



Protesters gather in front of a fire near the North police precinct in Portland, Ore. on Sept. 6, 2020. This was the 101st consecutive night of disturbances in the city. (Nathan Howard/Getty Images)

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A Münster of Our Own Making: Religiosity in Portland



[Joseph Bottum](#)

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Commentary



(Top) Protesters gather in front of a fire near the North police precinct in Portland, Ore., on Sept. 6, 2020. This was the 101st consecutive night of disturbances in the city. (Above) Captured citizens brought before an Anabaptist leader during the Münster rebellion.

A violent gang of radical Anabaptists—now that’s a phrase one doesn’t get to use often, but there it is: In 1534, a violent gang of radical Anabaptists seized control of Münster, the city in northwestern Germany, and announced to all the world the coming of the New Jerusalem.

It was there in Westphalia, they said, that they would create heaven on earth, founding the true community of saints.

You can probably predict the path the tale takes. This kind of story follows a familiar narrative logic, and it always ends in murder. The great temptation of radicalism is the attempt to “immanentize the eschaton” (a phrase of Eric Voegelin’s, much used by conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s).

This is the belief that perfected human society is within sight and needs just one little further push. It’s the idea that what religions promise for the end time can be brought about in the meantime, with only a little effort—a little revolution and revaluation of values. A little spilled blood.

You can find that general pattern in the Killing Fields (where the Khmer Rouge executed more than a million Cambodians in the 1970s, in the firm belief they were bringing about a peaceable utopia). Or the Cultural Revolution (where, at the instigation of Mao Zedong, radicalized “Red Guards” killed as many as 20 million Chinese in the late 1960s, in the name of restoring true communism).

What’s fascinating about the Münster Rebellion, however, is that it doesn’t follow merely the general history of grand social revolutions that begin in claimed idealism and end in actual slaughter. It also follows a particular pattern familiar to Americans watching the news these days.

Find the riots in the big cities a little hard to understand? They’re reenacting a 16th-century morality play. [Portland](#), Oregon, is our mini-Münster. The members of [Antifa](#) and Black Lives Matter are our ersatz Anabaptists.

New Jerusalem

So, around 1532, a Dutch agitator named Jan Matthys came to Münster and began working tirelessly to rile up the city. His party soon found a local Lutheran pastor named Bernhard Rothmann to promote their cause and a local wool merchant named Bernhard Knipperdolling to finance it. Anabaptists poured into the city from Holland and Germany, with mobs shaming and bullying random citizens into being rebaptized in the new dispensation.

Winning the magistracy elections in 1534, the Anabaptists installed Knipperdolling as mayor and deposed the representatives of the prince-bishop who ruled Münster for the Holy Roman Empire.

Wild bouts of looting and iconoclasm followed, with the (mostly Lutheran) churches stripped of their art and valuables. Rebaptism into Anabaptism was made mandatory, and property was

forcibly seized—with a declaration that, henceforth, all property would be held in common. The New Jerusalem, the world was told, had arrived.

The Westphalian prince-bishop and the Holy Roman Empire didn't share the euphoria, however, and they soon besieged the city. Not to worry, said Matthys, who announced that he was the new Gideon who would conquer for God—on Easter Sunday, no less. He and his indomitable band of 12 followers sallied out to smite the hundreds of professional troops surrounding Münster. They proved not quite up to the task.

After the deceased Matthys's head and genitals were nailed to the city gates, a 25-year-old Dutchman named John of Leiden took charge, on the basis of his claim to be receiving visions from God. Proclaiming himself the new David, and Münster the new Zion, John began to dress in royal robes and took several wives.

Of course, to have multiple marriages, he needed to enact a law allowing polygamy. When legalized polygamy failed to bring about the perfected kingdom, John—in a classic example of the escalating logic of radical social transformation—passed another law, making polygamy mandatory.

Even that, however, failed to end the starvation of Münster's citizens or shame the Holy Roman Empire into surrender. The city was retaken by the prince-bishop on June 24, 1535. John of Leiden and Knipperdolling were executed, with their bodies displayed in cages that still hang from a Münster church steeple.

Using the Radicals

Portions of this story have echoes in other rebellions. Looking at the Russian Revolution, Gary Saul Morson [has written](#) about the ways in which the liberal party in Russia actually helped the radical Bolsheviks who despised them.

Picturing the radicals as merely a useful club with which to terrorize the opponents of reform, the liberals supposed that the Bolsheviks could be reined in once the conservatives were defeated. And so the liberal Kadet party maneuvered to have Bolsheviks released from jail and armed for street protests.

Not surprisingly, the Kadet politicians proved less smart than they imagined themselves. The Bolsheviks used the opportunity to seize power—and promptly executed the liberal politicians who had facilitated their rise.

The obvious parallel to the Münster Rebellion comes in the early days, when key Lutheran figures aided Matthys and the radical Anabaptists, taking them as tools to use against Catholic opponents.

And the parallel to the violence in U.S. cities today comes with the Democratic party figures who pay the bail of radical protesters, the facilitating of violence by liberal mayors, and the notion that agitation makes Antifa and Black Lives Matter useful weapons for defeating Republicans—

all in the mad belief (so like the insanity of the Münster Lutherans and the Russian liberals) that the radicals can be dealt with easily, once the hated opponent has been eliminated.

Anxious Revolutionaries

But the Münster Rebellion and the current American agitation share elements not exactly present in the Russian Revolution—for Westphalia and America were profoundly Protestant territory, with their agitations shaped by that fact. In my 2015 book, “[An Anxious Age](#),” I argued that current generations of radically tinged Americans are “post-Protestants,” the children of the people who once filled the dying mainline churches.

Certainly, they manifest some of the worst of the old social norms: a conviction of their own moral rectitude and a feeling of superiority to the unenlightened. They have, as well, the same spiritual anxieties, made all the more desperate by their lack of actual religion. They seek constant assurance that they hold the right attitudes and take the right positions.

They are, in essence, the heirs of the Social Gospel movement, with all the old religion stripped out: the Church of Christ without Christ.

You can find my application of these ideas to contemporary events in a Weekly Standard essay, called “[The Spiritual Shape of Political Ideas](#)” and in “[Wokeness: Old Religion in a New Bottle](#),” a recent interview in Spiked. In them, I think about “white guilt” as the idea of Original Sin with God removed, cancel culture as Christian shunning with the church removed, and even radical environmentalism as the Christian Apocalypse with the Second Coming erased.

But, more particularly, think about the unendingness of the riots going on right now in Portland, the mad politics of the autonomous zones in Seattle, the bullying of restaurant-goers, the confrontations with passersby, and the rest.

The key is discerning the unfocused and unadmitted religiosity in it all. Antifa and Black Lives Matter are filled with spiritually anxious people, desperate to make their lives meaningful. The agitators traveling from protest to protest are Matthys, come to Westphalia to see if that is where the Anabaptist revolution would finally take hold. The mad escalation is religious rebellion against the sinful world, following out its inescapable logic.

We are watching a Münster of our own making: a vague and dangerous hunger for the world to be changed, with an anarchist utopia imagined to lie just a little push ahead—needing just a little apocalyptic revolution and social reversal. Needing just a little blood.

Joseph Bottum, Ph.D., is director of the Classics Institute at Dakota State University. His most recent book is “The Decline of the Novel.”

Views expressed in this article are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.