-228.

evil, indeed, forms the real foundation of history.”⁸ Berdyaev also argues that the Jewish people are central to history, concluding his chapter “The Destiny of the Jews” with the statement: “the problem of universal history cannot be solved without the religious self-determination of Judaism.”⁹ Although Taubes cites Berdyaev’s book three times in Book I (*OE*, ff. 3, 19, and 38) these citations do not make explicit his debt to Berdyaev on the role of human freedom and Israel as constitutors of history.

Similarly, the influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar on *Occidental Eschatology* is not foregrounded by Taubes. In his preface to the English translation of *Occidental Eschatology*, David Ratmoko notes that Taubes attended the lectures that would later become Balthasar’s *Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele*, and points to Ursula Baatz’s essay on the relationship between *Occidental Eschatology* and Balthasar’s *Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele* (*OE*, xii). Baatz argues that *Occidental Eschatology* was written, in part, as an answer to Balthasar’s *Apokalypse*,¹⁰ and one interesting example of a connection between the two works can be found in Taubes’ distinction between inner and outer realms of time. When Taubes begins Book I by claiming that time is “split [*zerissen*] into an inner and an outer realm,” and that time begins in the inner realm and moves to the outer with an “irreversible unidirectionality [*Einsinnigkeit*]” that proceeds teleologically toward the eschaton (*OE*, 3/11) he echoes – intentionally or not – the beginning lines of the *Apokalypse* in which Balthasar makes the very same distinction while also contending that the inner realm is revealed in the outer realm, but doing so with a concern for the soul rather than for time itself.¹¹ Taubes cites Balthasar’s *Apokalypse* sporadically throughout *Occidental Eschatology*, but (as with Berdyaev and freedom) he does not make the relationship between his and Balthasar’s use of the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ clear (*OE*, ff. 7, 10, and 40).

I note these connections not to hold Taubes to account for his influences, but rather to show that the many influences upon Taubes’ work in *Occidental Eschatology* are not always made clear in the text. In his forthcoming biography of Taubes, Jerry Z. Muller writes of how Taubes was unsure of how to write his dissertation, seeking counsel from friends about how to structure such a work.¹² Muller also notes that Taubes’ unacknowledged debts and extensive borrowing from the works of others prove his “genius” to some, while confirming his “charlatanism” to others. Whatever one may think of it, Taubes’ complex indebtedness to his sources is essential to keep in view, not only in order to understand *Occidental Eschatology* as a whole, but especially when considering the role of Müntzer, for reasons that will soon become clear.

Moving onward from Book I, in an effort to describe Taubes concept of emancipatory history and to situate the role of Müntzer, I observe that in Book II Taubes examines the history of apocalypticism and its conflict with the empire of classical antiquity (*OE*, 43/61), holding up the conflict between the Zealots and the Romans as a clash of “the global empire of masters against a world revolution of the oppressed” (*OE*, 45/64). Using the image of fire that Taubes later draws out of Müntzer’s work (*OE*, 106/143), Taubes praises the Jewish revolt against the *pax Romana* (*OE*, 46/64), and notes Jesus’ complex continuity with John the Baptist (*OE*,

⁸ Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, 58, 77.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁰ Baatz, “Ein Anstoss zur Abendländischen Eschatologie: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele*,” 326.

¹¹ Balthasar writes: “*Apokalypse heißt Enthüllung, heißt also soviel wie Offenbarung: revelatio. Offen liegt aber das Aussen, verschleiert das Innen. Seele is dieses Innen.*” See *Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele*, I, 3. Although I am using the original version, a new edition edited by Alois M. Haas was published by Johannes Verlag in 1998.

¹² Muller, *Jacob Taubes*. The author would like to thank Dr. Muller for access to a draft of the text.

49/69).¹³ Just as the Jewish revolt favored the poor through “the relaxation of taxes, the abolition of duty, and the release of prisoners” (*OE*, 46/64), the message of Jesus’ Kingdom of God “is particularly *good* news to the poor” (*OE*, 51/71). These themes of fiery rebellion and concern for common people reappear throughout Taubes’ examination of Müntzer.

In order to understand how Müntzer fits into the conceptual narrative of *Occidental Eschatology* it is important to bear in mind the precise ways in which human freedom constitutes history (as described in Book I, and summarized above), for without this context Müntzer may seem to be an odd choice for positive evaluation or inclusion in a history of eschatology, given that his problematic reputation as an extremist and fanatic endures. The end of Book II of *Occidental Eschatology* prepares the way for Book III by contrasting Augustine’s *civitas dei* with Joachim’s effort to “gain independence from the medieval *corpus christianum*” by means of an *ecclesia spiritualis* (*OE*, 82/111). For Taubes, Augustine is to blame for the movement from “universal eschatology” to “individual eschatology,” in which the former becomes heresy and the latter becomes orthodox within Christianity (*OE*, 80/109). Again the tension between the inner and the outer arises, and Book III begins on this note.

Taubes begins Book III by describing the Kingdom of God as an impending future that breaks the cycle of a “self-contained, mature system, which has found its own point of equilibrium, established itself absolute and contained all disruptive forces” (*OE*, 85/115). This cycle-breaking demonstration of history-constituting human freedom is definitive of the *ecclesia spiritualis*, which is radically distinct from the institutional *civitas dei*. Taubes writes that “the inner light of an *ecclesia spiritualis* burns down the walls of external institutions” and through both its proclamation and realization it becomes the “rhythm” of modern eschatology (*OE*, 85/115). Interestingly, Taubes contends that the modern age (*Neuzeit*) is also defined by this rhythm of cycle-breaking that “shatters an established horizon” and creates a “new syntax” that renders the old vocabulary obsolete (*OE*, 85/115).

For Taubes the spiritual inner light turns outward and becomes the fire of politically charged revolutionary activity. From a spiritualist inner light to a revolutionary outer fire, the categories of the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ are again reconfigured at the beginning of Book III just as they were at the beginning of Book I where time was the measure of the distance between the inner and outer (*OE*, 3/11), and just as they will be at the end of Book IV when Taubes rejects the separation of inner and outer in the works of Marx and Kierkegaard (*OE*, 191/255). At the beginning of *Occidental Eschatology* Taubes set the stage for the division between the inner and the outer by suggesting that time unfolds from the inner to the outer, and at the end of *Occidental Eschatology* he seeks their resolution by pushing together Marx’s “worldly revolution” and Kierkegaard’s “religious repentance” into his own – albeit unrealized – synthesis (*OE*, 191/254). The conclusion of *Occidental Eschatology*, as noted above, seeks to reconcile the idealism of Hegel with both the inward-focused piety of Kierkegaard and the outward-focused revolutionary consciousness of Marx. Because Taubes’ synthesis of these three figures appears as a concluding flourish rather than an extended argument, I only note here that it is unclear how Taubes thinks that this synthesis should be pursued. More to the point, in the middle of the configuration of the inner and the outer in Book I, Taubes narrates the movement from the inner to the outer by looking to Müntzer’s theology of revolution. It is here that Müntzer is situated – *in medias res*.

Joachim’s *ecclesia spiritualis* “shatters the foundations of medieval theocracy” when it denies (or negates) that the Church and the Kingdom of God are one (*OE*, 86/116). Taubes then argues that “Joachim’s theology of history is taken to its conclusion by Thomas Müntzer’s

¹³ Compare with Taubes, *Political Theology of Paul*, 59.

theology of revolution” which relies upon the same negation of the established church in favor of bringing the Kingdom of God on earth (*OE*, 86/116). Taubes’ turn to Müntzer not only aligns with his understanding of history as being constituted by human freedom, but also serves as a hinge between the inner light of the Spiritualists and the outer fire of the revolutionaries. Taubes states that “Müntzer and the Anabaptists want to bring about the *ecclesia spiritualis* on earth,” but notes the problem of violence (*OE*, 86/116), and makes reference to the work of Georges Sorel (*OE*, 87/117).¹⁴ Taubes then proceeds to contrast the Ptolemaic and Copernican visions of heaven and earth (*OE*, 88-89/118-120), and then strongly connects Joachim’s three-stage vision of world-history with Hegel’s dialectic (*OE*, 90-98/122-132), before returning to Spiritualism¹⁵ – specifically the Spirituals of the Franciscan order (*OE*, 99/132).¹⁶ For Taubes, the Franciscan Spirituals are a mystical influence on the Anabaptist movement, and this is the first of many anticipations of later research by social historians that Taubes provides when he critiques Troeltsch’s distinction between Anabaptists and mystics (*OE*, 105/142).¹⁷ Critiquing both Troeltsch and the church historian Karl Holl by using the work of Albrecht Ritschl, Taubes asserts continuity between the monastic traditions and the Anabaptists before beginning his section on Müntzer (*OE*, 106/143).

For Taubes, Müntzer represents the turning outward of the inner light of medieval Spiritualism (*OE*, 106/143). Referencing Marx, Taubes asserts that this movement of turning outward both *spiritualizes* the world by seeking to actualize the Kingdom of God here and now, and *secularizes* the spirit by “losing it to the world” (*OE*, 106/143). Praising Bloch’s interpretation of Müntzer, and making reference to Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia*,¹⁸ Taubes makes a case for Müntzer’s importance, despite his violence and “monomaniacal pathos” (*OE*, 106/143). Citing Bloch’s *Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution* as the “best account” of Müntzer, Taubes again paints a picture of Müntzer as an exemplary character in the drama of human freedom and its cycle-breaking fire (*OE*, 107/143).¹⁹ Speaking of Anabaptist chiliasm more generally, Taubes writes that in Müntzer “the courage to push beyond world becomes explosive in the world; the impossible gives birth to the possible, the unconditional to what is actually happening” (*OE*, 107/143-144).

The disputations between Müntzer and Luther are important to Taubes because – in a distinction borrowed from Holl – they present a choice between *reformation* (Luther) and *revolution* (Müntzer) (*OE*, 107/144).²⁰ In this decision, Luther represents a kind of retention of the Ptolemaic separation of heaven and earth, which he projects onto the separation between nature and grace, law and gospel, and the Old and New Testaments (*OE*, 109/146-147). Where Ptolemaic Christianity maintains separation between transcendent heaven and immanent earth, Copernican Christianity arises in the Reformation’s “enormous reduction in the dogma

¹⁴ See Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*.

¹⁵ Spiritualism is difficult to define in general terms, but historian Geoffrey Dipple ventures a summary of Spiritualism as a mix of biblicism, connection with the Holy Spirit or the inner light, and “a distrust of religious ceremonies and ecclesiastical ordinances.” See Dipple, “Spiritualist Anabaptists,” 291.

¹⁶ See “The Franciscan Spirituals,” in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, esp. 149-158.

¹⁷ Second generation ‘polygenesis’ historians of the Anabaptists have accepted Ritschl’s general thesis with some reservations and revisions. For two examples of scholars who trace the mystical and monastic influences on Anabaptism (respectively) see Davis, *Anabaptism and Ascetism*, 230-233. and Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler*.

¹⁸ Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, esp. pp. 211-219. Cf. Toscano, *Fanaticism*, 92-94.

¹⁹ Taubes cites Bloch, *Thomas Münzer*, original edition, 135-6; new edition, 99.

²⁰ See Goertz, “The Reformation as Revolution.”

concerning the hierarchical relations between heaven and earth” (*OE*, 109/147). For Taubes, while Luther is a representative of this Copernican turn, Müntzer negates the separations between inner spirit and outer revolution, Old and New Testaments, nature and grace, law and gospel (*OE*, 112/151). Against the sacraments that supposedly bridge the gap between heaven and earth in the Ptolemaic Christianity of Roman Catholicism, “Lutheranism founds a new church on the Copernican earth devoid of heaven” (*OE*, 110/147-148). But despite this movement away from the power of the institutional church in Luther, Taubes argues that Luther is still beholden to its “political and policing forces” thereby preventing him from truly embodying the history-constituting courage of human freedom (*OE*, 110/148).

At this juncture it is both Müntzer and the Anabaptists who “take this freedom seriously by founding the community of Christians on the principle of freedom, without state or hierarchical control” (*OE*, 110/148). At the birth of the modern self – which Taubes calls the ‘ego,’ in a straightforward sense – “the freedom of the individual Christian bears the sign [*zeichen*] that enables him [sic] to break the power and coercion of the Church which bestows the objective sacrament” (*OE*, 110/148 – translation altered). Taubes associates the birth of this kind of modern freedom and selfhood with the Anabaptist groups, but not as strongly as others.²¹ Importantly, Taubes writes that “a visible external manifestation [*zeichen*] of this community is adult baptism...” but quickly notes that “adult baptism is only the sign [*zeichen*] of this these groups; their real longing is for the apostolic community” (*OE*, 110/148).²² Placing Müntzer within the Anabaptist fold, Taubes then asserts that the “seething mass of desires associated with the Anabaptists culminates in Thomas Müntzer” and his confrontation with Luther (*OE*, 110/148).

At this point in Book III Taubes’ reading of Müntzer becomes a way of connecting Marx and Kierkegaard – a reading which takes up the bulk of Book IV, and one that he owes in part to Karl Löwith’s 1941 book *From Hegel to Nietzsche*.²³ Taubes argues that Müntzer critiques and sublates both the inner religious life exemplified by Kierkegaard and the outer social life that concerns Marx, perhaps thereby effecting the kind of “fusion [*Ineins*] of inside and outside [that] can only be attained if one is prepared to abandon the territory which holds Marx and Kierkegaard, even in their opposition, captive” as he posits at the end of the book, in the last sentence before the epilogue (*OE*, 191/254). While Taubes employs Müntzer in the service of his overarching genealogy of eschatology, the focus of this study is on both the surprising accuracy and emancipatory potential of his reading of Müntzer and the Anabaptists.

Taubes and the Anabaptists

Until this point I have attempted to summarize Taubes’ use of Müntzer largely on his own terms, but in order to more fully understand Müntzer’s importance within the argument of *Occidental Eschatology*, and to make a case for Taubes as a philosopher of history who anticipates later historical research on the Anabaptists, I will now compare his descriptions of the Anabaptists

²¹ Whereas Taubes does not draw an explicit causal connection between the Anabaptists and modernity (despite making the connection), Mennonite historian H.S. Bender makes the grand claim that “There can be no question but that the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion, so basic in American Protestantism and so essential to democracy, ultimately are derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period, who for the first time clearly enunciated them and challenged the Christian world to follow them in practice.” Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision.”

²² Taubes cites Bloch, *Thomas Münzer*, original 79-80; new edition, 60.

²³ Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, 137-162. Taubes describes the importance of his discovery of this work in “Carl Schmitt: Apocalyptic Prophet of the Counterrevolution,” 2.

and Müntzer with the recent historiography. As noted above, Taubes' descriptions of Müntzer are difficult to tell apart from his prescriptions. For example, Taubes claims that Müntzer's legacy does not die with him at the battle of Frankenhausen, but culminates in the siege at Münster (*OE*, 118/158-159). Citing Brandt's 1933 German edition of Müntzer's work, Taubes describes the Anabaptist movement as beginning in Zurich, after which "it moves out from its center in Zurich and intersects with Müntzer in southern Germany..." (*OE*, 118/159). A paragraph later, Taubes writes that "Other branches of the Anabaptists take refuge in Holland. These splinter groups quickly merge into the new sect of the Melchiorites, who choose to use force [citation from Troeltsch]. It is there that the Anabaptists suddenly erupt in Münster." (*OE*, 119/159). Narrating the later history of the Anabaptists, Taubes continues, stating that the disappearance of the militant Anabaptists occurs after the fall of Münster, while pacifist Anabaptism continues in David Joris until its final renewal and disappearance in the figure of Menno Simons [citation from Troeltsch]." (*OE*, 119/159).

In the declarative voice, Taubes makes claims about the relationship between Müntzer and the Anabaptists – specifically stating that Müntzer was influential for the Anabaptists via the apocalyptic and violent influence of Melchior Hoffman in the Dutch Republic, and stating that pacifist Anabaptism continued and concluded with David Joris and Menno Simons. Implicit in these claims is a distinction between violent and nonviolent Anabaptists, in which the category of Anabaptism is fluid and complex, not categorically including Müntzer, but not excluding him either. This fluidity of categories is in keeping with the claims of Joshua Robert Gold, Aleida and Jan Assmann, and Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, that, according to Taubes, boundaries ought to be complicated and blended rather than entrenched and essentialized.²⁴

Given that Taubes is a philosopher and not an historian it is surprising to see that these historical descriptions are far more in line with contemporary social histories of the Anabaptists and Müntzer, than with the confessional historiography of Taubes' day.²⁵ Unlike the confessional history of the Anabaptists being written in the 1940s and 1950s which ascribed a singular origin to the Anabaptist movement (H.S. Bender),²⁶ and defined Anabaptism as essentially nonviolent while rejecting Müntzer as an aberration (J.C. Wenger),²⁷ Taubes anticipates many of the advances made by later social historians of the Anabaptists by acknowledging the plurality of the Anabaptist movement (*OE*, 110/148), rejecting nonviolence as their defining characteristic (*OE*, 86/116), and defining their voluntarism as a consequence of their restitutionist desire to return to the values of the early church (*OE*, 110/148). Furthermore, Taubes places Müntzer in continuity with the broader Anabaptist movement (*OE*, 106/142) – something that confessional historians in the 1940s and 1950s would never have done, but something that is done now with some regularity, especially in the case of Müntzer's influence on Hans Hut and South German

²⁴ Gold, "Jacob Taubes: Apocalypse From Below," 141.

²⁵ For one overview of this history and historiography, especially pertaining to Müntzer, see the helpful introduction to the anthology *The Anabaptists and Thomas Müntzer*.

²⁶ Bender, *Conrad Grebel*, xiv. He writes, "The Swiss Brethren movement, commonly called Anabaptism and later known as Mennonitism, was formally initiated on January 21, 1525, in the city of Zurich, Switzerland."

²⁷ Wenger, *Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine*, 7-9. He writes, under the heading "False Theories of Anabaptism," that although Conrad Grebel and Müntzer corresponded, "Müntzer's program of violence was entirely unacceptable to the nonresistant Swiss Brethren" adding that "Swiss Anabaptism had no connections with Müntzer's peasant revolt of 1524-1525." In addition to Wenger's attempt to define Anabaptism as nonviolent, Swiss, and therefore essentially separate from Müntzer, he also rejects any Catholic-monastic influence (Ritschl) in contrast to Davis and Snyder's later work (see footnote 17 above).

Anabaptism.²⁸ In order to understand the significance of Taubes' anticipations, it is first important to understand the trajectory of Anabaptist historiography.

The historiography of the Anabaptists has moved through several discrete stages, beginning with the "Bender school" of the 1940s and 1950s that sought to restore the dignity of the Anabaptists, who had until then been equated with fanatics (*Schwärmer*) and associated with both Thomas Müntzer and the bloody siege of the city of Münster. Spearheaded by Harold S. Bender, this initial school of thought has come to be called the 'monogenesis' school because of its confessionally motivated search for an historical essence and singular beginning point of the Anabaptist movement. Not by contrast, but in continuity, the next stage in Anabaptist historiography was even more revisionist, advancing a polygenetic thesis that divided Anabaptist origins into many distinct geographical and temporal categories in an effort to correct for the oversimplifications and essentialisms of the monogenesis school.²⁹

Thomas Müntzer's reception by early historians of Anabaptism began with his rejection as the 'Satan from Allstedt' and his association with Luther in 1519, and this eventually contributed to his rejection by the monogenesis school.³⁰ From early on, despite receiving Luther's assistance in acquiring a post at a church in Zwickau, Müntzer differed from Luther. The relationship between the two remained a key issue of concern for historians of the Reformation, including those of the polygenesis school.³¹ Although Müntzer never baptized adults – a fact that allowed some confessional historians to distance him from the Anabaptist movement³² – he did oppose pedobaptism, and furthermore rejected Luther's salvation by faith alone.³³ By 1521 Müntzer came to believe that the end of time was at hand, and in 1525 Müntzer saw the Peasant's Revolt and the battle at Frankenhausen as true signs that the apocalypse and final judgment were at hand. Not to be confused with the person of Thomas Müntzer, the siege at the city of Münster in 1534 was spearheaded by Bernhard Rothmann, Jan van Leiden, Bernhard Knipperdolling, and Jan Matthijs – each of whom held apocalyptic beliefs similar to that of Thomas Müntzer. The siege began in February 1534 with the expulsion of all the unbaptized from the city, and what followed was the attempted establishment of the New Jerusalem, including the instalment of a theocratic government led by representatives claiming the title of the twelve tribes of Israel.³⁴

Where the pre-monogenesis historiography was guilty of conflating the Anabaptists and Müntzer under the derogatory accusation of enthusiasm, the monogenesis school recovered the dignity of Anabaptism by separating the supposedly true and pure Swiss origin of Anabaptism from the apocalyptic violence of Müntzer. A movement of accord was then re-initiated by the polygenesis historians who considered Müntzer to be at least influential upon the Anabaptist movement and placed him under a broader banners of radicalism, nonconformism, and dissent.³⁵ As described above, Taubes anticipates the advances of the polygenesis school and their heirs in the following ways: by referring to the Anabaptist movement in the plural (*OE*, 110/148), by not defining the group as strictly nonviolent (*OE*, 86/116), and by acknowledging Müntzer's influence on the broader Anabaptist movement (*OE*, 106/142). Taubes also seems to

²⁸ See Scott, *Thomas Müntzer*, 128. Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, 7 and 44.

²⁹ Stayer, Packull, and Deppermann, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis."

³⁰ Friesen, "Thomas Müntzer and the Anabaptists," 143.

³¹ Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer*, xvii.

³² Friedmann and Packull. "Müntzer, Thomas," Paragraph 13.

³³ See Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, Chapter 3.

³⁴ See de Bakker, Stayer, and Driedger, *Bernhard Rothmann and the Reformation in Münster 1530-35*, 4.

³⁵ See Driedger, "Anabaptism and Religious Radicalism," 213 and 219.

acknowledge both the monastic influences within the Anabaptist groups and the complex inheritance of Anabaptist dissent in modernity, while the monogenesis historians underemphasized the former and oversimplified the latter. While permitting these complexities and avoiding the essentialisms of the monogenesis school, Taubes nonetheless sees in Müntzer and the Anabaptists a usable history that can serve as a resource for present thinking about what it means to live in time and constitute history.

Emancipatory History

A major question may remain: can we distinguish between the surprisingly anticipatory descriptions of Müntzer and the Anabaptists in Taubes' work, and Taubes' prescriptive argument regarding the place of Müntzer and the Anabaptists in the drama of emancipatory history? However, the fact that Taubes is unclear about his influences, as well as the fact that he writes in strong declarative statements that admit no clear distinction between description and prescription, both seem to render this question unanswerable. The truism that there is no value-free history rings true for Taubes in a principled way, for he does not separate his normative thesis that the essence of history is emancipatory freedom from his descriptive account of Müntzer and the Anabaptists.

It would be too simplistic to say that Taubes advances a normatively oriented emancipatory philosophy of history that just so happens to be more nuanced or more accurate than other normatively oriented confessional historians who were roughly his contemporaries (particularly Bender and Wenger). This construal of the relationship between descriptive and normative accounts of history risks disconnecting the two orientations in such a way that would suggest that despite the normative orientations that historians cannot help but have, they may still set forth an 'accurate' description of historical events and groups. But Taubes' account of Müntzer and the Anabaptists is surprising because it anticipates and resonates with later developments, and not because it is accurate in any timeless or absolute sense.

While historians in the monogenesis school obviously allowed their confessional values to overdetermine their understanding and evaluation of Müntzer and the Anabaptists, so too does the polygenesis school and its contemporary representatives, albeit in a less obvious way. For example, Hans-Jürgen Goertz, the author of a definitive social history of the Anabaptists, initially appears to write from a more value-free and balanced perspective – for he does not decide which of the many Anabaptist groups were faithful, nor does he adjudicate between who belongs in the essential core of Anabaptism. Goertz avoids the pitfalls of the monogenesis school by understanding Müntzer as a key influence upon Hans Hut and South German Anabaptism and insisting on the plural origins and characteristics of the Anabaptists. In fact, Goertz himself contests Taubes' reading of Müntzer in *Occidental Eschatology*, arguing that although Taubes rightly understood Müntzer as a mystic, he did not adequately clarify the relationship between mysticism and apocalypticism in Müntzer's work.³⁶

However, like Taubes, Goertz's key category from start to finish is human freedom and its dissenting negation of established powers. Goertz's landmark book *The Anabaptists* begins with an examination of the Anabaptist 'free church,' proceeds by defining Anabaptism via the key category of anticlericalism, and concludes with a statement that moves from a descriptive affirmation of the irreducibility of Anabaptist thought to a prescriptive admonition to take up the Anabaptist vision of freedom today:

³⁶ Goertz, "'Dran, dran, weyl ir tag habt': Apokalyptik bei Jacob Taubes und Thomas Müntzer," 164.

The doctrines of the Anabaptists were as much of their age as the theology of those who persecuted them as heretics. This does not mean that impulses from the alternative movements of the sixteenth century cannot be taken up today, wherever, in their religious or social experience, people perceive the oppression which obscures a still-awaited ‘new heaven and new earth,’ and wherever they are able to grasp small opportunities to gain freedom.³⁷

If one of our questions is ‘how is it possible that partisan histories like Taubes’ can still get history right?’ – given his anticipations of later social histories – then we ought to consider that modern social histories *also* reflect the values of their authors, betraying an historical determination, and even mobilizing their histories for select political causes in the present. In the case of Goertz, the primary value of human freedom guides his historical work, motivating him to define the Anabaptists through the key category of anticlericalism, unlike the confessional historians of the monogenesis school who defined the Anabaptists by the key categories of nonviolence or nonresistance. Goertz’s emphasis on freedom may sound more value-neutral to us because individual freedom is so tightly knit into the fabric of modernity, but it is no less a normative *value* than the Mennonite belief in nonviolence that guided Bender and Wenger. Goertz’s work may nonetheless be a better historical account because of the way he broadens the category of who counts as an Anabaptist, thereby better apprehending his historical object of study by better understanding his own biases, but it still does not achieve value-neutrality (although he does not claim to do so). By contrast, although Taubes’ history of Müntzer and the Anabaptists is also deeply conditioned by his valuation of history as an emancipatory movement of human freedom, unlike the confessional and post-confessional historians of Anabaptism who both attempt to write descriptively, Taubes writes in a way that refuses to distinguish between prescription and description, but instead leans into the ambiguous relationship between what is and what ought to be, advancing a philosophy of history that is critical of modern political realities on the basis of the emancipatory history of eschatological thinking.

A further question that remains is that of the source of Taubes’ understanding of Müntzer and the Anabaptists. It is most likely that Bloch’s book on Müntzer exerted a substantial influence on Taubes’ *Occidental Eschatology*, for Bloch too reads Müntzer and the Anabaptists as a part of a wider movement of religious and political emancipation that occurred during the Reformation. In one of his early essays, Mennonite political theologian A. James Reimer praises Bloch’s interpretation of Müntzer for its combination of historical, theological, and literary styles, and for its portrayal of Müntzer as both a political and religious figure. Reimer further lauds Bloch’s approach to writing historically while being “existentially involved,” and concludes with an appraisal of the relationship between Bloch’s historical work and his self-avowed commitment to revolutionary social change.³⁸ On Bloch’s history of the Anabaptists, Reimer writes that “Bloch tends, like Engels, to throw Müntzer, the Münsterites, the Anabaptists, the peasants, and the poor working class all into one homogenous revolutionary group.”³⁹ Indeed, Taubes could be accused of the same thing, and one could argue that his anticipations of later historical scholarship can in some way be traced back to Bloch’s reading of these groups under one category. What is more likely, however, is that Bloch’s methodological orientation of existential involvement and his refusal of neutrality influenced Taubes’ approach to history, for

³⁷ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, 135.

³⁸ See Reimer, “Chiliasmatic Imagination of Social Change: Bloch’s Interpretation of Müntzer,” 451.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 451.

Bloch's book begins with the claim that Müntzer calls to us from beyond the grave, constituting history itself through his challenge and inspiration.⁴⁰

I began by situating Müntzer within Taubes' *Occidental Eschatology*, first by calling into question the role of the distinction between description and prescription in Taubes' account of Müntzer, and then by summarizing his emancipatory idea of history. I argued above that Müntzer's role in *Occidental Eschatology* is essential, and then I drew significant connections between Taubes' historical claims and those of modern historians of Müntzer and the Anabaptists. These connections alone give the reader a deeper understanding of *Occidental Eschatology*, but what remains is the question of Müntzer's and Taubes' contemporary relevance for thinking about time and history within present conversations on political theology.

In conclusion, I contend that Müntzer and Taubes are both significant figures who must be reckoned with in the discourse on time and history within political theology, not only because of their abiding partisanship and non-neutrality, but because of their desire for the emancipation of the oppressed (whether of the oppressed peasants in the case of Müntzer, or of forgotten histories in the case of Taubes).⁴¹ A deep contradiction within western modernity is the simultaneous emphasis on individual freedom and pluralism – two values that cannot be easily reconciled given that the assertion of the freedom of one individual will inevitably conflict with the assertion of another.⁴² Both Müntzer and Taubes are decisive in ways that bear directly on this issue, resisting the discourse of neutrality and favoring the emancipation of the oppressed through revolutionary refusal and cycle-breaking freedom (respectively) over the cyclical and routinized patterns of established political and religious institutions. Furthermore, Taubes' *use* of Müntzer similarly refuses neutrality because Taubes does not merely present Müntzer under the guise of neutral description, but instead uses him as a positive voice in his quasi-normative history of eschatological thinking. Taubes' use of Müntzer is exceptional both because he acknowledges the complexity of Anabaptist history, and because he avoids the pretense of value-neutral description.

Questions surely remain. If there is no value-neutral history, then what kind of values should historians hold? What is the proper use of history? These questions loom large for both historians and those who work in and with political theology. Although this study has not engaged with the broader discourse on historiography, preferring instead to stay close to its two sources, Taubes' use of Müntzer seems to demonstrate that a partisan and emancipatory reading of history can still account for the plurality and complexity of a group like the Anabaptists. This significantly weakens the established sensibility that the proper telling of history must remain agnostic on the question of values, and calls into question the equivocation of Müntzer and fanaticism or extremism, suggesting that there may be emancipatory potential left in the resourcing of history for contemporary political purposes, and not in such a way that requires the sacrifice of that history's complexity and ambiguity for those political purposes.

⁴⁰ Bloch, *Thomas Münzer*, 10. Reimer, "Chilastic Imagination," 448.

⁴¹ See Laclau, "Beyond Emancipation," in *Emancipation(s)*, 1-19. Here Laclau elaborates on the concept of emancipation by using six categories: the dichotomy between the emancipatory moment and the preceding social order, the holistic effect that emancipation has on the totality of life, the replacement of alienation with transparency, the grounding of the revolutionary act in the social order, and the secularizing and rationalizing tendency. Each of these emancipatory elements resonates in some way with the emancipatory visions of both Taubes and Müntzer, as described above.

⁴² See Laclau, "Subject of Politics, Politics of the Subject," in *Emancipation(s)*, 47-53. and Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 1-8.

Contemporary social historians of Anabaptism have recently pointed out that the fear of violent fanaticism has long been connected to the ways that governments govern in the name of security,⁴³ with some scholars emphasizing that the negative connotations of Müntzer, Münster, and the Anabaptists endure, most recently being compared to the actions of ISIS in the popular media.⁴⁴ Historian Michael Driedger argues that the reductive account that endures from the demonizing of Anabaptists through to contemporary charges of fanaticism risks contributing to “an unintended legitimation of state violence.”⁴⁵ Against the simplistic scapegoating of Müntzer and the Anabaptists that props up the rational state against so-called ‘fanatical extremists,’ Driedger insists that we should try to get history right, but in such a way that “weaken[s] the larger assumptions about religion and violence that encourage the meme of Anabaptist violence.”⁴⁶ Citing Toscano’s critique of the use of fanaticism to reaffirm political hegemony and Cavanaugh’s critique of the very concept of ‘religious violence,’ Driedger proceeds negatively, with the aim of maintaining the complex and contested status of his historical object, but without avoiding contemporary political realities.⁴⁷ However, Taubes moves further still than this, acknowledging the complexities of Müntzer and the Anabaptists, but pushing past the negative task of criticism and the neutral task of description to the positive construction of new values that may go some way toward addressing the oppressive and repressive tendencies of the past. In this way, Taubes is exceptional and may contain yet untapped resources for future use by the political left and in the discourse on political theology, not only because he gives a framework for understanding the work of history as a partisan exercise for the emancipation of the oppressed, but also because he points to the postsecular potential of presenting usable histories that actively resist both material and hermeneutic violences inherited from Christendom.⁴⁸

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⁴³ Waite, “Apocalyptic Terrorists or a Figment of Government Paranoia? Reevaluating Anabaptist Violence in the Netherlands and Holy Roman Empire, 1535-1570,” 122. Compare with the critique of how Hobbesian forms of state sovereignty are underpinned by the fear of death in Agamben, “Form-of-Life,” 5.

⁴⁴ Driedger, “Münster, Monster, Modernity: Tracing the Challenging Meme of Anabaptist Madness.”

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 29, 47.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 49.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*.

⁴⁸ For further and more developed indications of the theopolitical potential within the historiography of the Anabaptists see Heilke, “Theological and Secular Metanarratives of Politics: Anabaptist Origins Revisited (Again).”

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