



Reformation and Islam

A Stimulus Paper from the Conference
for Islam Issues of the Evangelical Church
in Germany (EKD)



Evangelische Kirche
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Foreword

What began in Wittenberg in 1517 not only shaped and changed the history of the churches and of Christianity far beyond the boundaries of our country. The Reformation became in fact an intrinsic part of European and world history. In 2017, when we celebrate half a millennium since the Reformation, many key developments and events of this significant period of the sixteenth century will come up for discussion. The ten preparatory years that led up to this anniversary, each with its own theme, gave us a foretaste of the wide range of insights and questions as well as of the topics worthy of consideration and discussion, not only nationally, but also in international perspective, not only within individual confessions, but also ecumenically and between different religions.

For this reason, it is good that the Conference for Islam Issues of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) has decided to focus on an area which up to this point has not stood at the center of scholarly attention. While the theological reconsideration of the relationship between the Protestant church and Judaism has prompted a great amount of study devoted to Martin Luther's and other Reformers' anti-Judaism, the number of church-related and scholarly publications centering on the themes "Reformation and Islam" remains on the whole quite meager.

Representatives of EKD member churches, organizations, and institutions commissioned with conducting dialogue with other religions and Islam took the Reformation Jubilee as an opportunity to scrutinize more carefully how Reformation theology and preaching at its very beginning perceived and judged the religion of Muslims and determine what consequences can be drawn from this for the present. There can be no doubt that this is a very current and relevant topic if we consider the new tasks and challenges facing us as we engage in interreligious dialogue and live in societies that are becoming increasingly pluralistic from a religious point of view. The Reformation era still shapes the way in which we think and perceive in theological terms. The authors of the following study engaged in a lengthy process of collecting sources and learning from them, having to wrestle at times with the unwieldy and quite difficult language of the sixteenth century. The findings they compiled need to be evaluated critically and reflected upon in the light of the present.

The publication at hand will enable a wider circle of interested people from the church and the rest of society to share in the results of this discovery process. Furthermore, I would be very glad if the stimulus provided by this text would also reach the halls of theological academia and resonate there, perhaps inspiring additional research in the coming years. And finally, it would be desirable that this contribution encourage all of us to engage in dialogue with Muslim women and men over the historical and theological legacy of the Reformation and make us open to learning from them.

Hanover, May 2016

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1 Introduction

The executive committee from the Conference for Islam Issues of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) published a stimulus paper in 2013, a year which, within the context of the Luther Decade, was devoted to the theme of tolerance.¹ The purpose of the paper was to deal more thoroughly with the relationship between the Reformers and the “Religion of the Turks,” as Islam was mainly perceived and described at that time. The numerous responses to this paper clearly show that people were greatly interested in obtaining more information and hearing more appraisals on this subject. Accordingly, on the occasion of a joint study day held in November of 2014, the executive committee expanded and complemented the text on the basis of these responses. The result is a version which, in view of the forthcoming Reformation Jubilee in 2017, intends to help congregations and the general church public to examine critically the historical legacy of the Reformation with regard to Muhammad, the Quran, the “Turks” – in short, with Islam.

It is worthwhile grappling with these issues not least because elementary deep structures of the collective memory of Europe are brought to light when we engage with Martin Luther and his times. At the time Luther lived, Europe saw itself beleaguered militarily and politically by an expanding Ottoman Empire. Constantinople had fallen in 1453. Ever since, the “Turks,” as people usually said during the Reformation era, were gaining ground as they advanced towards the northwest. They were perceived as “others” and foreigners, as a menacing force that threatened Central Europe from the southeast.

This is what we read in sixteenth-century texts, but it is not much different from what we also encounter quite often today in the newspapers and even more on the internet. How much of this is historical reality and how much is a fabricated stereotype of foreigners and “enemies?” We especially need to ask this question when we take a hard look at the violent history of the “Christian West.” Grappling with the images of “Turks” that were propagated during the Reformation era and the opposing self-images of (Protestant, German, European) Christians helps us see things more clearly, not only in the past, but also in our own present.

The 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation is an occasion for us to reflect on the current state of Christian-Muslim relations. With this stimulus paper, the Conference for Islam Issues of the Evangelical Church in Germany would also like to respond to the summons of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany “to discover dialogue between religions as a task to which Reformation theology genuinely calls us” – paying special attention to the dialogue with Islam, “which at the time of the Reformation was identified with the Turks who were threatening the borders of the Holy Roman Empire and were thus perceived in a way that was anything but nuanced.”²

2 Religious diversity at the time of the Reformation and today

There can be no doubt as to the importance Protestant Christians in Germany and beyond ascribe to the Reformers. Not only did their theological insights have long-lasting historical effects, but Luther and numerous other Reformers of his time had a formative influence on the language and culture of Germany. Historical developments during this early phase of the Reformation laid the groundwork for a plurality of confessions which – in the wake of exhausting and bloody confessional wars – made tolerance and freedom of religion a necessity.

At the same time, we must bear in mind that our modern notion of tolerance was something quite beyond the focus of the Reformation. It sought freedom of faith and tolerance for itself, and in some rare cases it actually succeeded in being granted this by the adherents of other confessions, e.g. by the Ottoman rulers of what are today Hungary and Transylvania as well as by the the Jagiellonians of Poland-Lithuania. In one instance, Luther corresponded with Ramser, the city pastor of Herrmannstadt, to discuss a church ordinance of Lutheran character which Johann Honterus had drafted für Kronstadt.³ The assertion that the Pope was worse than the “Turks” – a thesis Luther himself stated, but which also appears in the Smalcald Articles – emerged from this experience of relative toleration enjoyed by Protestantism under the Ottomans, while simultaneously having to endure oppression by the Pope.⁴

The example set forth by Poland-Lithuania exceeded by far anything else the sixteenth century was capable of in terms of tolerance: this territory or, to be more exact, kingdom was the first to display authentic religious toleration when the Polish nobility, meeting in the Confederation of Warsaw (1573)⁵, granted freedom of worship not only to the Catholic and Orthodox faithful, but also to Lutherans, Jews, and Muslims. Some of the Tatars living in what is today Lithuania were Muslims. In other words, Christianity only entered the country after Islam already had.⁶

Yet in countries in which the Reformation gained the upper hand, adherents of other faiths had to wait a long time before tolerance was accorded to them. Only when assuming a long-term perspective can we describe tolerance as a consequence of the Reformation, and this process was more the result of political than of religious developments.⁷

Things look quite different in Germany today. Religious freedom is enshrined in the German Basic Law and people of many different religious persuasions and confessions live together in German society. Immigration and globalization have helped promote diversity and tolerance in many areas, but they also have revealed areas of conflict. Ever since the middle of the twentieth century, the major churches in Germany began putting their relationship to other religions, especially to Judaism, on a new footing. These efforts resulted in documents such as the declaration “Nostra Aetate” issued by the Second Vatican Council in 1965 or the “Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies” developed by the World Council of Churches in 1977.

The experience of the Holocaust prompted the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) to rethink its attitude towards Judaism and to undertake a reorientation and reassessment of its theological positions. The EKD drafted three studies on this topic which were published between 1975 and 2000. In the process, it was impossible not to also give consideration to Luther’s problematic views of Jews. His treatise “On the Jews and Their Lies” (1543) is described in one of these EKD statements as “a terrifying testimony to deep-seated hostility toward Jews.”⁸ Defining the relationship to Islam is proving to be different for a number of reasons. Issues such as immigration, social conflict, and conflict constellations of a global dimension overlap with theological and religious issues. Misgivings and fears get in the way of factual clarifications. In the year 2000, the EKD declared that it „distances itself from the excesses and hostilities that have occurred in the past and occasionally also occur in the present.”⁹

Yet a critical and constructive discussion of Luther’s and other Reformers’ statements on Islam and of the way in which these views find expression in Protestantism’s confessional documents is only beginning now. The foundational text drafted by the EKD on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation puts it in the following way: “Early modern statements on Islam, which became the object of attention particularly in connection with the perceived ‘Turkish menace’ at the borders of the Holy Roman Empire and out of fear for the survival of Western Christendom, should also be given critical review, without negatively affecting the special relationship between Judaism and Christianity.”¹⁰ In the following, we shall quote from a number of texts drafted by the Reformers which we have compiled. Occasionally, the antiquated diction and style will remind us of the historical chasm separating us from the sixteenth century and of the need to reflect critically on the legacy of the Reformation’s relationship to Islam. In any case, the affirmation of religious freedom and of respectful tolerance towards our Muslim neighbors in Germany today remain non-negotiable.

3 Reformation perceptions of Islam

3.1 Martin Luther and the “Turks” – the historical context

In order to understand Martin Luther’s (1483 – 1546) relationship to Islam, it is essential that we take a careful look at the historical context in which he published his writings on Islam.

In Luther’s times, one did not yet speak of “Islam” or of “Muslims.” The followers of the prophet were called “Turks,” “Saracens,” “Mahomedans,” “Muselmans,” sometimes even “Ismaelites” or just plain “heathen.” At that time, when one spoke of the “Turkish faith,” the first thing one thought of was the “Turkish menace.” The Ottoman sultan Suleiman had conquered Belgrade in 1521, the Hungarian city of Mohács fell in 1526, and by 1529 the Turks had reached the gates of Vienna. Would Vienna soon fall as well? Would “the Turks” then conquer all of Central Europe? What was one to make of this monstrous, unprecedented threat? What was one to do? These were the burning questions that agitated Luther and his contemporaries in the late 1520s. These questions made it necessary for the political authorities to take appropriate military measures and for the Christian theologians to face up to this foreign and, as everybody felt at the time, false religion that was spawning monstrous heresies. It was therefore deemed necessary to strengthen Christians in their faith through catechisms as well as polemical and apologetical treatises.

This was the collective state of mind in the midst of which Luther’s writings “against the Turks” emerged. It is no coincidence that both his major works on this subject were written in 1529, as the Ottoman troops were besieging Vienna.¹¹ Neither is it a coincidence that Luther’s Small Catechism was also written in the same year: the greater the threat from outside, the more necessary it seemed to ensure that the “common man” and his children know and understand what it means to be a Christian.

The fundamental tone of what Luther has to say can be sensed by way of example in the following passage from his “Military Sermon Against the Turk” (*Heerpredigt wider den Tuercken*). He asks what Germans “who are imprisoned in Turkey or might be imprisoned in the future” should do and gives the following answer:

“While you have room and a place to do so, you learn the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and learn them well, especially this article in which we say ‘And in Jesus Christ, His only son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried, he descended into hell, on the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, he sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence He will come to judge the living and the dead etc.’ For everything depends upon this article. It is because of this article that we are called Christians; and upon this article we are called by the Gospel, baptized, counted and accepted into Christendom, and through this article we receive the Holy Spirit and forgiveness of sins, as well as resurrection from the dead and eternal life. For this article makes us God’s children and Christ’s brothers, so that we become like him eternally and fellow heirs.

And by this article our faith is separated from all other faiths on earth. For the Jews have it not, neither do the Turks and Saracens, nor any Papist or false Christian or any other unbeliever, but only proper Christians. Therefore, when you come to Turkey, where you can have neither preachers nor books, there say to yourself, be it in bed or at work, be it in words or thoughts, your ‘Our Father’, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments; and when you come to this article, cross a finger with your thumb or make some sort of sign with your hand or foot, so that you brand it on your mind and make note of it, and especially, for example, where you see some Turkish stumbling-block or are tempted. And with your ‘Our Father’, pray that God may keep you from stumbling and hold you pure and steadfast in this article, for in this article lies your life and salvation.”¹²

This quotation is enough to show quite clearly that Luther’s altercation with Islam was not a scholarly, academic dialogue concerning the relationship between two major religions, but was for him rather a struggle concerning the true faith at the end of time. Through his study of Scripture he had come to the conclusion that the empire of the Turks was the enigmatic fourth kingdom of which Daniel had once said: “And another shall arise after them. This one shall be different from the former ones, and shall put down three kings. He shall speak words against the Most High, shall wear out the holy ones of the Most High, and shall attempt to change the sacred seasons and the law” (Daniel 7:24-25). God was allowing the Turks to appear on the historical scene and prevail, for he wanted to punish the papal church for its refusal to accept the true Gospel. This was Luther’s conviction. The Turk was God’s rod for disciplining a dissonant Christendom, one final test which had to be endured. Luther wrote:

The war waged by the Turk is *“pure iniquity and robbery by means of which God is punishing the world, just like he sometimes uses scoundrels to chastise pious people, for he [= the Turk] is not fighting out of necessity or to protect the peace of his country, as a proper authority does, but is rather seeking to rob and harm another land which is neither doing nor has done anything against him, like a sea robber or a highwayman. He is God’s rod and the devil’s servant, there can be no doubt about this.”*¹³

This being the case in his opinion, Luther rejected plans to conduct a crusade against the Turks. To be sure, it was the Emperor’s duty to protect Christendom with all his might against any assailants. But it was certainly not the task of Christians to fight against God’s rod – for how could that be crowned with success? The task of Christians was rather to repent, to pray, and to gather one’s thoughts by reflecting on the true Gospel. This was the only way of dealing earnestly with the threat that emanated from the Turks.

The “Turkish menace” stood very much at the forefront of Luther’s writings of the 1520s, but in the final years of his life he occupied himself more intensely with Islam as a religion. This closer examination was triggered by the fact that, for the first time, a copy of the Quran in Latin translation fell into his hands. Up to that point he had only known the contents of the book of the “Turks” by hearsay and from sources which seemed to him to have little credibility. Now, in the spring of 1542, he was able to read the Quran in Robert of Ketton’s Latin translation. Luther wrote:

*“I read the Alcoran in Latin during this Shrovetide, but it was a very poor translation, making me wish I had a clearer one. But it made me realize this much: that Brother Richard did not make things up when writing his own book, but instead what he writes is confirmed. [...] I am saying this because I now must believe this Brother Richard, who refuted the Alcoran such a long time ago [...]. I have considered it useful and necessary to translate this book into German (because we have no better one), so that we Germans also realize how disgraceful the faith of Mahmet is, [and] so that we are strengthened in our Christian faith.”*¹⁴

As a consequence of the impressions that reading this translation made upon him, Luther published a series of books dealing with Islam. As Luther already explains in the quotation above, he edited the “Confutation of Islam” of Ricoldo of Monte Croce and translated it into German. At the same time he advocated the idea that the Quran be published. In a 1542 letter addressed to the city council of Basel, he encourages

the councilmen to permit Theodore Bibliander to go ahead and print his “Alcoran” and wrote the foreword of this first printed edition of the Quran. Luther justified his stance in the following way:

“I was prompted by the realization that there is nothing more annoying or damaging we can do to Mahmet or the Turks (even more than with any weapons) than to make their Alcoran known among Christians, so that they may see in it how cursed, shameful, and desperate a book it is, full of lies, fables and abominations of all kinds, which the Turks hide and gloss over and by all means refuse to have translated into other languages. For they sense all too well that it will cause all reasonable hearts to dissociate themselves from them.”¹⁵

The letter to Basel puts in a nutshell what Luther thinks of “Mahmet” and the “Alcoran”: to him it is a book full of lies and fables and all kinds of abominations. Admittedly, Luther was clearly aware of elements in Islam that impressed him: its strict monotheism, the ascetic lifestyle of its “priests,” who abstained from wine, drunkenness and gluttony, the discipline and silence of its prayer, including segregation of the sexes, appropriate attire, and the veiling of women. As Luther wrote:

“Furthermore, you will also find that they gather frequently for prayer in their churches and do so with great discipline, silence and with beautiful external gestures; you would never find such discipline and silence anywhere in our churches, for the women are located in a separate area and so veiled that nobody can see them; even our imprisoned brethren in Turkey criticize the fact that our people do not comport and conduct themselves in a similarly quiet, orderly and spiritual fashion. [...] They don’t drink wine, they don’t booze and stuff themselves like we do, they don’t dress carelessly and frivolously like we do, their buildings aren’t as showy as ours, they don’t behave ostentatiously like we do.”¹⁶

But all of this, says Luther, is just something external, an illusion a Christian should not allow himself to be deceived by. From an objective standpoint and at its heart, Islam is wrong; the “Turks” venerate *“the devil instead of God.”*¹⁷ Therefore, nothing could damage them more than to publish their, as he saw it, infamous “Alcoran,” which discusses many topics with which Christians are also acquainted from the Bible, albeit in a grotesquely perverted manner. As Luther wrote, it was as if the devil had collected all the false doctrines that had emerged in the history of Christianity and gathered them in one place.

“We thus see that the whole filth which the devil has spread ever so often by way of different heretics he has now spit out all at once through Mahmet.”¹⁸

Bitter polemics and vigorous *apologia* – these constituted the fundamental tone of Luther’s altercation with Islam against the background of the threat of war and Luther’s peculiar apocalyptic and Christological thought. In Luther’s view, there simply could not be any doubt that the Christian faith was the true faith. The doctrine of “Mahmet” was a nefarious heresy. Even if many things in the Quran initially sounded like Christian teaching, the Quran lacked everything that was essential or distorted it grotesquely: the doctrines concerning Christ, his divine Sonship, the Trinity, sin, the cross, the resurrection, forgiveness by grace alone, final judgement, and many, many more. In addition, the Quran had an ambivalent relationship to violence and contained flagrant lies. All things considered, it was a *“murderous, tyrannical, and rabid” law which “could not be God’s law [...], for it is, to cut the matter short, a law of death and rage.”¹⁹*

3.2 “Turks,” “Tatars” and “Mahometists” – Muslims in the Lutheran Confessions

It was not until the eighteenth century that people began using the term “religion” as a superordinate concept.²⁰ The Lutheran Confessions accordingly do not speak of the “religion of Islam,” but use instead terms such as “Turks,” “Tatars,” and “Mahometists” (Mohammedans), which explain themselves from the context of the sixteenth century. The Confessional Documents deal with “Mohammedans” most extensively under the category of a Christian heresy.

At that time there was no notion of an independent “religion” that existed in its own right. “Religio” was the name given to public confession. Inasmuch as adherents of the old faith and Protestants differed from one another in the way in which they confessed publicly, they belonged to different “religions.” Furthermore, a distinction was made between “heretics,” who believe in the same God in a false way or spread heresies, and “heathen,” who believe in other gods, e.g. polytheists. Already prior to the Reformation, Muslims were accused sometimes of being “heretics,” other times of being “heathen.” Luther and Calvin followed the tradition of perceiving Muslims as heretics.

The Lutheran Confessions contain very few statements on Muslims; we shall present some examples in what follows:

“They condemn all heresies which have sprung up against this Article, as the Manichees, who set down two principles, good and evil; in the same manner the Valentinians, Arians, Eunomians, Mohammedans, and all such like.” (Augsburg Confession, Art. 1).²¹

The theological characterization of the relationship to other religions is marked by Christocentric apologetics; *“even though they [the Turks and others] believe in and worship only one true God,”* they *“don’t know what he thinks of them.”*²²

In addition, as representatives of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks are considered a *“hereditary ... enemy of the Christian name and religion”* (Preface of the Augsburg Confession).²³

A number of articles of faith level charges of works righteousness. *“For the kingdom of Antichrist is a new service of God, devised by human authority rejecting Christ, just as the kingdom of Mahomet has services and works through which it wishes to be justified before God; nor does it hold that men are gratuitously justified before God by faith, for Christ’s sake.”* (Defense of the Augsburg Confession, Art. 15).²⁴

In spite of fears of the “Turkish menace,” one encounters relatively few statements demonizing Muslims. Islam was considered less serious a threat than the papacy: *“Even the Turks or the Tartars, great enemies of Christians as they are, do not do this, but they allow whoever wishes to believe in Christ, and take bodily tribute and obedience from Christians.”* (Smalcald Artikel, Part II, Article IV).²⁵

3.3 Reformed Traditions

Reformers standing in the Reformed tradition were largely influenced by their historical environment in the attitude they assumed toward Islam, in much the same way as Luther was. The medieval view of Islam, which fed on the memory of the crusades, and the current threat posed by the Ottoman Empire contributed to create a predominantly negative attitude. Furthermore, the lack of any personal interaction with Mus-

lims prevented them from revising their prejudiced perspective. As in the case of Luther, Reformed theologians' knowledge of Islam as a religion was based on the sources available at the time.²⁶ Among them there were some scholars, however, who deepened their knowledge by carrying out further studies on their own, with varying emphases.²⁷

Huldrych Zwingli (1484 – 1531) considered Islam to be a (Christian) heresy. He perceived the Turks as a major threat to Western Christendom and as a punishment and trial to which Christians were being submitted: “... He [i.e. God] is thus doing this now through the present Turkish tribulation, which he is unleashing upon all Christians for their own good.”²⁸ He rejected the idea of a crusade, especially one under the leadership of the Pope. He saw peaceful mission to Muslims as an alternative to military confrontation.²⁹

Although Zwingli did not publish any book on Islam or on the Turks, he did have the opportunity to read a Latin translation of the Quran during his university studies in Basel. He arrived at the following polemical verdict about the Muslim faith: “In the Turkish Alcoran I certainly find knowledge of their creed, but it does not lead me to give it any credence, for no greater nonsense was ever invented about a faith as can be found in theirs.”³⁰

Theodore Bibliander (1506 – 1564) picked up Zwingli's idea of carrying out mission among Muslims. He became a professor for Old Testament at the Schola Tigurina one year after Zwingli's death and applied himself assiduously to the study of Arabic with the goal of going to Egypt as a missionary. But Heinrich Bullinger eventually succeeded in convincing him to remain in Zurich.

Theodore Bibliander promoted the publication of a number of works which were decisive in providing adherents of the Reformation with a fundamental knowledge of Islam: among them was the 1542 work *Ad nominis Christiani socios consultatio* (“Deliberation addressed to those sharing the Christian name”),³¹ which sought to make the life of Muhammad known among Christians for apologetic purposes. In 1543, the Latin translation of the Quran by Robert of Ketton accompanied by numerous annotations establishing cross-references to Biblical passages was published under the title of *Machumetis Saracenorum principis, eiusque successorum vitae, ac doctrina, ipseque Alcoran* (“The life, teaching, and Quran of Muhammad, prince of the Saracenes, and of his successors”).³²

Heinrich Bullinger (1504 – 1575), Zwingli's successor, made numerous comments regarding Islam in the course of his writings and in 1567 published a book entitled "The Turks."³³ This work bears witness to a thorough knowledge of the Quran and of the Muslim faith. In it, Bullinger repudiates the supposedly divine origins of the Quran and qualifies it as an invention of Muhammad.

As others before him, Bullinger did not perceive Islam to constitute an alien tradition or even a religion in its own right, but considered it a Christian heresy. What made this evident for him was the fact that Islam contested central tenets of the Christian faith:

“Then he [i.e. Muhammad] destroyed the doctrine of and belief in the Holy Trinity in the following way. For without recognizing the three different persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a single undivisible being, he teaches and professes in a Jewish manner a single God, thus deeming neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit, but solely the Father to be God and worshipping only him.”³⁴

He thus condemns the Muslim faith for its missing Christology and for the paths to salvation required by it according to his impression, such as fasting, prayer, almsgiving etc., which he equated with the works righteousness of which the Papacy was accused.

“And Mahomet does not ascribe forgiveness of sins and eternal life solely to our Lord Jesus Christ, as the one mediator, or to true faith in him. For he has no regard for the true central doctrine of the holy Christian faith, which is the true justification alone through faith in Christ. For he invents ... that through which one procures and earns forgiveness of sins and eternal life. ... Just like many Popes have promised indulgence of sins to those who would get killed fighting for the sake of the Roman church. Thus does Mahomet also have his monks and nuns, ascribes salvation to their merits. For he places salvation not in faith, ... but in the merits of works.”³⁵

He also criticizes the practice of polygamy as well as Muslim notions of paradise. In the Muslim attitude towards violence he discerns parallels to the Anabaptists of Münster. Yet in spite of this negative attitude, Bullinger is quite capable of finding some things good about the way Muslims live, especially in comparison with the poor moral conduct of Christians. Herein lies in his view a decisive reason for Islam's success, which occurred during a time in which the church was shaken by dogmatic disputes. He understood the Turkish threat experienced during his lifetime as God's instrument

for training Christians and punishing them for their lack of faith. Bullinger's comments reveal a strong interest in the history of Islam and in its political and social structures. But one also finds that Bullinger associates Islam with the Antichrist, as he also does with regard to the Pope.³⁶

John Calvin (1509 – 1564) emphasizes other aspects in the numerous comments he makes. Although he never published any works dealing explicitly with the issue of the “Turks,” he did issue a number of fundamental statements regarding Islam many times in the course of his commentaries, sermons, and lectures. As was the case with other Reformers, Calvin's altercation with Islam also centers on theological issues. For him, Muhammad was an apostate who had caused a great number of Christians to abandon their faith:

*“Latius quidem defectio grassata est: nam Mahometes, ut erat apostate, Turcas suos a Christo alienavit ... sectam vero Mahometis, instar violent(i)ae exundationis fuisse, quae dimidiam plus minus partem suo impetus raperet.”*³⁷ (in English: “Desertion from the faith spread more and more rampantly. For Muhammad, being an apostate, estranged his Turks from Christ ... Muhammad's sect was like a massive flood that swept away from Christ more or less half of his kingdom.”)

Calvin's decisive criterion for charging the Muslim faith with heresy was its claim to divine revelation, for there could be no revelation and no religion outside of the Bible.³⁸

On another occasion, Calvin criticized the rejection of the divinity of Jesus Christ and of the Trinity; while he did not mention Muslims explicitly, it was clear that he was referring to them along with Jews and other “deniers” of Christ's divinity. No compromises were possible for him on this issue, for this was the central tenet of the Christian faith.³⁹

Admittedly, Calvin sometimes simply equates Islam and the Papacy with the “Antichrist:”

*“Tout ainsi que Mahomet dit que son Alchoram est la sagesse souveraine, autant en dit le Pape: car ce sont les deux cornes de l'Antechrist.”*⁴⁰ (in English: *Just as much as Muhammad says that his Quran is sovereign wisdom, the Pope does so as well [with regard to his decrees]: for they are the two horns of the Antichrist.*)

Yet he differs clearly from Bullinger as well as from Luther and Melanchthon in his fundamental stance. His criticism of Islam is primarily theological, and does not assume morally pejorative tones in the slightest. His critique focuses on tenets of faith, not on moral behavior, whereas for Bullinger it was precisely the practice of faith that constituted an unsurmountable obstacle.

Calvin's explicitly anti-apocalyptic point of view becomes especially evident when we look at his interpretation of the Book of Daniel. In his discussion of this book, he refuses to identify its prophecies with any current political phenomena. He considers the events described in Daniel to be historical facts having to do solely with the Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes. It is precisely this anti-apocalyptic interpretation that distinguishes Calvin so significantly from other Reformers.⁴¹ By conducting this debate primarily within the arena of theological debate and by refraining from deprecating Muslims morally or misrepresenting them as enemies, Calvin opens up new perspectives for dialogue and tolerance. It is in this sense that we can interpret an excerpt from one of his sermons in which he speaks of Turks as being "of our flesh":

“Or si nature nous enseigne d’avoir pitié les uns des autres, quand il y a ceste conjunction spirituelle que Dieu a mise pa L’Evangile, n’est ce pas encores plus? Prenons le cas que nous soions comme entre les Turcs, et qu’il n’y ait autre lien qui nous attire à ceste communauté de laquelle parle ici le prophete, sinon d’autant que nous sommes tous homes, nous viola desja convaincus; car un Turc est nostre chair. Et nostre Seigneur Jesus aussi monster assez que nous avons proximite avec ceux qui semblent estranges des nous, souz ceste figure qu’il nous propose du Samaritain”⁴² (in English: ... Thus, if nature teaches us to show pity for one another, since there is this spiritual bond created by God through the Gospel, what need is there for anything more? Let us imagine the case that we were among the Turks and that there was no bond connecting us to the community of which the prophet is speaking here other than the fact that we are all human beings – a thing we are all convinced of; for a Turk is flesh of our flesh. And our Lord Jesus clearly shows us that we are near to those who appear to us to be strangers when he sets forth before us the figure of the Samaritan).

But beyond the theological debate with Islam in the Reformed context, there were also impressive examples of tolerance practiced in daily life in regions in which Reformed congregations lived side-by-side with Muslim neighbors. The situation in Poland-Lithuania is also particularly interesting: the Large Council, which found itself predomi-

nantly under Reformed influence, granted freedom of worship to different faith persuasions in 1573.⁴³ Lutherans, Reformed and Moravian Brethren had already agreed upon religious freedom in the *Consensus of Sandomir* of 1570.⁴⁴

The Reformed confessional documents contain no explicit discussion of the Muslim faith, not even under the generic term of “Turks.” If at all, Islam finds negative mention under the umbrella term of “Antichrist.” Instead, it is reflections on how peace could be achieved with the Catholic Church, Lutherans, and heretics that play an important role in the “Fundamental Articles.” The underlying question was whether or not commonalities with people of other faiths were broad enough to allow religious pluralism.

The texts above deal with how the Reformation movement perceived Islam during the course of the sixteenth century. It would certainly be desirable to examine more carefully how these perceptions were passed on and modified throughout the history of Protestant theology in the centuries that followed, and to take close note of the impact these evolving perceptions had. Unfortunately, this would exceed the bounds of this essay. Instead, we shall leap from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century and reflect on how some of the key theological notions and insights of the Reformation can provide a point of departure for fruitful dialogue between Christians and Muslims today. It is our express wish that the impetus created by this discussion – currently taking place in connection with the Reformation Jubilee, but hopefully to be continued thereafter – finds wide resonance, be it in form of critique and controversy, be it in form of consent and agreement, and especially that it be developed further.

► fig. pp. 22/23:

Abraham Ortelius: *Theatrum orbis terrarum*, Antwerpen: Plantin, 1570. (K 80.2 Simon)

The historical map from the 16th century shows Wittenberg, the origin of the Reformation, and the entire geographical area of European Reformation history as well as the Ottoman Empire as a centre of Islam at that time.

Source: Lippische Landesbibliothek Detmold, K 80.2° Simon.





4 The task of redefining our theological relationship to Islam

The central insights of Reformation theology gained through the doctrine of justification by faith 500 years ago can be summarized in five key concepts: *solus Christus* – Christ alone, *sola gratia* – by grace alone, *solo verbo* – through the word alone, *sola scriptura* – on the basis of Scripture alone, and *sola fide* – by faith alone.⁴⁵

These concepts constitute fundamental hermeneutical and theological signposts and markers that have left their imprint on Protestantism and continue to influence it to the present. At the time of the Reformation, they also meant the exclusion of other notions. For example, *solus Christus* implied the rejection of the late medieval veneration of saints and of Marian piety,⁴⁶ *sola gratia* opposed perceived “works righteousness”⁴⁷ and the practice, common at the time, of the sale of indulgences⁴⁸; *sola scriptura* was an expression of the rejection of “doctrinal additions by the church”⁴⁹ and of the church’s claim to authority which vied with Scripture⁵⁰; *sola fide* stood in opposition to the notion that people could contribute to their own justification.⁵¹

One cannot simplistically transpose Reformation positions and standpoints into the present; special caution is called for instead. The distinction between Scripture and tradition expressed in *sola scriptura* needs to be revised today with the recognition that the very emergence of Biblical texts is in itself the result of a process of tradition.⁵² We therefore cannot simply take Biblical texts to be the direct “Word of God” in the same way as the Reformers did.⁵³ And *solo verbo* can no longer be interpreted to mean that the church denies other senses besides the sense of hearing: “Many exaggerations of the past, by which the church neglected everything except ‘the Word,’ considering them to be distractions foreign to evangelical tradition, have been overcome in the meantime.”⁵⁴

The same holds true with respect to *solus Christus*, making it necessary to ask ourselves whether the exclusivity of Jesus Christ expressed in this formula can be professed in a religiously pluralistic society in such a way that it is not perceived as presumptuous or arrogant when carrying out religious dialogue. The document “Justification and Freedom” drafted by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) says the following on this matter: “The challenge resides in speaking about Christ in such a

way that one does not denigrate somebody else's faith or disqualify it as false. Just as Christians draw their only comfort in life and in death from belonging to Christ, in the same way the followers of other religions draw sustenance from their own specific faith. Both sides of a dialogue should be willing to acknowledge this."⁵⁵

It thus becomes apparent that the "liberations" wrought by the Reformation 500 years ago need to be reappropriated and transposed anew into each age. This applies not least to the Reformers' perceptions of Islam, especially those of Martin Luther, many of which from a modern perspective cannot be described other than as polemical, biased, unprecise and simplistic. These perceptions therefore clearly conflict with current approaches based on dialogue and the desire to show respect and consideration towards the self-understanding and self-sufficiency of the Muslim faith. A dialogical attitude of this kind also requires being attentive to the rise of demeaning stereotypes and hyped-up threat scenarios; it requires informing oneself reliably and seeking personal encounter with Muslims continually. In the course of interreligious and interconfessional dialogue, theological statements come up repeatedly that in the respective religion's historical past were occasionally or permanently condemned as a "heresy." Precisely because of this, it is of utmost importance that we tolerate these statements as we partake in the learning process of dialogue, seeking to understand and assess them anew and not to break off contact because of it.

Accordingly, it is misleading to refer to the faithful who have converted to Islam as "Mohammedans," since this suggests that Muslims assign to Muhammad a similar place in their faith as Christians assign to Jesus Christ. To label the Muslim religion a "Christian heresy" ignores the independence and self-sufficiency of the Islamic tradition of faith. Declaring Islam to be the "Antichrist" encourages a demonization of Muslims which can in no way be justified.

Luther and other Reformers occasionally invoked Islam when calling on fellow Christians to repentance. Today we would have misgivings about instrumentalizing believers of other faiths pedagogically or homiletically by turning them into a shining or a warning example. On the other hand, it is legitimate and possible to acknowledge positively what appears to be positive in the faith of others, and to describe in a critical way what we perceive critically. The prerequisite for this is the willingness to take other people's faith seriously and on their own terms. This occurred only in the most rudimentary fashion during the Reformation. Today, a thoroughly changed historical and intellectual environment makes it possible for us to conduct serious interreligious dialogue.⁵⁶

In the process, we need to contradict resolutely all tendencies in today's society and world that look upon Islam with hostility. Such tendencies cannot be justified by unreflectedly repeating quotes from the sixteenth century. Sensitivity to nuance is required when confronting Islam as a religion practiced throughout the world. It is part of the essence of Protestant self-understanding and one of the central concerns of the Reformation to define God's relationship to human beings as being one of grace. The believer who has been justified by God can be calm and serene when interacting with believers of other faiths, free from the anxious need to prove something to himself, to others, or to God.

The five "sola" formulas that result from the doctrine of justification can be put to fruitful use when entering into a conversation with Muslims about faith, and they can serve as theological points of reference. The fundamental insight that it is due to God's grace that a person is able to believe in the first place, that faith is not an "accomplishment" achieved without God's help and action – this insight enables us to see non-believers or believers of others faiths in another light. It is precisely the realization that our certainty of faith is not something over which we can command that can lead us to show respect and consideration for the certitudes and modes of faith of others. The Theological Chamber of the Evangelical Church in Germany has expressed it in the following way: "Since Christian faith is the individual certainty of a single person, it cannot be advocated responsibly without recognizing and strengthening the right to have diverging religious convictions and therefore the right to religious pluralism."⁵⁷

The Reformation watchwords of *sola gratia* and *sola fide* invite us to enter into a deep conversation with Muslims over the inherent connection between faith, divine grace, and human action. The value ascribed to "good works" can also be discussed in this context without concealing the Reformation's rejection of so-called "works righteousness" or Islam's more positive assessment of orthopraxis. It may be useful to remind ourselves that even the issue of "good works" was one that was controversially debated during the time of the Reformation, as reflected in the Formula of Concord: *"Concerning the doctrine of good works two divisions have arisen in some churches: First, some theologians have become divided because of the following expressions, where the one side wrote: Good works are necessary for salvation. It is impossible to be saved without good works. Also: No one has ever been saved without good works. But the other side, on the contrary, wrote: Good works are injurious to salvation."*⁵⁸

Christian-Muslim dialogue could also be deepened by dwelling upon the central place both religions assign to the word or to scripture. *Solo verbo* and *sola scriptura* describe the Reformation's absolutely high regard for the Word of God as the sole rule and guideline for judging church doctrine. This appreciation of the Word of God can be made understandable to Muslims, who are committed to another tradition of word and scripture. Of course, recognition of the importance of the word for Christians and Muslims can and should lead to discussions about the contents of Torah and Gospel, Quran and Sunnah. As Protestant Christians we should feel no qualms about delving into the scriptures of other religions. We can assume a spirit of interest and openness when approaching the documents cherished by Islam as its revealed sources, and we need not be anxious of losing what is unique to us. On the contrary, a dialogue of this kind gives us the opportunity to intensify and broaden our own faith.

5 Prospects

The 500th anniversary of the Reformation presents an appropriate occasion to reflect upon the Reformers' perceptions of Islam and their significance for the present. In doing so, we need to speak of views that, from a modern perspective, are objectionable and theologically unjustifiable, but we also need to speak of fundamental Reformation insights that had an impact far beyond the borders of Germany and continue to shape the religious life of many people to this very day.

When engaging in dialogue with Muslims, Protestant Christians can openly speak about what the Reformation means for them today, both negatively and positively. The 500th Reformation Jubilee can also be an occasion for Christians and Muslims to discuss thoroughly the theological reasons and motivations for entering into dialogue with one another. The Theological Chamber of the Evangelical Church in Germany has expressed it this way: "The church faces a crucial challenge: it must decide which paths it shall pursue in the dialogue of religions within the horizon of its understanding of Scripture and in contemporary accountability to the confessions of the Reformation."⁵⁹ One thing that is clear is that the paths at our disposal today are marked by a significantly more positive understanding of religious diversity than was the case in the sixteenth century and long after.

At this time and in the future it will be crucial that we handle the legacy of the past in such a way that it does not thwart, but rather enables and fosters the encounter with others. Living in a society characterized by a multiplicity of faiths and worldviews presents us with a constant challenge to find appropriate theological language and strive for theological understanding. The Theological Chamber of the EKD speaks of the need for a "theology that is accountable to the public sphere." In its own words: "What is clear, however, is that the significance of religions in a pluralistic society depends crucially on whether or not these religions develop a theology that is accountable to the public sphere and facilitates mutual understanding and communication between confessions, religions, and differing worldviews."⁶⁰ The present text can be read as an encouragement to us on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation to appropriate the sometimes awkward legacy of the sixteenth century, accepting some of its elements, distancing ourselves from others, in such a way that it does not hamper, but instead facilitates mutual understanding between Protestant Christians and Muslims.

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- 45 *Justification and Freedom. Celebrating 500 Years of the Reformation in 2017. A Foundational Text from the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany*, Hannover 2015, pp. 28 ff. (German original: *Rechtfertigung und Freiheit. 500 Jahre Reformation 2017. Ein Grundlagentext des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD)*, 2nd ed., Gütersloh 2014, p. 44 ff.).

- 46 Justification and Freedom, p. 34 (German original: Rechtfertigung und Freiheit, p. 54).
- 47 Justification and Freedom, p. 39 (German original: Rechtfertigung und Freiheit, p. 62).
- 48 Justification and Freedom, p. 39 (German original: Rechtfertigung und Freiheit, p. 63).
- 49 Justification and Freedom, p. 47 (German original: Rechtfertigung und Freiheit, p. 76).
- 50 Justification and Freedom, p. 48 (German original: Rechtfertigung und Freiheit, p. 78).
- 51 Cf. Justification and Freedom, p. 53 (German original: Rechtfertigung und Freiheit, p. 87).
- 52 Cf. Justification and Freedom, p. 51 (German original: Rechtfertigung und Freiheit, p. 83).
- 53 Cf. Justification and Freedom, p. 51 (German original: Rechtfertigung und Freiheit, p. 84).
- 54 Justification and Freedom, p. 46 (German original: Rechtfertigung und Freiheit, p. 75).
- 55 Justification and Freedom, p. 36 (German original: Rechtfertigung und Freiheit, p. 58).
- 56 On this, also see the Guidelines for encouraging dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Germany drafted by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the Coordination Council of Muslims in Germany (KRM); German original: Dialogratgeber zur Förderung der Begegnung zwischen Christen und Muslimen in Deutschland, 2015, both versions available under www.ekd.de.
- 57 Christian Faith and Religious Diversity – a Protestant Perspective. A Foundational Text from the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, Hannover 2016, p. 12 (German original: Christlicher Glaube und religiöse Vielfalt in evangelischer Perspektive. Ein Grundlagentext des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD), Gütersloh 2015, p. 21).
- 58 Quoted from: <http://bookofconcord.org>; German original: Die Bekenntnisschriften der Ev.-Luth. Kirche, ed. by Irene Dingel, entirely new edition, Göttingen 2014, p. 1240.
- 59 Christian Faith and Religious Diversity (as in note 57 above), p. 46 (German original: Christlicher Glaube und religiöse Vielfalt, p. 75).
- 60 Christian Faith and Religious Diversity (as in note 57 above), p. 46 (German original: Christlicher Glaube und religiöse Vielfalt, p. 76).

Members of the executive committee from the Conference for Islam Issues of the EKD

Oberkirchenrat Dr. Martin Affolderbach, Hanover (to December 2012)
Pfarrerin Susanna Faust-Kallenberg, Frankfurt a. M. (to November 2014)
Landespfarrer Dr. Andreas Goetze, Berlin (since November 2014)
Oberkirchenrat Dr. Detlef Görrig, Hanover (Chairperson)
Pfarrer Michael Munzel, Hatten (to November 2014)
Kirchenrat Pfarrer Rafael Nikodemus, Düsseldorf
Pfarrer Dr. Rainer Oechslen, Munich (to November 2014)
Pastor Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Reinbold, Hanover (since November 2014)
Pfarrer Heinrich Georg Rothe, Stuttgart
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