

Luther and the Turks

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Abstract

Confronted with the military advance of the Turkish Ottoman Empire against the Holy Roman Empire, including the siege of Vienna, Martin Luther wrote several treatises on the Turks. Luther rejected the idea of a war in the name of religion against the Ottoman onslaught, seeing instead the defense of the Holy Roman Empire as the duty of the Emperor. Luther understood the Turkish threat as God's punishment for the laxity of Christians and so called for repentance and a return to the gospel. Luther wanted the Christians to have firsthand information about Islam and promoted a translation of the Qur'an in German against many obstacles. The Protestant church in Germany is very cautious about defining a present-day application of Luther's approach.

Perhaps it is because of the guilty conscience Christians have over their mistreatment of the Jews throughout the centuries in word and deed that Luther's writings concerning the Jews are frequently discussed. All of these writings have been translated into English. The same is not true concerning his writings about the Turks.¹ None of them are available in English, and in German literature they are hardly mentioned. This may be due to the fact that there are now more than three million people with Turkish roots living in Germany.

¹ In the writings of Martin Luther, the term *Turks* would today in many ways be equivalent to the term *Muslims*. It is only when this fact is grasped that one sees how contemporary and significant Luther's writings on the subject really are. Yes, Luther was a man of his time, and some of his ideas are quite primitive, but what he said is nevertheless important for today's dialog on the subject.

This lacuna is amazing, because just thirty years before Martin Luther was born Constantinople was conquered by the Turks (1453). One could even say that without the Turkish, or rather the Ottoman, army pounding every now and then on the eastern border of the Holy Roman Empire, Luther's Reformation would have been doomed. Each time Emperor Charles V (1500–1558) wanted to clamp down on the Reformation, the Ottoman military would advance westward, making him more conciliatory toward the Protestant princes because he needed their support against this threat.

After the devastating defeat of the Hungarian kingdom by the Ottoman army under Suleiman the Magnificent (1494–1566) at the battle of Mohács in 1526, central Europe was under the threat of being conquered by the Turks. The first Turkish siege of Vienna began in 1529. It is not surprising that Pope Leo X in his bull *Exsurge Domine* rejected Luther's idea that "to wage war against the Turks and fight them is to resist God, who is using them to punish us for our sins,"² wanting instead to launch a crusade against the Turkish threat. But Luther wrote in a letter to Georg Spalatin (1484–1545), the counselor of his elector, Frederick the Wise, that on a biblical basis he could not advocate war against the Turks.³ As Luther explained in his commentary on his Ninety-Five Theses, the Turks are God's rod with whom God punishes us for our sins.⁴ To wage war against this rod would amount to resisting God's punishment. Though he realistically saw the danger of the expansionist policy of the Ottoman Empire, Luther was by no means a crusader, and he certainly did not want a war conducted by a religious leadership, since for Luther religious concerns and worldly force should never be mixed.

Other important contemporaries of Luther also rejected the idea of a crusade against the Turks. The humanist scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam (ca. 1469–1536) was convinced that it was important to save as many Turks as possible, not to kill them.⁵ He suggested that the most effective means against them would be for them to see in Christians a resemblance of the teachings of Christ. As far as Erasmus was concerned, if the Turks did not perceive Christ in Christian demeanor, then Christians would more easily

² "Leo X: Bannandrohungsbulle 'Exsurge Domine,'" in Peter Fabisch and Erwin Iserloh, eds., *Dokumente zur Causa Lutheri (1517–1521)*, part 2 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1991), 385.

³ Martin Luther to Georg Spalatin (December 21, 1518), letter no. 125, in *WA BR* 1:282 (*WA* = Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luther Werke*, 120 vols. [Weimar, 1883–2009] and *BR* = Briefe).

⁴ Martin Luther, *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* (1518), in *WA* 1:535.35–39.

⁵ Cf. for the following, Rudolf Mau, "Luthers Stellung zu den Türken," in Helmar Jung-hans, ed., *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 1:647.

become Turks than Turks would become Christians. Ulrich von Hutten (1488–1523), another well-known humanist, also rejected the idea of a crusade. He asserted that Rome should not command wars but pray and proclaim the gospel. He said, however, that the princes under the leadership of the emperor should defend us against the Turks and bring honor to the German name. These other opinions show that Luther was not the only one who rejected the idea of a crusade against the Turks. But what did Luther actually write about the Turks?

I. *Luther's Writings on the Turks*

Luther's treatise *On War Against the Turks* of 1528 shows that Luther was not a pacifist. He refers to Pope Leo's bull and explains, "To fight against the Turks is as much as to resist God who punishes our sins with such a rod."⁶ Luther always perceived the Turkish threat as God's punishment for the sinfulness of his own German people. Therefore, Luther emphasizes over and over again that the only way to remove the rod from God's hand is to do penance and to return to the Christian faith. When German politicians today are confronted by German citizens who say, out of an obvious fear, that there are too many Muslims in Germany, the politicians say that Germans should express their Christian faith more freely. At the same time, the church in Germany remains silent on the issue and does not say Christians should confess their faith more clearly. Instead, the church demands toleration of Muslims and dialogue as a genuine task of Reformation theology. The leading motif in church and society is therefore not of penance, which would lead to the gospel, but law: righteousness by works. Yet for Luther, penance was important, and subsequently prayer to God for mercy, since it is God who is ultimately the Lord of history, not us.

Luther emphasizes in his treatise that it is not the task of the church but of the secular authorities to rally and wage war against the Turks. Looking back on history, he reflects that "as Christians and in the name of Christ there has never been a war won against the Turks."⁷ Yet everyone should remember "to what he has been called by God and faithfully serve in that office."⁸ Since the Turks have no right to start a war and to attack other countries that are not theirs, Luther concludes that God punishes the world with the Turks, at whose hands occasionally even pious people will have to

⁶ Martin Luther, *Vom Krieg wider die Türken*, in *WA* 30/2:108.20–21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, in *WA* 30/2:113.2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, in *WA* 30/2:112.15–16.

suffer. For Luther it is especially evil that the Turks restrict the freedom of the Christian faith. Though some Christians even at that time imagined that the Turks allowed everybody under their rule to believe what they want as long as the Turks could exercise their worldly authority, Luther contends that the Turks do not allow Christians to gather in public and that nobody is allowed to openly confess Christ or preach or teach anything against Mohammed: “But what kind of freedom of faith is this if one is not allowed to preach or confess Christ?”⁹ Luther suggests that we need only look at the situation of Christians in Turkey to see that there everything is going downhill and is becoming Islamic.

Luther knows the Qur’an from his own reading,¹⁰ and he explains that in the Qur’an Mary and Christ are highly praised and depicted to be without sin. Yet the Qur’an denies that Christ is the true Savior of the world and instead states that Jesus is like any other prophet. In contrast, Mohammed praises himself highly and shows how he has spoken with God and the angels. While according to Mohammed, the office of Christ has already been completed and Mohammed was commanded “to convert the world to his faith, and if people are unwilling to surrender, to conquer them with the sword or punish them,”¹¹ Luther contends that the Islamic faith is a mixture of religions “pasted together from the faith of Jews, Christians, and pagans.”¹² Luther notes especially that the Qur’an not only destroys the Christian faith but also the secular authority, since Mohammed commands Muslims to rule with the sword. The most important work advocated in the Qur’an is therefore to take up the sword. According to Luther, Muslims learn “that in their law it is commanded as a good divine work that they rob, murder, and devour further and further areas and destroy them”;¹³ pious Christians, in contrast, delight in neither murder nor in the death of their enemies. He says therefore that the Turks cannot be a part of the divinely ordered authority which safeguards peace and protects the pious by punishing evildoers. Instead, they are God’s rod of wrath and punishment for the unbelieving world. Finally, Luther is also critical of the Qur’an for allowing polygamy and treating women as property and not as partners of men. Luther strictly distinguishes the three basic orders of God as the religious, the political, and

⁹ Ibid., in *WA* 30/2:120.33–34.

¹⁰ Cf. Luther, *Einleitung zur Verlegung des Alcoran*, in *WA* 53:272.16ff. Having vehemently advocated a German edition of the Qur’an, he wrote a preface to this edition in 1543; see Mau, “Luthers Stellung zu den Türken,” 661.

¹¹ Luther, *Vom Krieg wider die Türken*, in *WA* 30/2:122.10ff.

¹² Ibid., in *WA* 30/2:122.29–30.

¹³ Ibid., in *WA* 30/2:123.32–33.

the economic, which cannot be mixed together. In the Qur'an, however, these orders are not distinguished from each other, so that the political order serves the religious to wage war in the name of Allah.

Luther asks, What should Christians do against this obvious threat? Since it expresses God's wrath, Christians must either suffer or fight the Turks with penance and prayer to drive them away. As for the secular authority, if the Turks attack the subjects of the emperor and his empire, it is the duty of the emperor "as an authority instituted by God to defend his people."¹⁴ Under the emperor's command and in his name one may wage war against the Turks, and whoever joins in is obedient to God. Yet Luther says that one should not fight the Turks for honor, nor to win goods and land, nor out of wrath and vengeance, but only to protect one's subjects. Luther also rejects the idea of a war of religion. He writes: "Let the Turks believe and live as they will just as one lets the papacy and other false Christians live. This sword of the emperor has nothing to do with faith."¹⁵ One should not wage war against the Turks because of their wrong faith and way of life, but only because of their murderous and destructive activities. The same holds true with regard to the pope, whom Luther often sees in parallel to the Turks, since both the pope and the Turks endanger the Christian faith.

Luther's treatise was published in April 1529, and in the same year it was reprinted seven times, which shows the immense interest in this publication at that time. This need not surprise us, since there was hardly any precise information available about the Turks and their faith, a fact about which Luther also complained. Luther therefore had a treatise published in Wittenberg entitled *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (A Writing about the Rites and Customs of the Turks, 1530), for which he provided a preface. This treatise had been written by Gregorius of Hungary (1422–1502), a Dominican monk from Transylvanian Saxony, present-day Romania, who had been in Turkish captivity as a slave for several decades and had gotten to know quite well the conditions that existed under Turkish rule. Luther mentions in this preface that the ceremonies and customs of the Turks are more convincing than those of the Christians: "If any [Christians] would stay for only three days under the Turks, probably no one would remain in his or her Christian faith."¹⁶

Already prior to that Luther had taken up his pen on October 28, 1529, writing *A Sermon against the Turks*. This sermon was occasioned by the

¹⁴ Ibid., in *WA* 30/2:129.19–20.

¹⁵ Ibid., in *WA* 30/2:131.6–9.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, "Vorwort zu dem *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum*" (1530), in *WA* 30/2:206.16–17.

advance of the Turks against the city of Vienna. But then they surprisingly withdrew. Luther interprets the threat by the Turks as a sign of the end times. He refers to the book of Daniel with the pronouncements of the four empires (Dan 2) and the four beasts (Dan 7) and assumes that the Turks are part of the last empire and the fourth beast. He even suggests that their advance is God's punishment, an attack of Satan, in this final eschatological battle. "He thus could lump the papacy and Turks together: 'The pope is the spirit of the antichrist, and the Turk is the flesh of the antichrist. The two help each other to strangle us, the latter with body and sword, the former with doctrine and spirit.'"¹⁷ He thus sees the pope and the Turks as the tyrants foretold for the end time.

According to Luther, the Turks do not distinguish between nominal and real Christians because they are the enemy of the name of Christ. Luther thought that since we live in the end times heaven will dethrone the Turkish Empire and thereafter nothing dangerous will come. The Turks' position as an enemy of God, as a blasphemer and persecutor of Christ and of his saints with the sword and fighting, will come to an end. "We can surely say that judgment day must be pounding on the door."¹⁸ Even in this end-time situation Luther does not call for a crusade against the Ottoman Empire but enjoins everyone to diligently follow Christ and be ready to suffer under its rule. One must be obedient to secular authority and protect in its name the country and the people, both women and children. Since the attacks of the Turks are directed against Christ, one fights against the enemy of God, even against the devil himself. In the battle against them one need not be afraid that one might kill innocent people, because all who fight in the Turkish army, including the Christians that fight in it, are obedient to the devil. Luther sees here an apocalyptic battle between the Christians with God and the Turks with the devil. Nevertheless, he does not advocate a crusade in the name of Christ. For Luther one can only properly fight under the secular authority, not as a Christian but as a secular subject, and only if the Turks initiate war. A pre-emptive strike against the enemy is never an option for Luther.

But Luther does not lambast the Turks. He even has some good things to say about them. Their spiritual leaders, for instance, lead an earnest and rigorous life. In their mosques there is silence and good demeanor, and one prays with beautiful external gestures that can hardly be found in Christian churches. The Turks

¹⁷ So Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 334, *WA Tischreden* 1, no. 330.

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *Heerpredigt wider den Türken*, in *WA* 30/2:171.20–21.

do not drink wine, do not guzzle and become gluttons, as we do. ... [They] do not swear and curse, have great and proper obedience, and propriety against their emperor and lords, and have their governments organized in such a manner as we would love to have in our German territories.”¹⁹

Since they have become powerful and won many victories against the Christians, they think that their faith and demeanor is pleasing to God. Therefore, it is impossible to convert just one single Turk. As with the pope, Luther sees the Turks as immensely self-righteous: if one were a prisoner under the Turks and had to serve them, one should do it without reservation and as long as it is useful for the new lord and his property. “But if they should force us to fight against Christians, we should not obey but rather suffer everything they would do, even death.”²⁰ One must not betray one’s Christian faith.

Luther’s *Sermon* is a call to utmost readiness and determination in resisting the Turks. He approves of material sacrifices, including a tax levied on the people, for fighting the Turks and also defense even at the cost of one’s own life. One must also hold fast to one’s Christian faith. Luther does not expect success against the Turks, and he is also not convinced of victory. Yet he is sure that it is the final eschatological battle and therefore that the empire of the Turks will soon come to naught. At the same time Luther is convinced that the Turks are God’s rod levied by God for our sins, both on Christians and non-Christians, if we do not change our ways and desist from persecuting and blaspheming the gospel. Luther is undecided whether the Turks are just God’s punishment or are already the foreboding judgment day. He comforts himself with the assurance that whoever is a Christian and has changed his ways can suffer and then enter eternal bliss.

Luther had heard that the Turks had devastated a large portion of Austria and killed or taken captive more than one hundred thousand people. When Emperor Charles V asked the Protestant estates for help against the Turks, Landgrave Philip of Hesse (1504–1567) wrote to Luther, saying that if Luther were asked by his elector for advice he should suggest that the elector put pressure on the emperor.²¹ Philip’s idea was that help against the Turks should only be granted by the Protestant estates if the emperor provided a satisfactory solution for the Protestants so that they may freely exercise their faith. Luther, however, did not want to mingle religious concerns with political ones and therefore responded to the landgrave evasively, saying

¹⁹ Ibid., in *WA* 30/2:189.27–190.1.

²⁰ Ibid., in *WA* 30/2:196.22ff.

²¹ Cf. letter of Landgrave Philip of Hesse to Luther of December 9, 1529 (no. 1503), and Luther’s answer of December 16, 1529 (no. 1507), in *WA BR* 5:203–4.

that so far the elector had neither consulted him nor informed him about his plans.

In August 1541 Suleiman II again invaded Hungary. After expelling the Austrian occupation forces, he put the country under Ottoman administration. By the end of the month Luther had heard of a large Turkish army moving westward. There was alarm in Germany, and the elector John Frederick of Saxony (1503–1559) was afraid that the Turks would not only move toward Vienna and take all of Austria but also devastate Germany. Therefore, he turned to Luther and Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), pastor of Saint Mary's church in Wittenberg and organizer of the Lutheran church in Northern Germany and Scandinavia, asking that they summon the pastors to preach repentance.

In October 1541, when some thought that Western Christendom was doomed, Luther wrote an *Appeal for Prayer Against the Turks*. Again he does not deviate from his conviction that as a Christian one should neither despair nor simply trust one's own might; instead, one should fear God and at the same time trust in God's goodness. On the positive side, Luther suggests that the Turks teach us to fear God so that we learn again how to pray. The first task of preaching is therefore to call us to recognize our own sinfulness and to accept that God punishes us, but also to trust him with our whole heart, to pray, and to call on him for all needs. The second task of preaching is to call us to return to God with true prayer that we might obtain good fortune and victory. We should not trust in our own righteousness but in God's grace. Since the Turks want to put Mohammed in the place of Jesus Christ and therefore blaspheme God, saying, "He is no true God and our Mohammed is higher and better than he," we may ask God to sanctify his name.²² According to Luther, judgment day is not far away, and therefore both the Turks and the pope will soon come to their end. We can confidently resist and pray God that he may give us his grace "to punish both the pope and Mohammed together with their devils."²³

Which points are still of significance for us today in Luther's writings against the Turks? First, we must note that during Luther's time a different nomenclature was used. One did not use the terms *Islam* and *Muslims* but talked about "the Turk" or "the Turks" and "Mohammedans," or simply "pagans" or "heretics." The norm for Luther, as well as for the other Reformers such as Calvin or Zwingli, was the Christian faith. Since this newly won

²² Martin Luther, *Vermahnung zum Gebet wider den Türken*, in *WA* 51:610.22.

²³ Martin Luther, *Verlegung des Alcoran Bruder Richardi, Prediger Ordens*, Verdeutsch und herausgegeben, 1542, in *WA* 53:396.28–29.

faith was threatened by both the pope and the Turks, the two were seen in parallel. Moreover, Luther and the other Reformers often perceived themselves as living in the end time and therefore interpreted enemies of the gospel in apocalyptic terms, drawing on the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation. Much of this looks and sounds very distant to us. But there are other points which merit more serious consideration.

First of all, Luther points out the strict distinction between the spiritual/ ecclesial authority and the worldly authority, a distinction that is essential for the Christian Protestant worldview, but not for the Turkish and Islamic understanding. While the first president of present-day Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), established a policy of state secularism, with a constitution that separated the government from religion, there is considerable pressure to end the separation of religion and politics. The emancipation of secular politics from religion seems to go against the grain of Islamic thinking, as Luther perceptively noted. Then Luther interprets the advancement of the Turks as a spiritual challenge for the Christians first to do penance and then to clearly confess their Christian faith. Many Christians today are very timid when it comes to standing up for their Christian convictions, since they do not want to offend anybody. But is our faith really just a private affair? Luther further notices that the Turks regard all Western people as Christians regardless of what their actual religious persuasion may be. Since for most Muslims there exist only Muslims and nonbelievers, regardless of what the actual religious conviction of those who are not Muslims may be, it is still difficult today for Muslims to understand that not all Westerners are Christians. For them the terms are usually synonymous. For Luther it is also clear that under Turkish authority the Christian faith would be curtailed as a formative power. We can see this today in the original Christian heartlands of Northern Africa (home of Augustine and Athanasius) and Palestine and the Near East (home of Paul and John of Damascus), where Christians have been reduced to a small minority. Finally, Luther is convinced that the secular authority must defend its citizens against the Turkish expansionist attempts. All citizens must join in this defense. Even though Luther's mind was occasionally occupied with the end time, for him there was reason for neither panic nor optimism. He was convinced that we must trust God because whatever may come, God's cause will be victorious in the end. Today, we should also live with the conviction that with God's providence everything will turn out all right. Although uncertainty with regard to Muslim extremists still looms, Christians derive their confidence from God's protective power, and they can have the assurance that God will win the final victory in the end.

Since for Luther and the people of his age Islam consisted of wrong teachings and of heretical assertions, Luther was convinced that Christians must ascertain what they believe to be able to defend their faith. Many Muslims still today believe uncritically the assertions of the Qur'an regarding the principal figures of the Christian faith, including Jesus, Abraham, and Mary, and then claim that the Christians have falsified these assertions. Therefore, it is still important that Christians know their Bible and be able to defend its claims, not contemptuously but with historically informed arguments. It is important for Christians to be religiously literate to defend their own faith. Luther demanded that Christians be religiously literate, and he himself contributed to this end. This was no small task, since publications that were considered heretical were traditionally committed to the flames. The writings of Christian theologians who were condemned as heretics, such as Arius and Pelagius, did not survive. We only know them from the quotations of their orthodox opponents. Even some of Luther's books were burned, and he himself threw into a bonfire the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*, which threatened him with excommunication, together with the papal decrees known collectively as the Canon Law of the Roman Church. He had made prior preparations to do this, and on December 10, 1520, a crowd of students and townspeople of Wittenberg witnessed the event.²⁴ On the other hand, Luther went in the other direction with the Qur'an and tried hard to provide firsthand information about the teachings of Islam.

II. *Luther's Concern for Religious Literacy*

Luther was convinced that the Turks would threaten Christians not only because of their military power but also because of their doctrine and way of life. Therefore, he regarded it necessary that one should be literate regarding Islam. This was not easy, however, because at that time there was no easy access to a Latin translation of the Qur'an, not to mention a German version, which did not exist. It was only in February 1542 that Luther was able to acquire a complete Latin version of the Qur'an. Prior to that, he had to rely on secondary literature such as the *Confutatio Alcorani* by the Dominican monk Ricoldus de Montecrucis (ca. 1242–1320), who had traveled all the way to Baghdad and learned the Arabic language, since he intended to convert Nestorian Christians to Catholicism. (Nestorius [ca. 386–450],

²⁴ For more information, see Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 98.

the one-time archbishop of Constantinople, held that Christ had two separate natures, one divine and one human, and that Mary only gave birth to Christ, and not to God, which implied for many that Nestorius's teaching was heretical, since he did not believe that Christ was truly God.) In the end, Ricoldus's mission failed, and he returned to his native Florence, Italy. He did, however, write a treatise on the Qur'an around 1300. Luther used it and thought at first that it was overly negative, as he was convinced that it would damage the cause more than help it if only negative things were written about Islam and the praiseworthy things suppressed. After he had actually read the Qur'an, however, he realized that it was much worse than he had first thought, so he published a German translation of Ricoldus's *Confutatio* in 1542 with his own introduction. He cut out much of Ricoldus's tedious exposition and offered a rather free translation of the rest. He highlighted internal contradictions in the Qur'an and pointed to assertions that stood in opposition to the Old and New Testaments. Luther admits in his introduction that initially he thought that Ricoldus's refutation of the Qur'an was built on lies and that Ricoldus was trying to put the pope in the best possible light, but that after he had read the Qur'an in Latin, he realized that this refutation was by no means a fabrication but a proper description of the Qur'an. Since there was no better information about Islam available at the time, Luther translated Ricoldus's refutation of Islam so that, on the one hand, what he called "the horrible faith advocated by Mohammed" could be revealed and, on the other hand, the Christian faith could be strengthened. Luther's intention in translating the *Confutatio Alcorani* was not to convert the Turks, something that Ricoldus had had in mind, but to strengthen the Christian faith. Luther regarded such a strengthening of the Christian's faith necessary so that the Christian could combat the Turks, and, if captive under the Turks, defend one's beliefs against a wrong faith.

Since the *Confutatio* was secondhand information, Luther was still interested in providing exact knowledge of the Qur'an itself. Therefore, he was engaged in providing a reliable edition of the Qur'an so that everyone could have information about that religion. As mentioned previously, this position was rather revolutionary. Since Christians considered Islam to be a heresy, the Qur'an was also destined to the flames. For instance, in 1530 the first Latin edition of the Qur'an published in Venice, Italy, was consigned to the flames by papal command.²⁵ In Protestant Basel, Switzerland, the printer Heinrich Petri (1508–1579) attempted in 1536 to publish a Latin translation of the Qur'an. But this attempt was put to nought by an injunction of the

²⁵ Cf. the more extensive information by Mau, "Luthers Stellung zu den Türken," 660–61.

city council. In 1542 the Swiss orientalist, publisher, and linguist Theodor Bibliander (1509–1564) in Zurich tried to provide a reliable Latin text of the Qur'an in which he compared the Latin and Arab versions of the Qur'an. The first German translation of the Qur'an was published finally in 1616 by the Lutheran theologian Salomon Schweigger (1551–1622), a translation from the Italian which, however, was based on Bibliander's Latin text. A famous printer in Basel, Johannes Oporinus, likely assuming that a preface by Philip Melanchthon would enable this edition to pass the censorship test, had set the text for printing when the city council discovered his project. The city council confiscated the whole edition, called the printer to task, and even arrested and held him for a while in prison.

The situation changed when Luther vehemently interceded, and this in itself was a part of a process. Once the whole edition had been confiscated by the city council, Oporin turned to the well-known theologian Martin Bucer (1491–1551), who had introduced the Reformation in the city of Strasbourg, for help. Bucer in turn called on Landgrave Philip of Hesse and asked that he and the Saxon elector Johann Frederick intercede with the city council on behalf of Oporin. The elector then asked Luther to write to the city council. In a letter of October 27, 1542, to the city council, Luther emphasized

that nothing more negative could be done to Mohammed or the Turks with all the weapons in the world, and no bigger damage than if one would bring the Qur'an into the daylight for the Christians so that they could see what a horrible book the Qur'an is.²⁶

Pastors too could ascertain their own faith and encourage their people to fight forcefully for pure Christian doctrine. Luther also emphasized that the Qur'an would have been published in Wittenberg long ago if the conditions for it had been right. If the city council of Basel were not willing to have its injunction lifted, Luther would ask Wittenberg to take over the whole of Oporin's edition "at its own risk." This way the printer would not incur any financial loss and there would also be no damage to the Christian church.

The city council of Basel agreed to Luther's suggestion, but with the stipulation that the name of the printer and Basel as the place of printing not appear in the printed version, and also that the Qur'an would not be sold in Basel. In 1543 the whole publication process was finished. Luther explained in his preface that since the beginning of the church the true doctrine of God has been flawed by the devil in many ways.²⁷ Yet one must

²⁶ Martin Luther, letter no. 3802, in *WA BR* 10:162.32–36.

²⁷ Cf. for the following *WA* 53:569–72.

know this kind of attack to refute it. Just as the apostles refuted the errors of the pagans, Luther suggested that now the church must refute the errors of the enemies of the gospel. He stated that Mohammed and the Turks are in line with the enemies of the gospel. One need not be afraid of the Qur'an, because everybody can see plainly the untruth of its doctrines and therefore be strengthened in the faith.

In the disputation with the Turks—and Islam represented by them—it was important for Luther that this threat to the Christian faith not be attacked in an unfair way. In his defense of the Christian faith against Islam it was clear to Luther that there cannot be two different versions of faith given by God. Since the Christian and Islamic versions were irreconcilable, only one could be from God, and the other must be from human beings or from an anti-God, meaning the devil. Luther hoped to strengthen the church and Christians against the Muslim threat through his writings and the publication of the Qur'an. This was even more necessary, since for Luther it was evident that he was living in the apocalyptic end-time in which Christians were engaged in the final battle between the forces of darkness, represented by the Turks and the pope, who wanted to devour Christians and their faith, and the forces of light, represented by God and the Christian church. But Luther was certain that it would be God who would stem the tide of evil and win the final victory.

III. *A Mixed Reception*

It is not without significance that the Conference on the Issues of Islam of the Protestant Church in Germany (*Konferenz für Islamfragen der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, EKD*) issued in May 2016 a discussion paper (*Impulspapier*) with the title *Reformation and Islam*. This paper dealt with Luther and the Turks, the Lutheran Confessions, and the Reformed tradition and concluded that the church faced the task of establishing a new theological relationship with Islam. The paper states that today we cannot simply transfer the position of the Reformation into the present. Since the Bible itself is the result of a process of tradition, “the biblical text cannot be understood as the immediate ‘word of God’ the same way it was by the Reformers.”²⁸ This means that the Reformation standard of *Scripture alone* needs to be reinterpreted. In another place, the paper says, “The challenge consists in talking about Christ in such a way that the faith of others is not devalued or declared untrue. As with Christians belonging to Christ is the

²⁸ *Reformation und Islam* (Hannover: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, 2016), 24.

sole comfort in life and death, so it is also with the specific faith for adherents of other religions.”²⁹ Thus the concept of *Christ alone* has been reinterpreted considerably. One wonders what Karl Barth would have said, especially in light of the *Barmen Declaration*. But, of course, one could say that Barth lived in a bygone age. The same reinterpretation occurs with the other Reformation trademarks, *faith alone* and *grace alone*.

The paper concludes, “Since the Christian faith is an individual certainty, it cannot be responsibly represented without acknowledging and strengthening the right of divergent religious convictions and thereby the right of religious pluralism.”³⁰ Luther always emphasized that faith is a personal matter and that we must be able to exercise that faith freely. This implied that there are other religious convictions besides one’s own. But Luther himself would have never dreamed of “strengthening the right of divergent religious convictions.” Yet that is exactly what is occurring in Germany today. A Lutheran bishop volunteers to become a board member of a future Islamic center, and the EKD advocates Germany-wide Islamic religious instruction in schools, while in some states in Germany, Protestant religious instruction is no longer offered in public schools.³¹ How far away from the Reformation can one get?

Luther would have no problem with the statement in *Reformation and Islam* that “at present and in the future it is important to treat the heritage of the past in such a way that the encounter with others is not hindered by this heritage but is enabled and furthered.”³² As was stated earlier, Luther was not a crusader. His intention was never to wage a religious war. Even to resist the emperor when the latter wanted to crush the Reformation was not an option for Luther.³³ Instead, he called for repentance in face of laxity in faith. He produced the Large Catechism and the Small Catechism (1529), the *Personal Prayer Book* (1522), and the *Wittenberg Hymnbook* (1529) in order to strengthen the personal faith of Christians. But he also actively participated in the publication of the Qur’an so that Christians could know firsthand what the other faith taught, in order that they might confidently and cheerfully hold on to the Christian gospel.

²⁹ Ibid., 25.

³⁰ Ibid., 26.

³¹ “Evangelikale kritisieren Islam-Initiative von Bischof Bedford Strohm,” evangelisch.de, <https://www.evangelisch.de/inhalte/123728/04-08-2015/evangelikale-kritisieren-islam-initiative-von-bischof-bedford-strohm>.

³² *Reformation und Islam*, 28.

³³ Cf. Hans Schwarz, *True Faith in the True God: An Introduction to Luther’s Life and Thought*, rev. and exp. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 43.