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"All things are in common": theology and politics in Luther Blissett’s Q

Roland Boer

In regard to what was to be understood by “the Gospel”, [Thomas] Münzer asserts: “It is an article of our creed, and one which we wish to realise, that all things are in common [omnia sunt communia], and should be distributed as occasion requires, according to the several necessities of all. Any prince, count or baron who, after being earnestly reminded of this truth, shall be unwilling to accept it, is to be beheaded or hanged”.1

The long and wildly popular novel Q is a stunning reclamation of the revolutionary Christian tradition for a whole generation of anti-capitalist activists. Written by the radical Italian collective, Luther Blissett (now Wu Ming, “nobody”),2 it was first published online in Italian in 1999. I would like to suggest that it is both an unexpected and lively

1. Kautsky, 1897, p130.
2. Luther Blissett, the name of an English footballer who played for A C Milan in the 1990s, was a name used by hundreds of activists in order to play pranks on the capitalist media. Wu Ming (the new name of the collective from 2000 but earlier the name of a much wider movement), was deeply involved in the G8 protests in Genoa, where the police laid a trap and beat, tortured and imprisoned many protesters. For some further information, filtered through the mouths both of Wu Ming and of the reporter, see the interviews by Baird and Home and their own reflections in the Verso reprint of Münzer’s Sermon to the Princes (Baird, 2006; Home, 2013; Wu Ming, 2001; 2010).
contribution to the renewed debate over Marxism and religion and that it reveals some unexpected dimensions of the anti-capitalist movement. In what follows, I analyse the tone of the novel, one that is set by a tradition that begins with Engels, runs through Karl Kautsky and Ernst Bloch and includes Antonio Gramsci. This is a tone of revolutionary appreciation of the Anabaptists and of Thomas Münzter, but also one that sees the Reformation itself as a great revolutionary period. From tone I move to the issues raised by the novel. These are the tensions between passion and reason, and between rupture and communalism, and the deep political ambivalence of theology. What is intriguing about these tensions is that one finds them in both revolutionary political and religious traditions. Finally, I broach the matter of translation, offering both an alternative model to the relations between religious and political thought, and seeking a possible answer as to why many of those in the anti-capitalist movement have read Q, indeed why they are so interested in religious radicalism.

Before proceeding, a brief outline of the novel is perhaps in order, a novel that shows all the signs that the authors thoroughly enjoyed the writing thereof. The revolutionary decades of the 16th century are connected by a multi-named protagonist, who is at the same time without a name. He may be of German extraction, but much of the revolutionary and religious ferment arises from the Netherlands—a welcome emphasis. He moves from the battlefield of Frankenhausen in 1525, where the peasants led by “Magister Thomas” (Münzter) were finally defeated, to owning a Venetian brothel in the 1540s, from the Anabaptist revolution of Münster in north west Germany to defrauding the Fugger family’s bank of 100,000 florins, from the war parties of Jan van Batenberg to the Brethren of the Free Spirit or Loists of Antwerp, from bringing Italy to the verge of Reformation to conspiring with Jewish bankers to spread Calvinism via the booklet The Benefit of Christ Crucified. Increasingly, he becomes a leader himself, a prophet with a canny ability for taking care of himself. Friends and comrades meet grisly ends throughout, loves are lost or left behind and battles are mostly lost, but some are won.

Throughout the novel the protagonist is shadowed by an equally unnamed Vatican agent. Or rather, this agent has a consistent code name, signing his missives to his Vatican boss with “Q” and those to Münzter with “Qoellet”. On each revolutionary occasion Q is in the thick of events. He persuades Münzter to take to the battlefield at Frankenhausen, feeding false information concerning the supposed unpreparedness of the troops of Philip, Landgrave (count) of Hesse. He turns up within the walls of Münster, seeking to ingratiate himself—now as Heinrich Gresebeck—with the Anabaptist leaders and push them to extremes. He investigates the curious radical ferment in Italy itself, devoting himself to identifying its cause. He counters the efforts of moderate Roman Catholic cardinals and theologians who seek rapprochement with the Protestants.

Throughout he pens missives to his tireless boss, Cardinal Gianpierato Garafa, the head of the newly formed Inquisition and one who becomes Pope Paul IV at the end of the novel. These letters are a crucial component of Q. At once fawning and frank, they offer insights into the radical movements, propose daring counter-revolutionary moves and educate readers concerning the inner theologicopolitical workings of the Counter-Reformation. He also pens the letters that win over the confidence of Münzter, showing a mastery of flattery and faux confidentiality (although we must wait quite a while to find out he is the author). The formal opposition of these two characters, both men of action and ingenuity, will become crucial for my later assessment of the ambivalence of Christianity.

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3. I must admit to a slightly self-serving dimension to this question, since I seek some answers to the popularity of my own five-volume work The Criticism of Heaven and Earth (Boer, 2007–2013) in the same circles. From Morocco to China to Australia, I have encountered activists who have read these heavy tomes and have endless questions concerning theology itself.

4. The secondary literature on Q is rather thin. The study by De Donno touches on some of the issues raised here (and I refer to it from time to time), but seeks a moral in the novel and is theoretically tone-deaf, thereby missing central features of the novel (De Donno, 2013). Garber and Zucchi focus on historical issues. Although both attempt to assess the historical reliability of the novel’s representation of the Anabaptists and the Reformation era, Zucchi at least searches for some features of their play with history: Garber, 2009; Zucchi, 2007. In reply, it is worth quoting the authors: “We make use of historians’ work, their research and their interpretations, but then we go beyond the point at which they’re constrained to stop”—Baird, 2006, p255. The main focus of the other studies on the Wuming project concerns the political function of indeterminate identities and authorship, along with scattered interest in the role of media and the nature of Italian literature and intellectual activism in Italy, or the function of the indeterminacy of names, with little, if any, attention to the crucial matter of the intersections between theology and politics in Q. Habeck, 2009; Ovan, 2005; Thoburn, 2011; Bisain, 2010; Meccia, 2009; Piga, 2010.

5. Here the authors both implicitly acknowledge Georg Lukács’s point that the novel needs a hero to provide a thread that links its disparate elements and challenge that point with the multi-named hero and the two characters—the hero and the Vatican agent—Lukács, 1971. For some further reflection on the slipperiness of identity and anonymity, see the interview by Baird and the studies by Habeck, Ovan and Thoburn: Baird, 2006, p252; Habeck, 2009; Ovan, 2005; Thoburn, 2011.

6. The other letters are those—between Münzter and other revolutionaries—in the old satchel rescued by the hero from the battlefield of Frankenhausen, as well as the few sent by Anton Fugger to the Inquisition boss, seeking the punishment for heretics, burning at the stake, of those who had defrauded the bank so successfully. They are of the same ilk as Q’s letters.
Q and the Marxist tradition

In the eyes of the German working classes Münzer was and is the most brilliant embodiment of heretical communism.7

Q breathes the spirit of those who have identified a profoundly revolutionary dimension to Christianity—from Frederick Engels, through Karl Kautsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky and Ernst Bloch, to Antonio Gramsci.8 For Engels, the process of coming to terms with his Reformed background (he shared the strong faith of his Calvinist household in Wuppertal) involved an increasing awareness of the revolutionary nature of Christianity.9 Developing a passing insight in the 1840s concerning “the religious revolution of which the outcome was Christianity”,10 Engels first elaborated his position in an influential study of Münzer and the peasant revolution, The Peasant War in Germany.11 Although this work set in train a series of subsequent studies, especially by Karl Kautsky and Ernst Bloch, so much so that Münzer became a revolutionary hero in East Germany, it is not Engels’ best study. Here Münzer’s fiery theological language becomes a mere external covering for a secular, revolutionary core. Münzer spoke in theological terms to the larger groups of peasants, but to the inner circle he spoke in a directly political manner, untainted by theology. Other

7: Kautsky, 1897, p151.
8: I would add the occasional moment from Marx and Mao as well. From Marx we have, of course, the explanation of the economic mechanisms of capitalism, focused now on the “Dutch miracle”, that is the first properly capitalist empire. Blissett, 2004, pp260-264.
Further; “Luther stripped the priests of their black garb, only to put it on the hearts of all men”, Blissett, 2004, p258, Marx, 1975, p182; see also Boer, 2012, pp145-50. And the Marxist moment appears when Otfelie von Gersen, Münzer’s wife, whispers, “You were right. We can do nothing without the peasants”. Blissett, 2004, p56; see further Chan, 2003.
9: For a detailed discussion of these aspects of Lenin’s work, with complete references, see Boer, 2012, pp233-306.
10: This is from his Letters from London of 1843. Following the text I have quoted is a reinterpretation of a phrase from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3): “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven and, however long it may take, the kingdom of this earth as well”. Engels, 1975a, p380. To this should be added his early call on revolutionary movements and their leaders inspired by Christianity, such as Thomas Müntzer, Etienne Cabot, Wilhelm Weidling and others: Engels, 1975b.
11: Engels, 1978. I am not interested here in assessing Münzer per se, but rather his place in the Marxist heritage. For those wishing to explore Müntzer further, a cluster of studies appeared at what was generally agreed to be the 500 year anniversary of his birth in 1989.

elements are of greater worth, such as the identification of a tension in Luther’s message, one that both set Müntzer on his revolutionary path and then led Luther to denounce the peasants; the clear appeal of Luther to the merchants of the towns; and the detailed discussion of military manoeuvres and battle plans (with a glorious map). The latter may not have been taken up by the novel, but the former becomes a crucial feature that enhances the theme of the political ambivalence of Christianity.

Engels’s later study of early Christianity, published posthumously in Neue Zeit, under Kautsky’s editorship, is much sharper.12 Here Engels argues that: “Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and freemen, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome”.13 Indeed, it succeeded in overthrowing the world. So close is the comparison with modern socialism, with its sects and false prophets and persecution and problems with finance, that Engels often draws direct comparisons. Yet he does not quite argue in a thoroughly dialectical fashion that theology itself could be revolutionary—that argument had to wait for Anatoly Lunacharsky and Ernst Bloch. Instead Engels sees a paradox. Christianity offered an otherworldly solution to suffering, a solution that had very this-worldly repercussions. Perhaps the best summary of his position is found in a work written at the same time:

It is now, almost to the year, 16 centuries since a dangerous party of overthrow was likewise active in the Roman Empire. It undermined religion and all the foundations of the state; it flatly denied that Caesar’s will was the supreme law; it was without a fatherland, was international; it spread over the whole empire, from Gaul to Asia, and beyond the frontiers of the empire. It had long carried on sedition activities underground in secret; for a considerable time, however, it had felt strong enough to come out into the open. This party of overthrow... was known by the name of Christians.14

Given Engels’s profound influence, this position would become a standard one in the socialist criticism of the time. But Engels’s task remained incomplete, so he passed the mantle to Karl Kautsky,15 who was to take the analysis of the revolutionary tradition
Anabaptists, to the watershed of Münster itself, the careful effort to read against the anti-revolutionary bias of the sources; the suspicious figure of Luther, who Münzer outshines; the energy and organisational brilliance of the peasants and their leader; the names, networks and arrest of the various Anabaptist leaders; as also the empathetic interpretation of the Anabaptist revolution at Münster.

Indeed, Kautsky is even more sympathetic to these radical Anabaptists than is Q. For the novel, eventually Münster slips into madness under Jan Matthys and then Jan van Leyden, especially when our hero leaves the city, first to seek reinforcements and supplies, and then for good. However, Kautsky attempts to understand and favourably interpret the situation of a city of radical communists under siege. Seeking the correct path into the unknown, surrounded by forces of the ruling classes desperate to crush them, the Anabaptists did far better than anyone would have expected. So Kautsky reinterprets the austerity and puritan nature of the defenders, the economic need for what has been called “polygamy” (of approximately 10,000 defenders, 8,000 were women), the desire for peace, and the enthusiasm to the last of those who knew they were doomed. Of course, we also find the central figure of Gresbeck, who betrayed the Anabaptists at Münster to the massed Roman Catholic and Protestant forces. Gresbeck, a native of Münster and a joiner, wrote one of the most detailed accounts of the events in the city, albeit from the perspective of one who betrayed it. So Kautsky’s suspicions provide the creative link by which Gresbeck becomes, in the novel, a manifestation of the Vatican agent, Q.

By now a question needs to be asked—were the Anabaptists really revolutionaries? Thomas Münzer certainly was, as Engels and Kautsky agree. But his links with the Anabaptists were tenuous at best. The Anabaptists themselves were clearly regarded as revolutionaries by both sides of the Reformation. Calvin, for instance, worked hard to distance himself from the Anabaptists—with whom the Romish church was keen to connect him—and present his own approach as a middle way between the

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22: Even the opening scene in which Münzer is captured after the battle of Frankenhausen, a scene that vividly captures the reader in the opening pages of Q, appears in Kautsky’s text. More concise, pp. 53.
23: Actually, Kautsky points out that they “never got beyond the search for a suitable form of marriage” that met the extraordinary circumstances in which they found themselves: Kautsky, p. 269-270. In this way he reads the various reflections, announcements, backtracking in Q, pp. 269-270. This is really an observation concerning all forms of communist construction.

becomes the Elisha to Engels’s Elijah, picking up the mantle fallen from the departing leader: Engels, 1891, p. 200; Engels, 1891, p. 184; Engels, 1892d; Engels, 1892e; Engels, 1894e, p. 747; Engels, 1892f, p. 88; Engels, 1892f, pp. 749-749; Engels, 1892g, pp. 269-270. For Kautsky, Q. 197, pp. 270-273.

17. I make this point fully cognisant of the fact that Wu Ming has stated that Bloch is the major influence on their reading; De Donno, 2013, p. 44. On this matter, I would simply point out that authorial statements are not always the best guide to interpretation, especially when they attempt to direct such interpretation.

18. In their introduction to the Verso reprint of Münther’s Sermon to the Princes, Wu Ming notes the curious and even troublesome intersection between Q and the anti-capitalist movement, especially at the GS meeting in Genoa in 2008. Apart from placards with omnia sunt communia, those involved used aliases such as “Magister Thomas” and “Gert-from-the-well”, Wu Ming, 2010, xxxiv.


21. On this matter, De Donno is mistaken, for he suggests that Bloch was the first to make this point. His reading of Kautsky is somewhat superficial: De Donno, 2013, p. 44.
Anabaptist excesses and the stultifying corruption of Rome. For Kautsky, they exhibited not only the robust debate and struggle of a radical movement in its early days, but also the two crucial elements of revolutionary overthrow and communal life (from Acts 2 and 4). The authors of Q agree wholeheartedly, exploring both dimensions, from the violent confrontations with the peasants at and Müntzer to the communal life of the Brothers of the Free Spirit, or Loists, in Antwerp.

Less needs to be said here concerning Anatoly Lunacharsky and Ernst Bloch, save that they shared the insight of Kautsky—that theology is itself crucial. The well-nigh forgotten Lunacharsky (through no fault of his own) was a Left Bolshevik, Commissar of Enlightenment after the Russian Revolution, and author of a stunning work, *Religion and Socialism*. Here he writes: “Great prophets are always on the borders, among seething social struggle. With eagle eyes peering into the future, they provide a slogan, generalise the struggle, scorch the enemies of their ideas, console supporters.”

This applies as much to Müntzer as it does to the tradition of revolutionary prophets that he traces through from the Bible: Amos the firebrand, bright Hosea, Isaiah the democrat, Jeremiah the furiously eloquent, Paul the democratic internationalist. Jesus the scourge of the propertied and wealthy, the “everlasting Gospel” of Joachim of Fiore, through to Müntzer.

In many respects, Lunacharsky anticipates the interests and emphases of Ernst Bloch, even though the latter does not seem to have known of his forerunner. Along with Engels and Kautsky, Bloch influenced the raising of Müntzer to the status of pre-revolutionary hero in east Germany (much like Jan Hus in Czechoslovakia). His *Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution* (Thomas Müntzer as theologian of revolution) first appeared in 1921, with its wholehearted embracing of Müntzer and the peasant revolt. The book follows Kautsky’s main points, arguing for the centrality of theology in Müntzer’s radical politics, as also the pre-Marxist forms of communism that are found in the radical tradition of Christianity. For Bloch, of course, it is part of his wider project to restore the “warm stream” of Marxism, the one that appeals to the heart, that fosters enthusiasm and commitment. It is not that he wished to dispense with “cold” theory, but that the two are necessary for Marxism. One of the main sources for that warm stream is religion, or more specifically the Bible. However, Bloch’s distinct contribution is to focus on the apocalyptic or millenarian dimension of Müntzer’s message, although this too is part of a larger project to show how revolutionary such religiously-inspired apocalyptic movements can be. Not only was this an effort to introduce a distinct dimension that Marxism had missed, but it also pushed back against the desire by Marx and Engels to counter the apocalyptic fervour of many early communists (such as Moses Hess and Wilhelm Weitling). In Müntzer’s hands, then, the revolutionary myth of Christian communism finds full expression. The Bible becomes the bad conscience of the church, and it is precisely its vivid apocalyptic texts that breathe the fire of protest and revolution.

By now there is more than enough to indicate the tradition from which Q springs, the tone and feel that it conveys: revolutionary Anabaptist, Christian communism, theology itself as potentially revolutionary—all mediated through a distinctly Marxist tradition. However, the novel also breathes a curiously Italian air, that of Gramsci. It was Gramsci’s lasting lament that Italy had not experienced the Reformation. Indeed, “Luther and the Reformation stand at the beginning of all modern philosophy and civilisation”. By contrast, Italy had undergone, through the Renaissance, a series of “reforms that touch only the upper classes and often only the intellectuals”. Never was there an “intellectual and moral reform” that shook up society from bottom to top. Gramsci goes so far as to align the Protestant Reformation with the communist revolution, for the Reformation was the last great European mass movement. The solution: Gramsci searches for a comparable figure and finds him in Machiavelli’s prince. The authors of Q give voice to the same longing, although they also correct Gramsci by constructing an account in which the reason why a Reformation did not take place may be found in the Inquisition. Our protagonist undertakes, towards the close of the novel, a programme of razing preaching, spreading the Anabaptist message, baptising and finding many adherents. In the end it fails, through the dual causes of the Inquisition and the cowardice of the newly-found leaders. The authors also correct Gramsci by locating the truly revolutionary strain of the Reformation not with Luther but with the
Radical Reformation. If this had taken root, there would indeed have been a thorough shake-up of Italian society at all levels.

So Q breathes the air of this long tradition in Marxism, where religion itself can become a revolutionary force. Engels feeling his way, Kautsky providing a grand narrative, Lunacharsky and Bloch giving some depth and Gramsci an air of longing: these are the nutrients of rich engagement.

**Issues**

Tell me that what we were fighting for wasn’t a mistake. I clench my jaw, my fists clenched. I’ve never thought so, not for a moment.31

My analysis turns now to consider four themes that emerge from Q: the tension between passion and reason, that between rupture and communalism, the political ambivalence of Christianity, and the question of translation between politics and theology.32 On the first point, the novel clearly focuses on what it is that motivates people to take up revolutionary politics. It is a passion enhanced at a narrative level by the immediacy of the filthy roughness of life, but especially in situations of war. Carefully argued assessments of the current state of economic oppression, with the requisite determination of what needs to be done, may be one thing, but that—which thoroughly necessary—is not what touches the heart for many. It is what Ernst Bloch called the “cold stream” of Marxism, or what Anatoly

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32. All of these may be seen as distinct features of political myth, the recreation of which is a crucial feature of Wu Ming’s project. However, I have written at length on political myth elsewhere and De Donno has broached, in a limited way, the self-proclaimed “mythopoesis” of Wu Ming, as well as their allegory of the present: Boer, 2009b; De Donno, 2013; Baird, 2006, pp257-259. Although De Donno’s emphasis on mythopoesis is welcome, it misses the full dialectical complexity of political myth. More problematic is the way he follows a rather old-fashioned search for authorial intention, overlaid with moral concerns—a curious effort given Wu Ming’s problematising of authorship itself. That he falls into the trap of following Wu Ming’s own efforts to guide and control interpretation of the novel only exacerbates the problem. Further, he tends to focus on Thomas Müntzer, which is the concern only of the first part of the novel, thereby giving scant attention to the longer and even more intriguing engagements with Müntzer, the Anabaptists in the Lowlands, the Brethren of the Free Spirit in Antwerp, and the movements in Italy. Other themes may also suggest themselves, such as the carnivalesque nature of revolution, or revolution as apocalypse, the perennial question of old and new, or the tension between utopian and dystopian dimensions of radical activism. Apart from the last point, which may be extracted from De Donno’s (2013) study, the remainder are the topics of another study.

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Lunacharsky described as “‘dry’ economic theory”.33 Instead they preferred to stress the enthusiastic and emotional dimensions. For both of them, the cold stream was embodied in Second International Marxism, depending as it did on a particular reading of Engels, especially the Engels of Anti-Dühring and Socialism: Utopian and Scientific.34 This was to lose the sensitive and enthusiastic Marx, who provided alongside his scientific work an emotional appeal, who said, according to Lunacharsky, “that poets need many caresses” (The October Storm and After).35 Indeed, this Marx was the one who brought about a distinct “conversion to Marxism”, a conversion to a system that is a “deeply emotional impulse of the soul”.36 Or in Bloch’s characteristic style, “to the warm stream of Marxism, however, belong liberating intention and materialistically humane, humanely materialist real tendency, towards whose goal all these disenchantments are undertaken”.37

The tough hero of Q is also one whose eye has the glint of promise and hope, and who finds that same gleam in Thomas Müntzer, “the flame that set Germany ablaze”, in the peasants who follow him, in the eyes of the radicals at Müntzer, in the apocalyptic prophets such as Jan Mathys, and in the free spirits of Antwerp. To be sure, he has his head on his shoulders and the survivor’s instinct. His scars—the geographical map of lost battles”—tell enough of that story. Yet in the face of an almost unending stream of catastrophe and failure, when the “army of the elect” is “lost in the mud”, the passion remains. But whence does that enthusiasm come? Is it the catharsis of violence, when his hopes are seemingly dashed time and again against superior forces? Is it the hedonism that creeps through at different moments, with a wine flask and a woman or two? Is it the revolutionist promise, when “everything was possible”, that calls one back again? No, it is clearly from his faith, of a radical Anabaptist kind.38

A gospel of the poor it was, of the drags who never imagined they would have the chance to decide history. Or rather, through a focus on the text in which obedience to God’s command was central, those who failed to live up to that law were to be condemned. Princes, bishops, barons, counts, any who oppressed the poor, especially the peasants, were subject to God’s judgement. Any who saw themselves as higher than everyone else, who took on airs and powers and wealth, did so not only on the backs
of the poor, but in contravention to the message of the Gospel. Not only did the Church of Rome fall short. But so also did Luther, whose message appealed to the wealthy merchants and burghers of the towns, let alone the princes who saw in Luther and his message a way of throwing off the burden of Rome and the Holy Roman Emperor.

This emphasis leads to the second tension in the novel, between rupture and communialism. The first appears with the opening scene, the graphic first-hand account of the slaughter of the peasants at Frankenhausen, and it continues through the long story of the siege of Münster, a name that provokes "a shiver that was once an earthquake", let alone the apocalyptic squads of Jan van Batenburg in the Netherlands, seeking on the end by cutting a swath of destruction. Each was the "umpteenth Jerusalem, still populated with ghosts and crazed prophets". But I wish to focus here on the constant desire, at both the personal level of our hero and of the revolutions themselves, to break through to communial life, with all things in common, mutual aid and the banishment of exploitation. We find this above all at three moments, with differing emphasis but with the same underlying desire.

Apart from efforts at communal government, as explorations of proto-socialist formations in Mühlhausen and Münster (both seized by deist and popular revolutions), and the most obvious treatment of communialism takes place when the hero spends a good deal of time— the middle section of the novel— with the Brethren of the Free Spirit in Antwerp, Lodewijk de Schalledecker (alias Eloi Pruystinck) is their founder and guide, a man who had, like Müntzer, gone beyond Luther, but on a different tack. For Eloi, the key is not violent conflagration, but an antinomian reading of theology— "Not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14) means that the old order no longer holds one down. The new order, of grace that goes beyond all that is begins now, has been inaugurated and awaits the consummation with Christ's return. The upshot: a community of mutual aid, having all things in common, in cooperation rather than conflict, of sexual freedom, an oasis in the maelstrom of life and politics. Indeed, this is precisely how the hero first encounters them. He is rescued by Eloi after a severe beating at the hands of Spanish colonial soldiers immediately after the execution of Jan van Battenberg. The vast house of the Brethren becomes a place of recuperation from his injuries, of finding again old handicraft skills, of peace and even of love (Kathleen). But how does Eloi fund the group? He is as innocent as a dove and as wise as a serpent. So

he persuades the rich merchants and bankers of Antwerp, who are all too keen to foster any movement that challenges Rome and the tax burdens of the Spanish crown. Yet he also has a grander scheme, not only of finding his movement but of bringing the corrupt economic and ecclesial order of Europe to its knees. He enlist our protagonist and an old banker into a massive project that defrauds the Fugger bank and nets them each 100,000 florins (an early instance of revolutionary expropriation, a tactic that the Bolsheviks would perfect). The idea is that the scheme would throw doubt on the reliability of the bank, but Anton Fugger calls Cardinal Carafa to investigate and try Eloi as a heretic. He dies at the stake in 1544, but not before many among the Brethren— forewarned— escape overseas, or in the case of our hero, to Italy.

Tellingly, our hero takes on the name of Lodewijk de Schalledecker, and recreates a very different communal life, now in Venice and as a shareholder (with his many florins) in a brothel. His hard-earned toughness enables him to provide the necessary threat of violence (and its occasional enactment) to ensure the women in the brothel can work in peace and under good conditions. Here is both an astute awareness that any communist venture requires a strong arm to keep it from being destroyed at bay, but also a working out of what it actually means for Jesus to prefer the company of the dispossessed, the whores and the panderers, the dregs who had nothing to lose. Of course, the brothel venture is connected with the antinomian sexual bent of the novel, in which the celebration of a very different, communial life, also means the earthiness of carnivals, sexual enjoyment— even Müntzer is known to like a drink, engage in sexual banter and in an outrageous mutual masturbation with his wife Ottilie in public.

A final expression of the desire for communialism emerges through the contacts with the Jews and Muslims in the story. Initially some Jewish bankers provide a glimpse of an alternative life, even while constantly watching their backs, prepared to move on at an instant. And then, as the novel closes, the Muslims of the Ottoman world, with their superior culture and knowledge of what it means to live well, provide a glimpse of peace. A man now older and with a few too many creaky bones and stiff


40: He takes on the names of Gerrit Boekbinder in Münster (thereby linking in with the historical Bartholomew Boekbinder) and Titian in Italy (the Italian heretic connected with The Benefit of Christ Crucified).
41: Blissett, 2004, p150.
42: "Let the Carnival begin" is the call that notes the successful revolution in Münster. Blissett 2004, p211. Bakhtin's study of the carnivalesque may be read as both a search for its historic revolutionary role and as a code for the Russian Revolution. Bakhtin, 1984: Boer, 2007b.
This ambivalence emerges at multiple levels within the novel. It may be within Luther himself, for he is the one who set on their paths the radicals, especially Müntzer, who was “more like Luther than Luther himself”.46 That is, they sought to bring to its natural conclusion the message of salvation by grace through faith. Luther, of course, soon became alarmed at what he had unleashed, seeking to rein in the radical tendencies of those who took him at his word, taking a position in line with the Roman Church he opposed.47 The moderate Reformer Philipp Melanchthon then expresses the position of both Rome and Wittenberg, that of Romans 13.48 However, these remain at the level of content; a more sustained manifestation of this political ambivalence appears in the form of Q. I think in particular of the doppelganger characters, of the name-changing Anabaptist revolutionary and his opposite, the Vatican agent Q, who works for the founder of the Inquisition, Cardinal Carafa. Struggling with one another at a distance or at close quarters, at times even cooperating (especially when Q is Gresbeck in Müster and then towards the close of the novel), it seems as though the agent mostly has the upper hand. He is the one who persuades Müntzer to lead the under-prepared peasants onto the battlefield at Frankenhausen through carefully crafted letters (as “Quoet”) that inspire trust.49 He too volunteers to go into Müster, in order to push the leaders to extremes so that the whole Anabaptist movement would be discredited. Here he becomes the historical figure of Gresbeck, who pens the most intimate account of the revolution and is instrumental in its betrayal. At this point, my own sense is that the author overplays their hand, for Q is a little too involved in every event, a little too prescient, a little too able to influence the course of history. The opposings, such as grace and law, faith and works, and so on. The problem was that the transition or break was never made cleanly or completely, for the old life continued to make its claims. De Donno’s proposal that the novel seeks to revitalize the radical utopian tradition while warning against its authoritarianism and the repressive nature of institutions may be seen as one element of this larger political ambivalence of Christianity, De Donno, 2013, p.44-49.

43: The debate turns up in the novel itself. Blissett, 2004, p.251. The argument that one (usually the communal, pacifist) side is the true core and the other an aberration is both mistaken and obviously an effort to gain the upper hand in a perpetual struggle. Garber’s story is written from the perspective of ensuring that the pacifist story remains the core: Garber 2006.

44: Nonetheless, a loss of the revolutionary edge risks two developments: an accommodation with the status quo for the sake of working within the system; retreat from the world in somewhat self-contained communities that define themselves by offering an alternative to the degraded world that surrounds them. The reasons for such moves vary widely, some of them strategically justified, but too often these moves become permanent, eschewing any form of revolutionary activity and finding all manner of justifications for doing so. At one point in the novel a debate between Elia and The hero turns on precisely these issues: Blissett, 2004, p.256-258.

45: See Boer, 2013a: pp.15-160. We may trace this deep ambivalence to the thought of ideological level the earth-shaking transitions from an older economic system in the ancient. The basis of his effort was to focus on the transition from death to resurrection, both in the


47: This insight is given to Q himself, who writes in one of his letters: “The truth is that when Luther has opened one is that he himself would now wish to be closed”—Blissett, 2004, p.46.

48: At one point, in debate with the radical Karlstadt, Melanchthon quotes Romans 13:1: “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no power but of God, the powers that be are ordained of God”—Blissett, 2004, p.29.

49: The letters—a standard literary device—are another formal manifestation of the tension. Initially, it seems as though Q has the upper hand, with his long letters foreseening new developments, if not precipitating them. Yet Müntzer too has written and received letters. In the end these letters hold their own against those of Q.
result is that the agency of the peasants and Anabaptists dissipates somewhat, even with the realistic awareness of the perpetual threat of spies and agents. Given that the coherence of a novel such as this is strung together by the lead character — here a double character — the point is that reaction is exceedingly strong and devisive. Yet in the end Q loses his sense of purpose, and realises how much he has both been used and how dispensable he really is. Finally the hero and Q meet, cooperate for a moment to gain access to incriminating documents concerning the pope and the struggles in the church between moderates and hardliners, only for Q and the documents to burn and die in the fire that consumes the Viennese brothel.

By contrast, the hero with many names and yet none embodies the revolutionary side of this tension. While the struggles between him and Q manifest the profound political ambivalence at the heart of Christianity, the novel closes with a hint that the former has greater endurance. The hero’s passion never quite fades; the multitude of failures and disasters never quite dampens his desire and belief; many ghosts may visit his dreams, but he wakes once again. Here too form exhibits this message even more than content. At the novel’s opening we are thrown into the last moments of the bloody defeat at Frankenhausen. Müntzer and our man are hauled off the field by the miner-bodyguard, Elias, only for Müntzer to be captured, Elias to be beheaded on the street, and the hero narrowly to escape.

Why begin with a crushing defeat? I suggest that the defeat actually opens up the possibility of hope. New life follows death. Defeat is the first word, the common denominator, a bitter lesson to be learned, but it is not the end. Indeed, the structure of the novel that follows, at least for two thirds of its length, works its way between flashback (enabled at first by the rescued letters of Müntzer and then by the questions of Eloi Pruystinck) and the present, filling out the story that led to the high points of Frankenhausen and then Müntzer, yet showing that the project continues beyond the defeat. A deft switching back and forth between past and present tenses in the narrative increases the effect of this narrative feature, now at a formal level of syntax. The novel continues, with even more defects, but those formal moves indicate that at least one survives, learns, hopes and fights again. The revolutionary fire cannot be extinguished so easily.

50. “Every time thunder shakes the heavens, I start at the memory of the cannon. Every time I close my eyes to sleep, I know that by the time I open them again I’ll have been visited by many ghosts” — Bissett, 2004, p.399.
51. A similar approach is used with the death squads of Jan van Batenberg, for the narrative reopens after the execution of van Batenberg and the hero’s narrow escape after a harrowing defeat: Bissett, 2004, pp.103-104.

Conclusion: How to be truly radical

The more radical a social movement, the more theological were its party words.52

I have argued that Q offers a comprehensive recovery of the radical, revolutionary dimensions of the Reformation, especially for a range of left wing movements today. It is indebted to the Marxist tradition of identifying the revolutionary strain of Christian thought and practice, whether in terms of early Christianity, Thomas Müntzer and the peasants, or the Anabaptists at Müntzer. Here the names of Engels, Luxemburg, Kautsky, Lunacharsky and Bloch are central. I have also sought the deeper issues raised by the novel, in terms of the tensions between passion and reason, rupture and communalism, and the political ambivalence of Christianity. I would like to close on a slightly different, albeit related note, and ask: how is all this relevant to the appeal of Q today, with its wholesale recovery of the radical theological tradition?

Apart from the issues explored earlier, I would suggest a significant part of Q’s appeal lies in what may be called the translatability of religion and (especially) radical politics. That is, the semantic fields of key terms and ideas in both politics and theology offer the possibility of being translated into one another. Before I indicate what that means, I would like to comment on the epigraph from Kautsky, which inadvertently points in this direction. Kautsky sets out to say that local and sporadic forms of protest usually take a directly economic form. It may be a grievance over corn prices, hoarding by the rich, service demanded by a lord, restrictions to traditional rites of access to common lands, an increase in taxes that were already beyond the means of peasants and workers. However, when those local protests gain more widespread and organised support, they typically take on modes of expression that go deeper, seeking underlying causes and expressing common grievances. At the time of the Reformation that was primarily in terms of theology, but in our own day it may be expressed in terms of particular political ideologies. In that formulation, he draws closer to Engels’s suggestion, that theology was a code or language for expressing political aspirations. Yet Kautsky does not quite say that either (and thereby goes beyond Engels), for no one language provides the authentic core, for no one language provides the authentic core, for which others are cloaks. Instead his point is that theology and political thought are both modes through which radicalisation takes place.

It does not seem as though Kautsky is quite aware of the implications

52. Kautsky, 1897, p.220.
of his argument. I would like to take it a step further and thereby illuminate how $Q$ develops its appeal. Kautsky is pointing towards the translatability of radical political terms with those of theology; terms such as revolution and miracle, obedience to the law of god and justice, the land as god’s and land reform, adult (or believer’s) baptism and the right of people to make their own political decisions, Christian communism and the abolition of private property. These and more have their own semantic fields that open out to one another. Let me give one example of many (note the biblical allusions):

We were diligent sowers of the seed, lighting the spark of war against those who had usurped the word of God, the tormentors of His people. I saw scythes hammered into swords, hoes becoming lances and simple men leaving the plough to become fearless warriors. I saw a little carpenter carving a great crucifix and guiding Christ’s troops like the captain of the most invincible army. I saw all this and I saw those men and women take up their own faith and turn it into a banner of revenge. Love seized our hearts with that one fire that flamed within us all: we were free and equal in the name of God, and we would smash the mountains, stop the winds, kill all our tyrants in order to realise His kingdom of peace and brotherhood. We could do it, in the end we could do it: life belonged to us. 54

When they touch one another in the process of translation, the semantic fields overlap, albeit not completely. God may come out onto the barricades, get drunk in taverns, sack churches and frighten the horses, but that is not all God does. As any translator knows only too well, the overlap is never complete, for each semantic field has smaller or larger regions that do not intersect immediately, which lie outside and perhaps even resist the translating process. When such a translation process works well, both political and theological terms are enriched, but when it works less well, something is lost in the process of translation. Now the situation becomes more interesting, for translation never rests content with the initial overlap. For this reason, it constantly moves back and forth, from one term to the other, exploring possible alternatives. The dialectic is never satisfied with its achievement. And there often remains a dimension that cannot be translated, that resists the process and holds the other term to account. Theology may say to politics: you cannot express everything that I am able to express, especially in ontological terms. Politics may reply: ditto, except that I give fuller articulation to imminent forms of political desire.

The advantages of this model—which can be sketched out here only in a preliminary manner—are threefold. First, it challenges the narrative of secularisation, in which theology is the point of origin and political thought becomes the inheritor and transformer, emptying these terms of theological content and yet bound to the forms of expression. If we shift the model to one of translation, we are able to dispense with the linear narrative and gain a greater sense of the perpetual interplay between these two languages. Second, it negates the claims to absolute status by either code. For theology, it usually takes the form of absolute source, the origin and thereby determining mode of expression. Political thought may attempt a similar move (usually via the troubled classicist narrative that traces the origins of Western thought to that Eastern European, Balkan country known as Greece), or it may urge that it is the basic form, for which theology is then a particular expression. By contrast, translation reminds each that their is a limited language, with some pluses and minuses, relative to one another.

Third, the model of translation provides a fruitful avenue for considering the popularity of a novel like $Q$ among some—usually younger—elements of the radical left today. The novel does not spare readers the intricacies of the theological debates of the 16th century, for these are crucial to understanding its politics. It does so in a way that refuses absolute status to either code, for political aspirations were expressed in theological terms, while theological differences were in their turn articulated in political shape. The authors offer a careful example of that translation process in action. For instance, the wonderful scene of feasting and sex in the early days of Münster is an expression both of the radical form of grace and of the freedoms unleashed when the people themselves take power. The scene cannot be understood without both codes intersecting at this point. This feature of the novel is replicated time and again throughout the text, all of which leads to the desire by those on the activist left to understand the nature and intricacies of those debates. In this respect, they carry on a tradition that $Q$ has recovered in popular form.

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53: See Kautsky’s rather astute reading of the challenge to the powers that be of adult baptism: Kautsky, 1897, pp.170–172.
54: Blissett, 2004, p.67. Or, in the words of Bernard Rothmann, the preacher of Münster, “Justice for us, brothers and sisters, justice for anyone who is held in servitude, forced to work for a starvation wage, anyone who has faith and sees the house of the lord sullied with images, and children being washed with holy water like dogs under a fountain”—Blissett, 2004, p.171. Note also $Q$’s own words: “Wherever there is a discontented, hungry or ill-treated peasant or craftsman, there is a potential heretic”—Blissett, 2004, p.98.
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