

# **Islam – Fearful Foe or Hand of God?**

## **The Protestant Reformation and its response to Islam**

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The marking of 500 years since the start of the Lutheran Reformation has been characterized by mixed feelings. The Reformation was a moment of theological and liturgical renewal, political transformation for much of Europe and also the source of significant religious and political division. Much has already been said this year about these aspects, and there have been numerous attempts by theologians, Protestant and Catholic, to evaluate the Reformation, in the light of the ecumenical movement that has sought Christian reconciliation and unity. Less attention has been given to the inter-religious aspects of the Reformation, understandably because the Reformers had much less to say about other faiths, and where they do it is mostly Judaism and Islam. Many will be familiar with Martin Luther's polemic against the Jews, rhetoric that would play a part in Nazi propaganda in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So we are already aware of how the writings of theologians of the past can shape how we relate to minorities, religious and otherwise, in the present. In this paper I am setting out to describe the utterances of the Reformers on Islam, looking at the context in which these were offered, and offer some reflections upon our present context where questions about Christian Europe's relationship religious pluralism is writ large.

The early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have witnessed rising anxiety within Europe regarding a perceived threat from Islam. This is due to a number of factors. The first has been the steady trend of immigration into Western Europe of Muslims from other parts of the world, most particularly from former colonies, and also from countries

where Europe has had a troubled history. Thus Western Europe began to welcome new communities from Algeria, Somalia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey and elsewhere. This was followed by the post-9/11 fears of radicalization and terrorism and then more latterly by significant numbers of refugees fleeing the civil war in Syria along with Muslim refugees from Afghanistan and elsewhere. Europe's increasing secularity and the decline of churches with roots in the Reformation has resulted in uncertainty around identity and a decline in confidence in these former identities.

It is however easy to see any such anxiety as a new and recent phenomenon, yet history tells a different story. In a year when the churches mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's protestations against medieval ecclesiastical practices, we might also note that Luther and other figures of the Reformation reflect anxieties concerning the fear of Islamic expansionism and also suggesting resonances with the fears of our own time.

### **The Reformers Assessment of Islam**

The Reformation was principally a northern European affair and Islam did not offer a serious religious or theological challenge. However, at this time much of Europe was concerned with the Turkish Empire to the East: Sultan Suleiman I had conquered a large part of Hungary at the Battle of Mohács in 1526 which had been followed by an unsuccessful siege of Vienna in 1529. Much of Europe therefore lived with the fear of further military conquests. The Reformers shared these concerns and it is within this context that Luther, Calvin and Zwingli comment on Islam, referring to them as "the

Turks”. Comment on the Turks from the Reformers falls into two categories: (1) the political threat, and (2) the beliefs of the Turks.

### ***The Political Threat***

The Reformers assessment of the political significance of the Turks derived from their struggle within the Catholic Church. The Reformers believed that Rome had deviated from the true faith and thus had aroused God’s anger. Employing scripture they asserted that just as Israel’s unfaithfulness to God was punished through the armies of Babylon so too were the Turks the arm of God’s judgment upon an unfaithful Europe.

For Martin Luther his view of the Turks was within his own theological framework of the two realms – civil and spiritual – arguing that all citizens had an obligation of obedience to the civil authorities as they were instituted by God for the preservation of order:

“There are few true believers, and still fewer who live a Christian life, who do not resist evil and indeed themselves do no evil. For this reason God has provided for them a different Government beyond the Christian estate and the Kingdom of God. He has subjected them to the sword so that, even though they would like to, they are unable to practice their wickedness, and if they do practice it they cannot do so without fear or with success and impunity. In the same way a savage wild beast is bound with chains and ropes so that it cannot bite and tear as it would normally do, even though they would like to.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, quoted in Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*. T&T Clark 1986. p.54

This would also apply to any future rule by the Turks which he viewed as a realistic possibility. During his lifetime Luther's protractors would accuse him of collusion with the Turks. But for Luther the issues were much deeper than simply the threat of political and military dominance. Luther believed that the Turks represented God's judgment upon Christian Europe, thus in 1518 he remarked "to fight against the Turks is the same as resisting God, who visits our sin upon us with this rod".<sup>2</sup> According to Luther the most important response to the Turkish threat was, prayer and repentance. However by 1528 Luther was to recognize the threat posed by the Turks and stated that whilst they may be agents of God's punishment they were none the less 'servants of the devil'.<sup>3</sup>

Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin held a similar views to Luther's in respect of the Turkish threat. Zwingli compared the fall of Christian lands to the Turks to the Old Testament conquests of Israel by the Babylonians,<sup>4</sup> whilst Calvin's correspondence with Farel and Melanchthon reveal his belief that the Turkish threat was a consequence of spiritual and moral failure within Christian Europe. Disaster should prompt examination of sin and he suggested that Islamic domination of Greece and Asia was a sign of God's anger at "every kind of foul and monstrous licentiousness" and at "shocking superstitions and impieties."<sup>5</sup> Calvin believed however that whilst Europeans should defend themselves against this threat the church should not engage in a holy war or crusade but rather should concern itself with the spiritual concerns of

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Henrich & James L.Boyce, "Martin Luther – Translation of two prefaces in Islam" in Word & World: Theology for Christian Ministry, Vol.XVI Spring 1996.No.2, p.252

<sup>3</sup> On War Against the Turks, referred to in Henrich & Boyce

<sup>4</sup> Katya Vehlow, "The Swiss Reformers Zwingli, Bullinger and Bibliander and their attitudes to Islam 1520-60" in Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Vo.6, No.2, 1995, p.237

<sup>5</sup> W.J.Bouwsma, John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait. Oxford 1988, p.170

prayer, penitence and fasting. John Wycliffe held a similar view holding that the only defense against Islam was reform within the church.<sup>6</sup>

Calvin expressed the view that the Turks regarded the Christian religion as misguided and a fantasy. His fear was that Christian Europe would be overwhelmed: “the danger exists that there will be a greater barbarity in Christianity than ever before because the Turk will be able to come to gain everything. After that he will cause Christianity to be abolished to such an extent that there will be no memory left of it.”<sup>7</sup>

### ***The Beliefs of the Turks***

During this period there was a paucity of informed studies of Islam and in the absence thereof a number of fantasies flourished as to the origin of Islam. One popular idea was that Muhammad was a cardinal who had formed a rival religion in a fit of pique because he had been overlooked for the papal succession.<sup>8</sup> The Reformers reflect the ignorance of Islam during this period and share many of the common Medieval theories as to the origin of Islam. Bullinger believed that Islam was a synthesis of Christian heresies<sup>9</sup>, Luther saw it as a syncretism of Christianity, Judaism and forms of paganism, and Calvin maintained that the Turks were former Christians misled by Muhammad. The Reformers main theological objections to Islam are (1) the denial of the centrality of Christ, (2) the denial of the doctrine of the Trinity, (3) the perception that Islam is a religion that teaches justification by works.

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<sup>6</sup> Katya Vehlow, “The Swiss Reformers Zwingli, Bullinger and Bibliander and their attitudes to Islam 1520-60” in Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Vo.6, No.2, 1995, p.233

<sup>7</sup> sermon 28 on Daniel 11.30-32, quoted in Slomp.

<sup>8</sup> Vehlow p.233

<sup>9</sup> Vehlow, p.238

The fullest understanding of Islam is to be found in the writings of Theodor Bibliander (c.1505-64), one of Zwingli's successors in Zurich, a linguist and who had translated the Qur'an in 1543 to which Luther and Melanchthon had both written prefaces. Bibliander regarded the Qur'an as a confused book that contained many "evils" as well as "contradictions and errors". His own motivation for translating the Qur'an was to show Christianity in a more favourable light.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, he demonstrates an accurate understanding of the Muslim rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity:

"God [says Muhammad] is one. Thus he is not father and son, this would make several gods. If there were a father and a son and then several other gods, there would be schism and several parties in heaven: therefore God has no son. God has no needs and can create and govern everything: therefore he is not in need of a son. It is impious to suppose several persons in God, as is a procreative act: therefore he is not in need of a son. Christ and his mother ate like other human beings: therefore he is not God. He has said: 'worship God, my Lord' and because he is not God he worships God."<sup>11</sup>

This denial of the Trinity was for Luther one of the main arguments against Islam. He believed that they rejected the Trinity because of their reliance on human reason:

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<sup>10</sup> Vehlow, p.243

<sup>11</sup> quoted in Vehlow, p.243

“The Turks stand fast, as well as the Jews, and repudiate God’s word, since their belief is mere reason, and they wish to judge Christianity according to it.”<sup>12</sup>

We might note that that the issue of the relationship between faith and reason and how violence plays a part in this would surface again in another troubled time, this time in the Regensburg Lecture in 2006 given by Pope Benedict XVI.<sup>13</sup>

Luther maintained that Islam posed a threat to Christianity in three “estates” – spiritual, temporal and marriage (or the family). Islam is a religion in which “Father, Son, Holy Ghost, the sacrament, gospel, faith, and all Christian doctrine and life are gone, and instead of Christ, only Muhammad with his doctrine of works and especially the sword is left.”<sup>14</sup>

Crucially for Luther, Islam is a religion that teaches a doctrine of salvation by works and that this was principally concerned with military force “with lies he kills souls and with murder he kills bodies”.<sup>15</sup> This leads the Muslim to take up arms against the Christian West, he maintained. In terms of the third estate, Luther deplored the Muslim practice of polygamy which he believed destroyed the estate of marriage and the home.

The matter of justification by faith versus salvation works is a major theme in the Reformers comment on Islam. Bullinger believed that the Five Pillars of Islam

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<sup>12</sup> Vehlow, p.246; meanwhile Joseph Raztinger, during his time as Pope Benedict XVI, asked whether Islam’s stress upon an “irrational God” does not encourage irrational acts of violence. See, James V.Schall, The Regensburg Lecture, St.Augustine Press, 2007

<sup>13</sup> See: James V.Schall, The Regensburg Lecture, St.Augustine’s Press, 2007

<sup>14</sup> “On War Against the Turks”, quoted in Henrich & Boyce p.254

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

amounted to salvation by works. But, as with the other Reformers this is within the overall context of theological controversy with Rome, Bullinger asserting that Islam and the Papacy had fallen into the same trap:

“Muhammad does not attribute forgiveness of sins and that gaining of eternal life to the one Jesus Christ as the only mediator and the only one [in whom we can have] true faith. He does not appreciate at all the true central doctrine of the holy Christian belief in the true justification by faith in Christ. He makes up..the doctrine that...one can earn and merit the forgiveness of sins and eternal life... just as many popes granted indulgences of sins to those who were slain in the wars undertaken by the Roman church. Like them, Mohammed has his monks and priests in whose conduct he seeks salvation. They are not justified by faith... but by works.”<sup>16</sup>

Bullinger further suggests that Islam has replaced baptism with circumcision.

In his great work “The Institutes of the Christian Religion” John Calvin seems to set up Islam as a foil for attacks on opponents of Christianity and a way of preaching his own evangelical theology. For Calvin, the fundamental flaw in Islam is its denial of the central importance of Christ: thus his critique of Islam enables him to emphasize his own high Christology: “So today the Turks, although they proclaim at the top of their lungs that the Creator of heaven of earth is God, repudiate Christ and substitute an idol in place of the true God.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> quoted in Vehlow, p.240

<sup>17</sup> quoted in Slomp p.131



But whilst he seems aware of the “beautiful names of God” within Islam, Calvin rejects any notion that they can have any ontological reality when they are separated from a Christo-centric theology: “with whatever beautiful titles Turks and Jews adore God, one is still bound to hold the opinion that the name of God, once it is separated from Christ, becomes an empty idea.”<sup>18</sup>

For Calvin it is not possible to know God other than through faith in Jesus Christ and thus he regards Jews as having a “veil before their eyes” (which is of course a common anti-Semitic polemic of the Middle Ages) and Muslims to be deluded even to the point of accusing them of worshipping the devil under the name of God.<sup>19</sup>

In other places Calvin regards Muslims along with the Jews and “Papists” as “imposters” who deviate from the truth; indeed Calvin often speaks of the “Papists” and the “Turks” in the same breath, suggesting that they belong together theologically.

It seems that Calvin, whilst being informed of some Islamic beliefs was unaware of the prominent place of Jesus and Abraham within the Qu’ran. However Calvin is well aware of the importance of Muhammad. Jan Slomp calculates more than 25 references to Mohammed in Calvin’s writings.<sup>20</sup> Muhammad alone is responsible for the mistaken ideas that the Turks have about God. The existence of other religious sects Calvin blames on Muhammad who had corrupted the greater part of the world: “all sects that exist today have come out of this mud puddle. This happens when one is not content with the pure doctrine of the Gospel.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> quoted in Slomp p.131

<sup>19</sup> Slomp p.131

<sup>20</sup> p.133

<sup>21</sup> in sermon 26 on Daniel 9, quoted in Slomp p.134

Once again Calvin's view of Islam derives from his own Reformation struggle – just as he felt bound to reject the notion of papal revelation from the Holy Spirit, so too he was bound to reject any notion that the Qur'an was directly revealed to Muhammad: "Mahomet and Pope have a principle of religion in common: perfection of doctrine is not contained in scripture but in something higher than was revealed by the Spirit. From the same swamp Anabaptists and libertines are scooping their frenzied ideas."<sup>22</sup> And just as Calvin rejected the idea that the Roman Church's practices have authority because they trace back to the earliest days of the church, so too does he reject the idea of Islam as a primordial religion – superstition is just as old, he contends.<sup>23</sup> The Church of Rome and Islam "both draw water from the same dirty old well".

Calvin did however have some positive things to say about Muslims. On a number of occasions he exhorts his hearers to follow the example of Muslims in the zeal with which they observe their faith and their practice of prayer and fasting. However Calvin seems to follow his fellow Reformers in not substantially altering the view of the Medieval Church of the Muslim as the infidel.

### Concluding Remarks

The distinguished Orientalist Bernard Lewis comments that only in the post-Holocaust context of the West is "tolerance" prized as a virtue, whereas previously "truth" was regarded as essential to one's salvation and temporal survival. Yet whilst prizing tolerance today we may forget that we are formed by the world views of the past. The present anxieties concerning Islam – whether it be terrorism or migration –

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<sup>22</sup> in Calvin's commentary on John 15.26, in Slomp p.134

<sup>23</sup> ibid

have strong echoes of the fears of previous centuries. A glance at the Reformers reminds us that we in Europe and Muslims of the East have a past, and only by coming to terms with that past, and by finding a new theological language, will we have anything to offer into the present context.

But whilst we are to some degree formed by the views and prejudices of the past we are not compelled to live in the same paradigm as them. We must take care when applying to the present the views of revered figures of the past for we live in a different paradigm and a different time. For them the grand narrative, as we might call it, that of Christian truth understood in a very particular way, should govern everything. For us in a post-colonial and post-Holocaust world, the grand narratives that held power up until only a few decades ago, are crumbling, and new voices are being heard. Liberation and feminist theologies are posing important questions as to what it means to be a Christian in a world of different cultures, faiths and lifestyles.

So is there is any point in studying to views of the Protestant reformers with regard to Islam? Are they just part of the old “grand narrative”, so we can ignore those parts that make us uncomfortable? Well, there is an important lesson that we can draw. Luther, Calvin and others sought to offer a *theological response* to the challenge that was Islam. Indeed, many of the same questions that they attempted to answer remain with us today. They attempted to answer those questions out of the paradigm of their times. We too must offer a theological response out of the paradigm of our times. Dialogue is a good thing but without good theology to go with it we will ultimately fail in our well meaning attempts at dialogue and mutual understanding.

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