

# Bullinger on Islam: Theory and Practice

DANIËL TIMMERMAN

## Abstract

The present inquiry engages with the perception of Islam and of Christian-Muslim relations in the works of the sixteenth-century Zurich Reformer Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575). On the basis of previous research, it attempts to deepen our understanding of the Reformer's theory of Islam by comparing it with the notions of true and false prophecy. This theological perspective is broadened by a discussion of Bullinger's more practical advice on the Christian presence in Turkish territories and on evangelization of Muslims. These themes are explored through the Reformer's correspondence, his 1551 catechetical letter to Hungarian Protestants, and his 1567 systematic and polemical exposition of Islam (*Der Türgg*).

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## Introduction

**I**n our age, the world is facing growing tensions between worldwide communities of Muslims and the largely secularized Western societies. On either side of the spectrum, Christians are called to live as a “holy priesthood” (1 Pet 2:5), witnessing in word and deed to the gospel of reconciliation through Jesus Christ. However, on the path to fulfilling this vocation, we are confronted with stumbling blocks from the past. This applies in particular to the history of Christian-Muslim relationships. Although the records show remarkable examples of respectful dialogue and

cohabitation, the prevailing image is that of mutual prejudice, caricature, and violence. For many Muslims, the history of aggression from the medieval crusades to the twentieth-century massacres in Bosnia fuels a deep suspicion against the powers of the “Christian” West. On the other hand, the present-day violence of certain radical Islamists reinforces the deeply ingrained and historically developed distrust of many in Western societies against Muslims. Hopefully, awareness of the stumbling blocks from the past may be a step in the process of removing them.

For the present purpose, we will take a look at the Christian perception of Muslims in a specific time and context: the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the European continent witnessed a steady advance of the forces of the Ottoman Empire. By 1529 the Turkish armies had marched into the heartlands of the Hungarian kingdom and even laid siege to the city of Vienna. In the following decades, the main powers of central Europe always had to counter military pressure from the Ottoman Empire. As a result, the confrontation with the Turks curtailed the military strength of the leading Catholic states, thereby immediately facilitating the development of the Protestant Reformation. Theologically, the advance of the Turks was interpreted on both sides of the confessional rift as an indication of God’s wrath against Christianity.

Rather than focusing on the views of Martin Luther and the German Reformers,<sup>1</sup> the present article will zero in on the perception of Islam and Muslim believers in the city-state of Zurich. Although this breeding ground of the Reformed tradition was not directly affected by the military engagement with the Ottoman Empire, the issue of the “Turkish threat” was felt there as much as in other parts of the continent. Through networks of correspondents, its leading theologians were well informed about the situation of Protestant Christians under Islamic rule.<sup>2</sup> Since Zurich was one of the leading cities in the movement of what would later become the Reformed tradition, they were challenged with the task of giving interpretation and guidance in view of the rise of the Turkish armies at the doorstep of a continent that understood itself as a *corpus Christianum*.

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<sup>1</sup> A vast research literature exists on this subject. For orientation on the current state of the debate, see Damaris Grimmsmann, *Krieg mit dem Wort: Türkenpredigten des 16. Jahrhunderts im Alten Reich*, AKG 131 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016). For English introductions to Luther’s position, see Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics*, CMR 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2007); and Hans Schwarz, “Luther and the Turks,” *Unio cum Christo* 3.2 (April 2017): 139–52.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Bryner, “Bullinger und Ostmitteleuropa: Bullingers Einfluss auf die Reformation in Ungarn und Polen: Ein Vergleich,” in *Heinrich Bullinger: Life—Thought—Influence*, ed. Emidio Campi and Peter Opitz, ZBRG 24 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 2007), 2:799–820.

Fortunately, the views of the sixteenth-century Zurich theologians on Islam are very well documented.<sup>3</sup> Scholarship has paid special attention to the writings of the city's leading minister, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575),<sup>4</sup> and of the professor of Old Testament at the Zurich Academy, Theodor Bibliander (1505–1564).<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, the present inquiry seeks to deepen our understanding of Bullinger's theory of Islam by relating it to the notion of prophecy. On the other hand, it attempts to broaden the image of the Reformer's approach to Islam by turning to more practical questions, like how Bullinger counseled Christian believers in Turkish territories and what his opinion was on the evangelization of Muslims. Both perspectives, theory and practice, are brought together in the concluding section.

### I. *Islam as False Prophecy*

The opinion of Bullinger on Islam is articulated in his 1567 polemical treatise *Der Türgg* (The Turk).<sup>6</sup> On the title page of this work, Muhammad is introduced to the readers as a “false prophet.”<sup>7</sup> This polemical rejection of the prophetic status of the founder of Islam is a standard element in medieval and early modern writings on Islam.<sup>8</sup> However, within the corpus of

<sup>3</sup> Paul Widmer, “Bullinger und die Türken: Zeugnis des geistigen Widerstandes gegen eine Renaissance der Kreuzzüge,” in *Heinrich Bullinger*, ed. Campi and Opitz, 2:593–624; W. Peter Stephens, “Understanding Islam—In the Light of Bullinger and Wesley,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 81 (2009): 23–27; Emidio Campi, “Early Reformed Attitudes towards Islam,” *Near East School of Theology Theological Review* 31 (2010): 131–51; Damaris Grimmssmann, “Heinrich Bullingers Deutung der Türkengefahr und des Islam,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 103 (2012): 64–91.

<sup>4</sup> Biography: Rodney L. Petersen, “Bullinger, Heinrich (1504–1575),” in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 254–61. Works: *Heinrich Bullinger Werke* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1972–2017) [= HBW]. Bibliography: Joachim Staedtke, ed., *Heinrich Bullinger Bibliographie 1: Beschreibendes Verzeichnis der gedruckten Werke von Heinrich Bullinger*, HBW 1.1 [= HBBib].

<sup>5</sup> Biography: J. Wayne Baker, “Bibliander, Theodor,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1:171–72 (hereafter, *EncR*); Emil Egli, *Analecta Reformatoria, II. Biographien: Bibliander, Ceporin, Johannes Bullinger* (Zurich: Zürcher & Furrer, 1901), 1–144. Bibliography: Christian Moser, *Theodor Bibliander (1505–1564): Annotierte Bibliographie der gedruckten Werke*, ZBRG 27 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, *Der Türgg: Von Anfang und Ursprung des Türggischen Gloubens ...* ([Zurich], 1567), doi:10.3931/e-rara-5161; see HBBib 249; Bruce Gordon, “Heinrich Bullinger,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, vol. 6: *Western Europe, 1500–1600*, ed. David Thomas and John Chesworth, CMR 22 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 746–51.

<sup>7</sup> Bullinger, *Der Türgg*, fol. a1r.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview, see David Nirenberg, “Christendom and Islam,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 4, *Christianity in Western Europe, c. 1100–c. 1500*, ed. Miri Rubin and Walter Simons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 149–69. For the designation of Muhammad as false prophet, see, e.g., Robert of Ketton's famous 1143 translation of the Qur'an, the *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete*; see Campi, “Attitudes,” 133.

Bullinger's writings, this application of the term "false prophet" deserves further attention. Within the incipient Reformed tradition, the Zurich Reformer was an influential voice on the subject of prophecy. His 1532 treatise on the duties of the prophet, *De prophetarum officio*, was the first comprehensive exposition of this high-profile topic in the Protestant tradition. Accordingly, the notion of true and false prophecy provides a specific viewpoint from which to explore Bullinger's evaluation of the Islamic faith.

Before turning to the contents of *Der Türgg*, it will be useful to survey Bullinger's positive exposition of the prophetic office in his earlier works.<sup>9</sup> For the Reformer, a true prophet combines two basic characteristics. Firstly, he should be a learned interpreter of the biblical text in its original tongues and a rhetorically skilled preacher with the ability to edify, encourage, and challenge the church on the basis of Scripture (cf. 1 Cor 14:5). Following an idiosyncratic exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14, Bullinger understands the gift of "tongues" as the ability to speak and translate the original languages of the Bible. A prophet who faithfully exercises this gift thereby gains the authority to proclaim the word of God.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, Bullinger's prophet is a watchman over the people of God. In line with his emphasis on the unity of God's covenant, from Israel to the church, he sees a clear resemblance between the Old Testament prophets and the preachers of the church. Whereas the former were sentinels on the walls of Zion (cf. Ezek 3:16–21; Hos 9:8), the ministers of the word should guard over Christian society by means of sound teaching and an exemplary way of life. In doing so, the preachers must warn both magistrates and civilians within Christian society about imminent danger and teach them the ways of the Lord.

A comparison of Bullinger's assessment of Islam in *Der Türgg* with his idea of the prophetic preacher reveals six points of interest. First, when true prophecy is identified as the reliable and orthodox teaching of Scripture, false prophecy amounts to a conscious deviation from this teaching. In other words, it is heresy. In the Reformer's earliest writings, this argument is employed in polemics against Roman Catholicism. He emphasizes that in Scripture false prophecy emerges primarily from within the people of God. In the Old Testament, false prophets appeared in the temple (e.g., Jer 28). Likewise, the New Testament warns that false prophets will cause confusion and deception within the church (e.g., Matt 24:24). Within this interpretative framework, Bullinger judges the doctrines and practices of

<sup>9</sup> See Daniël Timmerman, *Heinrich Bullinger on Prophecy and the Prophetic Office, 1523–1538*, Reformed Historical Theology 33 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> An echo of this approach may be heard in chapter 1 of the Second Helvetic Confession: "the preaching of the word of God is the word of God."

the papal church of his days. For instance, in his first published work, the 1526 *Verglichung der uralten und unser Zytten Kaetzeryen* (Comparison of ancient and contemporary heresies), he argues that the doctors and priests of Rome are in fact heretics, because they ground their teaching not in Scripture but in their own ideas and philosophies.<sup>11</sup>

In *Der Türgg* a similar line of reasoning appears, but now in relation to Islam. For the identification of Muhammad as a false prophet, Bullinger was greatly indebted to traditional Christian polemics against Islam. More specifically, his writing relies heavily on the works of John of Damascus (676–749), who first designated Muhammad a false prophet. Accordingly, Bullinger argues that Muhammad “has scraped this ‘Alcoran’ together with the special help and support of an apostate, unfaithful, and heretical monk by the name of Sergius, and also by the advice of certain distorted Jews and false Christians.” These advisors of Muhammad, Bullinger argues, were stained by heresies similar to those that had arisen in the early church, like those of Arius, Nestorius, and Eutychus. Characteristic of Bullinger’s treatment of this theme is his interest in the historical framework, emphasizing the relative newness and lack of authenticity of Muhammad’s teaching over against the antiquity and trustworthiness of the books of Moses and the Gospels.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Muslims are not in view as people who have not yet been reached by the gospel, but rather as apostates who have consciously rejected the Christian message.

Secondly, this view of Islam as a heretical deviation from Christian orthodoxy results in a critical assessment of the prophetic role of Jesus in the Qur’an. Again, a parallel is present in Bullinger’s earlier writings against the Church of Rome. In a discussion with papist theologians, he underlines the qualitative difference between God’s revelation and the teachings and traditions of the church. Therefore, he argues that prophets as the human interpreters of God’s revelation are always subordinate to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and to the Scriptures that testify on his behalf (cf. John 5:39). Because of this qualitative difference, Bullinger is reluctant to call Jesus a prophet. In line with the christological outlook of his theology as a whole, he rather emphasizes that the Lord is “more than a prophet” (Matt 11:9).<sup>13</sup>

An echo of this discussion is heard in *Der Türgg*. Bullinger knows that Muhammad considered Jesus to be a great prophet, born of a virgin and raised by God into heaven. Moreover, second only to Muhammad himself,

<sup>11</sup> See HBBibl 3.

<sup>12</sup> Bullinger, *Der Türgg*, fol. a4v. For a similar approach, see his *De Testamento seu foedere Dei unico et aeterno* (Zurich, 1534), fol. 48r.

<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Bullinger did not develop the concept of a “threefold office of Christ.”

Jesus is regarded as the holiest of all saints. This appreciation of Jesus's prophetic role, however, adds no credibility to Islam for Bullinger. On the contrary, he maintains that Muhammad does not teach the right doctrine concerning Jesus Christ, who is truly God and man, crucified for our sins and raised for our justification.<sup>14</sup> In sum, the prophetic status of Jesus in the Qur'an does not provide a point of contact between Christianity and Islam.

On the contrary, a third element is found in the Reformer's association of Islam with the great eschatological adversary of the church: the antichrist. This view was presented to him by a broad strand in the Christian tradition. In the Middle Ages, many reached the conclusion that the victories of Muslim heretics at the eastern and southern borders of Europe were an unmistakable sign of the end times. In a similar vein, the religious and moral decay of the Roman papacy suggested that the devil had gained a foothold at the very heart of Christianity. There emerged the theory of a double antichrist, Islam in the east and the papacy in the west. In early works, like his 1536 commentary on Second Thessalonians, Bullinger clearly adhered to this theory. Later, he seemed to have exchanged the theory of a twofold antichrist for an exclusively antipapal understanding of the eschatological adversary.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, echoes of his previous position are still heard in *Der Türgg*. In this work, Bullinger understands Islam in light of Paul's prophecy of the latter days in 2 Thessalonians 2:11–12. Therefore, this religion is a manifestation of the "powerful delusion" which God sends into the world and by which all those who do not love the truth are led to "believe lies so that all who do not believe the truth but delight in unrighteousness will be judged."<sup>16</sup> From the context of these verses, it becomes clear that an echo of Bullinger's previous association of Islam with the antichrist is still present in 1567.

Fourthly, at the heart of Bullinger's use of the concept of prophecy lies the question of religious authority. When the prophetic preacher is legitimately called by the church and gives a correct and faithful interpretation of Scripture, he is able to proclaim the word with divine authority. In his polemics with Roman Catholicism, the Reformer frequently rebuked the doctors and prelates of the church as false prophets because they did not know the Bible and missed its correct understanding. Similarly, Bullinger criticized the Anabaptists because their preachers traveled around the

<sup>14</sup> Bullinger, *Der Türgg*, fol. a5v.

<sup>15</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, Commentary on 2 Thess 2:3–5, *HBW* 3.8:61–68. See Christian Moser, "Papam esse Antichristum": Grundzüge von Heinrich Bullingers Antichristkonzeption," *Zwingliana* 30 (2003): 73–75.

<sup>16</sup> Bullinger, *Der Türgg*, fols. a4v–5r.

countryside without a commission by the church and preached and baptized on their own initiative. Therefore, he deprecatingly called them “self-commissioned” messengers of dreams. The Reformer applied the scriptural warnings against false prophets from Deuteronomy 18:20–22 and Jeremiah 23:25–28 to Roman Catholic theologians and Anabaptist preachers alike.<sup>17</sup>

The same theme of religious authority plays a central role in *Der Türgg*. Bullinger asserts that Muhammad lacked the authority of a prophet because “he devised many revelations and visions and maintained that God himself and God’s archangel Gabriel talked to him and commanded him to reveal these to the people.” In doing so, “he deviated from the salutary and true word of God, which is revealed by the holy prophets and apostles in both the Old and New Testament, and devised for himself and by his own capriciousness a doctrine and law.” In other words, his message was not in line with God’s revelation in Scripture. Moreover, he did not receive a legitimate call. Bullinger portrays Muhammad as “a completely cunning, deceitful, and hypocritical Arab” who had been employed as a merchant. Only afterward, he “set himself up as a prophet, and became known and very famous under the Arabs in the year 613.” In a similar vein, Bullinger argues that he “commissioned himself, and his new teaching in particular, into the world.”<sup>18</sup> This refutation of Muhammad’s claim of prophetic authority particularly echoes the earlier polemics with the Anabaptists.

The fifth element of Bullinger’s discussion of false prophecy concerns the immoral behavior and carnal interests of false prophets. In his earlier works, he did not fail to expound the moral flaws of the Roman Catholic clergy and the Anabaptist preachers. He underlines that all false prophets, past and present, are prone to pride, avarice, and carnal desires. This association between false prophecy and immorality is also a core element in medieval and early-modern Christian polemics against Muhammad and his followers. Many authors of this era dwell on the atrocities and sexual excesses of Muslim peoples—often turning a blind eye to the abuses by Christian crusaders against Jews, Muslims, and fellow Christians. Also in this respect, Bullinger’s *Der Türgg* is greatly indebted to the tradition. Both in quantity and scope, the moral failures of Muhammad and his successors receive full emphasis. The Reformer considers Muslim women subject to the whims of their husbands, and he rebukes Muslim males for their carnal and

<sup>17</sup> See Timmerman, *Prophecy*, 135–47, 301–2.

<sup>18</sup> Bullinger, *Der Türgg*, fol. a4r.



unspiritual understanding of paradise as a place of food, drink, and sex.<sup>19</sup> He goes on to compare Muhammad and his followers to the radical Anabaptists of Münster because both groups tried to propagate their religion with the sword and tried to establish an earthly kingdom.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the Reformer identifies the false prophets of Islam by their fruits (cf. Matt 7:15–20).

Closely related to the immorality of false prophets is the sixth and final characteristic: the inclination to proclaim a message which is pleasant and acceptable to the ears of their auditors. Such was the case with the four hundred false prophets in the days of Micaiah son of Imlah (1 Kgs 22). In his earlier works, Bullinger applies this criticism to the teachers of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, in *Der Türgg* the prophet Muhammad is rebuked for his attempt to amalgamate the religions of the world into a single and acceptable faith.

In those days, there were Christians, Jews, and heathen in the world, who all strove against each other with conflicting doctrines and separate beliefs. Muhammad attempted to unify all these beliefs as much as possible and to devise a pleasant faith for the world.

To this end, he purposefully deluded his “poor and foolish” followers with “fantasies and new fables.” Moreover, the prophet formulated a “better-composed doctrine” by leaving out disagreeable or disputed elements from the orthodox message, such as the doctrine of the Trinity and of the two natures of Christ.<sup>22</sup> Muhammad adapted other parts of the true message by adding Jewish teaching concerning circumcision and food regulations. “Indeed, by means of adding, altering, and deconstructing he has corrupted and brought to shame the true salutary foundation of our veracious Christian faith, with remarkable and terrible blasphemy.”<sup>23</sup>

In sum, in *Der Türgg* Bullinger understands Islam in much the same way as he previously characterized the position of his Roman Catholic and Anabaptist opponents. In his opinion, they all reveal the essential qualities of false prophecy. With respect to the appearance of the “false prophet,” Bullinger considers Muhammad as the one sent by God to rebuke the sins and unbelief of the Christian world. Again, the Reformer shares in the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., fols. a6v–7r.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., fols. a4v, a6r–v.

<sup>21</sup> See Timmerman, *Prophecy*, 260.

<sup>22</sup> Bullinger, *Der Türgg*, fols. a4r–5r. On these pages the Reformer uses the term *verglychen*, meaning to compare or equate.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., fols. 5r–7r.



traditional Christian approach to Islam, according to which Muslims are seen as the rod by which God chastises his church. Therefore, the advance of the Ottoman Empire is understood as a clear indication of God's indignation over the sins of the church and of his righteous wrath. Accordingly, in the concluding prayer formula to *Der Türgg*, Bullinger reveals that God has sent the Turks to instruct and discipline the church and that Christians are called to confess their sins.<sup>24</sup> This call for prayer forms a bridge to the Reformer's pastoral advice for Christian life under Muslim rule.

## II. *Christian Life under Muslim Rule*

In *Der Türgg* Bullinger presented a theological and historical account of the Islamic faith to his Swiss compatriots, who were unlikely ever to meet Muslims in person. At the same time, the Zurich Reformer was well informed about the situation of other Protestant believers and their churches who lived in territories under Ottoman rule. The position of these Christians provides a specific starting point for an elaboration of Bullinger's practical advice concerning Christian-Muslim relations.

The main source for the present exploration is a 1551 epistolary treatise, addressed to the "oppressed and ravaged churches in Hungary, and to their pastors and ministers."<sup>25</sup> After subsequent defeats by the Ottoman sultan Suleiman I in 1526 and 1541, the magnificent kingdom of Hungary became divided into three spheres of influence. The northwest was dominated by the house of Habsburg under the Austrian archduke Ferdinand I, a brother to Emperor Charles V; the heartlands of the kingdom came under immediate Turkish rule, and an Ottoman vassal state emerged to the southeast under the rule of János Zsigmond Zápolya. Over time, Zsigmond's realm of Transylvania gained a substantial degree of political autonomy. The political confusion promoted religious diversity in Hungary. Whereas Archduke Ferdinand I was a loyal Catholic who strongly opposed Protestantism, the sultan tolerated religious diversity among his Christian subjects. As a result, vigorous forms of Protestantism, of both the Lutheran and Reformed confessions, emerged in central Hungary and Transylvania.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., fol. d7v.

<sup>25</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, *Epistola ad ecclesias Hungaricas earumque pastores scripta, MDLI*, ed. and trans. Barnabás Nagy (Budapest: Synodalkanzlei der reformierten Kirche von Ungarn, 1968); see HBBib1 181–82. The work was not printed before 1559. Quotation from p. III.

<sup>26</sup> David P. Daniel, "Hungary," *EncR* 2:272–76; Peter Schimert, "Transylvania," *EncR* 4:170–72.

For the Reformed churches of Hungary, the theologians of Zurich were an important point of reference and a source of advice.<sup>27</sup> This is illustrated by a letter sent to Bullinger in 1551 by Johannes Fejérthóy, the secretary of the Hungarian chancellery at the court in Vienna.<sup>28</sup> After having expressed his gratitude for Bullinger's learned writings, this official argues that it has been through these works that the Hungarian people have been led back to the "pure guide of the Christian religion." Moreover, he knows that the message of the gospel has even reached the capital of the Turkish Empire. In his letter, Fejérthóy asks Bullinger's attention for the difficult situation of those fellow Hungarians who remain faithful to the word of God. On the one hand, they are confronted with oppression by the Roman Catholic Church, and on the other with the "tyranny of the Turks." Their pastors must face great trials and tribulations. In the face of these hardships, Fejérthóy asks Bullinger to write a book of consolation and advice for the believers in Hungary.<sup>29</sup> In June of the same year, the Reformer met Fejérthóy's request by sending him an extensive letter of instruction.

Bullinger's *Epistola* is, in fact, a catechism-style introduction to the central elements of biblical teaching from a Reformed perspective. Its main polemical thrust is directed against the "new" and false teaching of the Roman papacy.<sup>30</sup> In his preface, Bullinger expresses his gratitude for the fact that God has called his Hungarian brothers and sisters out of the "darkness of the antichrist" into the "wonderful light of his beloved Son." He considers that the day of Jesus Christ is drawing near because, as he argues, "the pure proclamation of the gospel has been reintroduced in nearly the entire world, after so much violence and misleading by the antichrist."<sup>31</sup> Despite its anti-papist outlook, the *Epistola* also addresses the issue of Christian-Muslim relations in a section devoted to the question "whether it is appropriate to live among the unfaithful." From the letters sent to him by Hungarians he

<sup>27</sup> Bryner, "Einfluss," 804–7.

<sup>28</sup> Johannes Fejérthóy to Heinrich Bullinger, March 26, 1551, in Johann Jacob Ulrich, ed., *Miscellanea Tigurina ...* (Zurich, 1723), 2.1:192–94. See Barnabás Nagy, preface to *Epistola*, by Bullinger, 9–10.

<sup>29</sup> Among other themes, Fejérthóy seeks Bullinger's advice on the particularly vexing issue of second marriages of those whose spouses had been deported by the Ottomans. What should be done when the spouse returns unexpectedly after a long time in captivity and finds the partner married to another person? Bullinger's reply does not contain an answer to this question.

<sup>30</sup> Bullinger, *Epistola*, IV. It shows a strong thematic resemblance to another work by Bullinger from 1551, his *Gaegensatz Umd kurtzer begriff*, which contains a systematic comparison of evangelical and papist doctrines, written particularly in view of the second session of the Council of Trent. See HBBib1 114.

<sup>31</sup> Bullinger, *Epistola*, IV, XLIX–L.

has learned that the gospel is being proclaimed “to you, who are dispersed everywhere under the government of the mighty Turk, and even in Thracia and the royal city of Constantinople.” Therefore, Bullinger engages himself in particular with the position of Christians in the Ottoman vassal state in central Hungary, and of those held captive in the homeland of the Turkish Empire.<sup>32</sup>

Four points of interest to the present exploration of Bullinger’s practical counsel for Christians living under Muslim rule appear in the 1551 *Epistola*. First, the Reformer highlights that believers should accept their situation. He compares their position to that of the first Christians who lived under the rule of the idolatrous and perverted Roman emperors. Likewise, their situation is similar to that of the people of Israel during the exile in the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires. Here, the covenantal dimension of early Reformed theology, with its emphasis on the unity of the Old and New Testaments, results in identification with the trials and tribulations of ancient Israel by later Christians. Therefore, when the Hungarian believers accept that “God has handed [them] over to the power of Turks,” they should accept that political reality. Moreover, they must be prepared for even greater misfortunes, for “since God has conferred the kingdom to the Turks, he will add even greater strength to them.” But, as Bullinger explains, “this is not because their religion, which had been taught by Mohammed, would be true and sound, but because our sins are worthy of the rod.” In sum, the Ottomans fulfill the same chastising role towards Christians as the Assyrians, Babylonians, and other nations once fulfilled against the people of God in the Old Testament.<sup>33</sup>

Second, while accepting their position under hostile rulers, Bullinger maintains that Christians should in no way contaminate themselves with the beliefs and practices of Islam, or, for that matter, of Catholicism. He clearly states that all teachings and rituals that do not lead the church to Christ should be shunned and condemned. Believers must take heed not to “participate in their beliefs or religion, in their rituals and devotions.” In support, he quotes a number of scriptural passages, including 2 Corinthians 6:17: “Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them.” Significantly, in relation to the position of Christians under Muslim rule, he also refers to Calvin’s 1537 *Epistolae duae*—a work addressing the attitude of Protestants under Catholic dominion.<sup>34</sup> Positively, believers are called to

<sup>32</sup> Nagy, preface, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Bullinger, *Epistola*, LI.

<sup>34</sup> See Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 135–36.

give a clear testimony to Jesus Christ and to the gospel. In support, Bullinger adds a Pauline encouragement to perseverance and patience: Jesus warned his followers that persecution, defamation, robbery, and even death may be their share in this world. At the same time, the Lord made promises of great reward for those who suffer for the sake of his name and for the gospel. “It is the greatest blessing to be in fellowship with Christ and the holy martyrs, through the cross.” With many quotations from Scripture, the Reformer encourages the believers in Hungary to remain steadfast until the end.<sup>35</sup>

That they might persevere, the Hungarian believers are urged to express their difficulties and concerns in prayer to God. Since the second half of the fifteenth century, the call to prayer had been a standard element in the spiritual warfare of Christians against the Turks.<sup>36</sup> The same motive appears as the third characteristic of Bullinger’s pastoral advice in the *Epistola*. Because he acknowledges that “our sins are worthy of the rod,” their prayer should first and foremost be a prayer of confession and supplication. This element is fully developed in the concluding prayer formula at the end of *Der Türgg*, “which Christians may pray to God, during the present Turkish threats and warfare.”<sup>37</sup> Bullinger leads his flock in ardent prayer, acknowledging that the sins of Christianity are great and heinous and that God’s judgments are righteous and deserved. He specifically mentions a list of vices, ranging from false doctrine and religious dissensions to blasphemy, perjury, and other moral abuses. He knows that God has sent the Turks to teach and chastise Christians, just as the people of Israel were disciplined by the Assyrian and Babylonian kings. When believers acknowledge and confess this, an opening appears for them to return to God and to plead for his forgiveness and mercy, and for liberation from the oppression by the Ottomans.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the acknowledgment of the Turkish oppression as a rod in the hand of God should lead to a response of humble prayer. Notably, the element of confession receives full emphasis in *Der Türgg*, a work written for readers who could observe the Turkish threat from a safe distance. When writing to Christians who lived under the yoke of Ottoman rule, Pastor Bullinger merely touches on this aspect.

Fourth and finally, this prayer of supplication also leads to intercession for the Turkish overlords. The *Epistola* Bullinger adduces the example of the people of Israel in Babylon as a model for the present. Jeremiah’s appeal to “seek the welfare of the city” and to “pray to the Lord on its behalf” (Jer

<sup>35</sup> Bullinger, *Epistola*, LII–LIV.

<sup>36</sup> See Grimmsmann, *Türkenpredigten*, 28–66.

<sup>37</sup> Bullinger, *Der Türgg*, fol. a1r.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, fols. d7r–v.

29:7) is brought home to the Hungarians who “should pray for the papists, and even for the Turks.” By doing what is good and honorable, without cunning or deceit, they should aspire to a quiet life.<sup>39</sup> A similar motive appears in the concluding prayer in *Der Türgg*. Bullinger suggests that his readers pray that God “would convert the Turks from Muhammad, that great seducer and evil man, to Jesus Christ, the light and savior of the entire world.” He is confident that God can magnify himself “even today amidst the Turks,” just as he did once during Israel’s captivity in Babylon. That this missionary perspective is encapsulated within the geopolitical framework of his age, is shown from Bullinger’s assumption that Turks will acknowledge their false beliefs if “they would become our subjects.”<sup>40</sup> This dimension of the Reformer’s pastoral advice to Christians living under Islamic rule introduces a final question: How did Bullinger consider the possibility of active Christian witness to Muslims?

### III. *Christian Witness to Muslims?*

Today, a time after the great missionary movements of the nineteenth century, a discussion of Christian-Muslim relations is likely to evoke the question of the necessity and possibility of evangelization of Muslim believers. However, for several reasons, this question was not foremost in the minds of many sixteenth-century believers. The political and military antagonism between Christian and Islamic nations made active missionary outreach to Muslims practically impossible. Contemporaries were well aware that a Christian could safely travel to Egypt for trade, but would certainly risk his life if he were to say anything contradictory to Islam.<sup>41</sup> Also, as the discussion of Bullinger’s work *Der Türgg* has elucidated, Muslims were not generally seen as unreached peoples, but rather as dangerous apostates who had consciously rejected orthodox Christian doctrines. Therefore, they were considered more as associates of the eschatological adversary of Christ than as objects of evangelization. Moreover, most medieval and early-modern theologians thought that the “great commission” of Matthew 28:19–20 had been fulfilled in the days of the apostles.<sup>42</sup>

In spite of this, the notion of the evangelization of Muslims was not completely foreign to Bullinger’s era. For instance, his Hungarian correspondents

<sup>39</sup> Bullinger, *Epistola*, LI.

<sup>40</sup> Bullinger, *Der Türgg*, fol. d8r.

<sup>41</sup> Georg Frölich to Heinrich Bullinger, April 1, 1546, *HBW* 2.16:300.

<sup>42</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2005), 626–28.

informed him about the unimpeded proclamation of the gospel in the areas under Ottoman control. Fejérthóy reveals that many Turks were present in the worship services of the Christians. Their overlords even sympathized with the Protestant cause rather than with Roman Catholics. Therefore, Fejérthóy expects that “if they are not by chance destroyed, the Turks will soon accept the Christian faith.”<sup>43</sup> In light of these signs, it is understandable that certain contemporaries considered active missionary outreach to Muslim believers possible. The most famous example is provided by the controversial scholar and priest Guillaume Postel. This French Roman Catholic combined a profound knowledge of the Arabic language and Ottoman culture with an apocalyptic zeal for missionary activity. In the Protestant camp, Postel found a kindred spirit in the Zurich scholar Bibliander.<sup>44</sup>

A great exegete and polyglot, Bibliander was not only an expert in the field of Hebrew and Greek but also a pioneer of comparative linguistics. For this purpose, he learned the Arabic language and devoted himself to the study of the sources of Islam. This resulted in the 1543 publication of an encyclopedic work on Islam in which he collected all available knowledge of “the lives and teachings of Muhammad, leader of the Saracens, and his successors, and the Qur’an itself.” It is a compilation of a Latin translation of the Qur’an and a great number of treatises on the doctrines and history of Islam. Although Bibliander wrote with the apologetic purpose of instructing Christians in the erroneous nature of Islam, he also wished to stimulate missions to Muslim nations.<sup>45</sup> In a later phase, he devoted his scholarly attention to the common elements in the languages known to him, including Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic. Starting from this linguistic perspective, Bibliander also considered the common elements in the religious texts of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. While maintaining the essential difference between orthodox Christianity and other beliefs, he identified no less than ten common elements in all world religions. Also, Bibliander developed an increasing and sometimes speculative interest in the end times. Not unlike Postel, the expectation of the immediate return of Christ and the defeat of the antichrist fostered his zeal for missions to the Islamic world.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Johannes Fejérthóy to Heinrich Bullinger, October 10, 1551, in Ulrich, *Miscellanea Tigurina*, 2.1:198. See also Bryner, “Einfluss,” 806–7, n. 23.

<sup>44</sup> William J. Bouwsma, “Postel, Guillaume,” *EncR* 3:321; Egli, *Analecta*, 83, 132–33.

<sup>45</sup> *Machumetis Saracenorum principis eiusque successorum vitae* ... ([Basle], 1543), doi:10.3931/e-rara-246. See Bruce Gordon, “Theodor Buchmann,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations*, ed. Thomas and Chesworth, 680–85.

<sup>46</sup> Campi, “Attitudes,” 140–43; Egli, *Analecta*, 70–95; Gordon, “Buchmann,” 675–85; Moser, *Bibliander*, 8–14; Grimmsmann, “Bullingers Deutung,” 89.

A remarkable episode in Bibliander's life was his temporary resolve to abandon his chair in Zurich in order to travel to Egypt as a missionary.<sup>47</sup> In early 1546, he wrote to Georg Frölich, the secretary to the Council of Augsburg. It seems that Bibliander asked this official to gather information from Augsburg tradesmen about the possibilities of a journey to Egypt. Also, he requested funds from this wealthy town to support his plans for the evangelization of Muslims. Rather than providing him with the requested information and funds, Frölich wrote to the Zurich church leader, Bullinger, suggesting that he dissuade Bibliander from undertaking such a dangerous voyage.<sup>48</sup> Bibliander's request and the Augsburg reaction cannot be isolated from the theological problems that had previously arisen in Zurich. It was generally known that the exegete and philologist Bibliander was very critical of all theological speculation on the subject of predestination. Around 1545 this seems to have resulted in a vehement conflict between the Old Testament professor and some of the Zurich clergy. Apparently, it was Bullinger, the prudent pastor and church leader, who reconciled the conflicting parties and dissuaded Bibliander from leaving the city.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the fact that Bibliander was unable to put his missionary convictions into practice, it is still remarkable that this Zurich scholar considered for some time evangelizing the Muslim people of Egypt. Bullinger's appeal to abandon this plan was probably prompted by a degree of political realism and a concern for his friend's well-being. Nevertheless, this episode raises the question as to how Bullinger would have evaluated Bibliander's missionary motives. Although the sources do not allow a definitive answer, it seems clear that Bullinger did not share his colleague's evangelistic agenda. Reading backward from the preceding discussion of the 1551 *Epistola* and the 1567 *Der Türgg*, it appears that Bullinger's writings on Islam were written from an exclusively internal Christian perspective. Muslims are viewed as both the rod by which God punishes Christianity and a political reality that Christians should accept without accommodating to their beliefs. Although he does encourage believers to pray for the conversion of Muslims, in contrast to Bibliander, he does not mention the possibility of missions to Islamic territories. Moreover, Bullinger clearly does not share the comparative approach to religion advocated by Postel and Bibliander. This is indicated

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<sup>47</sup> Egli, *Analecta*, 88–95; idem, "Biblianders Missionsgedanken," *Zwingliana* 3.2 (1913): 46–50.

<sup>48</sup> Georg Frölich to Heinrich Bullinger, March 2, 1546, *HBW* 2.16:192; idem, April 1, 1546, *HBW* 2.16:300.

<sup>49</sup> Georg Frölich to Heinrich Bullinger, June 3, 1546, in *HBW* 2.17, 68.



by a comparison of Bibliander's writings with Bullinger's *Der Türgg*.<sup>50</sup> After Bibliander's death in 1564, Bullinger reworked much of his scholarship into his own writing, leaving out his exposition of the common elements of religions, and his missionary program. Moreover, Bullinger's emphasis on Muhammad as a false prophet may motivate the former's dissociation from the comparative approach of contemporaries like Postel and Bibliander.

## Conclusion

This article has explored in reverse chronological order three episodes from Bullinger's engagement with Islam. Around 1546, he dissuaded his Zurich associate Bibliander from embarking on a mission to the Muslims of Egypt. In 1551, he wrote a catechetical letter to Hungarian Protestants living under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. And in 1567, he published a systematic and polemical exposition of the history and beliefs of Muhammad and his followers (*Der Türgg*). A consistent element in these otherwise very different episodes is Bullinger's polemical and defensive attitude against Islam. His main objective was to demarcate the message of the gospel from alternating religious views, either within the Christian tradition (Roman Catholicism, Anabaptism), or outside (Islam). Moreover, the Zurich Reformer interpreted the religious and political conflicts of his days in terms of the eschatological collision of the kingdom of Christ with the forces of the antichrist. This perspective clearly shaped his interpretation of Islam as the religion of the "false prophet" Muhammad. Unlike his contemporary Bibliander, however, Bullinger did not translate this eschatological perspective into a program for the evangelization of Muslims.

In view of the challenges of the church today, we should not confine ourselves to repeating the ideas of Bullinger and his contemporaries. Although the highly polemical portrait of Islam of the Reformer is understandable in view of the political situation and theological tradition, it comes short in terms of a fair and truthful description of the beliefs and practices of Muslims. Moreover, in light of present-day Christian-Muslim relations, more needs to be said about the necessity of respectful dialogue and humble witness to Jesus Christ in Islamic cultures.

Nevertheless, valuable lessons can be drawn from the sixteenth-century discussions. For one, over against the somewhat naive quest of some of Bullinger's contemporaries for a universal harmony between the world's religions, the Reformer reminds the church of the need of steadfast

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<sup>50</sup> Gordon, "Buchmann," 750.

confession of the truth of the gospel. Further, his writings encourage the church today to persevere in prayer for our Muslim neighbors. Such prayer should include confession of sins because the words and deeds of Christians have done great damage to the cause of the gospel and to Islamic believers. Also, following the calling of Israel in Babylon to “seek the welfare of the city,” we should also pray to God for the well-being of Muslims. Such prayer may include the request that God would grant us the grace to give testimony, with gentleness and reverence, to the hope that is in us (1 Pet 3:15–16).