

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 71:3/4

July/October 2007

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Luther, Lutheranism, and the Challenge of Islam

Adam S. Francisco

Michael Scheuer, former head of the unit charged with hunting down Osama bin Laden at the Central Intelligence Agency and now analyst for CBS News and Jamestown Foundation's *Global Terrorism Analysis*, is not known for pulling punches. Still, it is interesting to find in his analysis of the war on terror a jab at contemporary Christianity and its attempts to reach Muslims in the heartlands of Islam. They will never "trade what the West calls their harsh and medieval Islamic theology for the Pillsbury Doughboy-version of Christianity now on offer from the Vatican and Canterbury," he writes. "The gentle refrain of 'kumbaya' will never replace the full-throated 'Allahu Akbar.'"¹ Scheuer, a Roman Catholic well acquainted with missionary endeavors and how they are perceived by Muslims in the Middle East,² seems to have concluded that much of modern Roman Catholic and Anglican theology is too impotent and incapable or unwilling to respond to the challenge of Islam.

Scheuer's curt criticism of Roman Catholic and Anglican theologies is not unwarranted. Both traditions have, in the past, had extensive and relatively faithful dealings with Islam. However, recent attempts to address Islam from influential scholars in these two traditions have been soft. For example, in the D'Arcy Memorial Lectures at Campion Hall in Oxford (2000), Thomas Michel, a renowned Jesuit scholar of Islam and Secretary for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome, addressing the divisive theological issues in Christian-Muslim dialogue, has suggested—naming several other prominent theologians in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican traditions who virtually agree—that Christians might be able to recognize the prophethood of Muhammad, in some sense, as legitimate.³ The Anglican Keith Ward has articulated in the first tome of his multi-volume work of systematic theology that, while there is

¹ Michael Scheuer, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2004), 46.

² Michael Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2006), 272-273.

³ Thomas Michel, "Paul of Antioch and Ibn Taymiyya: The Modern Relevance of a Medieval Polemic," *The D'Arcy Memorial Lectures*, 27 January-2 March 2000, Campion Hall, Oxford, U.K.

something peculiar to the Christian revelation, the Quran⁴ could be considered to contain divine revelation.⁵ The days are long past when you could count on a Christian scholar to refer to the Quran's teachings as a collection of ancient heresies vomited up through Muhammad, as one medieval scholar and missionary to the Muslim world described it.⁶

One might wonder where Lutherans fit into the mix of Christian responses to Islam. While the subject is rarely covered, it should be known that we, too, have a long history in dealing with the challenge of Islam, dating all the way back to the sixteenth-century Reformation and Martin Luther. We also have our share of contemporary scholars on Islam,⁷ but most of them are approaching or are already in retirement. This presents an enormous challenge for us, for Islam will continue to grow, if not through proselytization, then through demographic growth. Since 1945, the number of Muslims across the world has quadrupled, and it shows no sign of decline.⁸ This phenomenon is particularly worrisome when one considers the shape of western Europe. Recent analyses suggest that by 2025 one-third of all children will be born to Muslim families, and, according to Mark Steyn's *America Alone: The End of the World as We Know It*, by 2050 the urban centers of Europe will be predominated by Muslims, which will be followed shortly thereafter by radical changes not just in demographics but political and legal structures.⁹

Whether these gloomy predictions pan out remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that Islam as a religious ideology is on the rise and will continue to grow as it is proliferated on the Internet and propagated by Muslim apologists, activists, and academics. The question is: Are we ready

⁴ I have opted, for ease of reading, not to use diacritical marks with transliterated Arabic words.

⁵ Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 337.

⁶ Jean-Marie Mérigoux, "L'ouvrage d'un frère prêcheur florentin en Orient à la fin du XIII^e siècle. Le *Contra legem Sarracenorum* de Riccoldo da Monte di Croce," *Memorie Domenicane (nuova serie)* 15 (1986): 63.

⁷ For example, see James P. Dretke, *A Christian Approach to Muslims: Reflections from West Africa* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979); Roland E. Miller, *Muslim Friends: The Faith and Feeling* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995); and Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel: Bridging the Gap* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2005).

⁸ See C. George Fry, "The Witness of the Cross and the Islamic Crescent," in *The Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century: Signposts for a Multicultural Witness*, ed. Alberto L. García and A. R. Victor Raj (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 83-102.

⁹ Mark Steyn, *America Alone: The End of the World as We Know It* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2006).

for the challenge of Islam? And, do we have the means to respond to this seemingly new challenge? Now, more than ever, we need to prepare ourselves to respond to this challenge not by borrowing from the "Pillsbury Doughboy" mush of contemporary theology, but rather from the vantage point of the timeless confession of the Christian church. This may not make us popular; certainly it will not be easy, but it is necessary. The intention for this essay is merely to describe Lutheranism's early tangle with Islam and then to make a giant leap forward to consider the challenge that awaits Lutherans today.

I. The Expansion of Islam

Presumably few readers of this journal need to be convinced that Islam poses a significant challenge to Christianity. It is true that, early in his career, Muhammad dissuaded his followers in Mecca from debating with Christians under the pretense that they and Muslims believed in the same prophets, scriptures, and God (Quran 29:46). After the prophet of Islam fled persecution and established political and religious hegemony in Medina, however, this early message of ambivalence toward other faiths was abrogated and Muhammad was ordered, allegedly by God, to cause Islam to prevail over all other religions (9:33). Shortly before his death in AD 632, Muhammad reiterated this in a sermon when he recounted, "I have been commanded to fight against all people, till they testify to the fact that there is no god but Allah, and believe in me (that) I am the messenger (from the Lord [i.e., Allah]) and in all that I have brought."¹⁰ Following their prophet's instructions, the burgeoning Muslim state perpetrated this mission throughout the Middle Ages. They did this not necessarily through forced conversion but political and the consequent legal mastery of non-Muslims.

This was precisely what happened along the shores of the Mediterranean as much of Christian Byzantium suddenly found itself dominated by Arab rulers and Islamic law. Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and most of North Africa all fell to Muslim conquerors by the early decades of the eighth century. And despite the best efforts of apologists such as John of Damascus (ca. 676-749), Theodore Abu Qurrah (ca. 750-820), and

¹⁰ *Sahih Muslim*, trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1971-1975), 1:9.29-35; cf. *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997), 1:2.24; and Muhammad ibn Umar al-Waqidi, *Kitab al-Maghazi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 3:113. It should be noted that this mission to bring (through social, political, and military struggle [jihad]) the world unto submission (Islam) is perpetual, according to Islamic law. See Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 207.

others, the lands and people surrounding the Mediterranean were quickly Islamized.

The first wave of Islamic expansion out of the Arabian Peninsula into the Levant and North Africa (as well as Spain in 711) was followed by a long period of imperial consolidation. It was also during this period that Islamic law and theology were refined and formalized. One development in particular with far-reaching consequences was the bifurcation of the world into two spheres—the house of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) and the house of war (*dar al-harb*). According to Efraim Karsh,

As a universal religion, Islam envisages a global political order in which all humankind will live under Muslim rule as either believers or subject communities. In order to achieve this goal it is incumbent on all free, male, adult Muslims to carry out an uncompromising struggle ‘in the path of Allah,’ or jihad. This in turn makes those parts of the world that have not yet been conquered by the House of Islam an abode of permanent conflict . . . which will only end with Islam’s triumph.¹¹

The two greatest medieval Islamic empires—the Umayyads who ruled from Damascus between 661 and 750 and the Abbasids who ruled from Baghdad up until 1258—failed to realize fully the goal of global political hegemony. In fact, it seemed as if Muhammad’s mission and the mission of Islam were forever lost when descendents of Ghengis Khan made their way into Muslim heartlands in the thirteenth century. This caused a fundamental restructuring of the seemingly monolithic Islamic Middle East, as various dynasties vied for power in the lands formerly ruled by the Abbasids.

The most significant dynasty to emerge from the chaos of the Mongolian onslaught was the house of the Turkish warlord named Osman (1258–1326). Osman and his tribe had settled in the eastern parts of modern day Turkey, strategically positioning themselves between the house of Islam and what was left of Byzantium. This was intentional, for Osman and his descendents—known as the Ottomans—were *gazis*—that is, Islamic warriors—charged with expanding the house of Islam. From the early 1300s, after experiencing initial success in their expansion through Asia Minor, the Ottoman Turks saw themselves as a people specially “chosen to

¹¹ Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 62.

act as Allah's sword 'blazing forth the way of Islam from the East to the West.'¹²

The Ottoman Turks first made their way into Europe across the Dardanelles onto the Gallipoli Peninsula in 1348 and from there began their conquest of the Balkans. While they had established hegemony in Asia Minor, and were beginning to do so in southeastern Europe, they had yet to conquer Constantinople. Protected by the enormous Theodosian walls, the ancient Roman capital still remained in the hands of Christianity, and would remain so for nearly a century until the descendent of Osman and Turkish sultan Mehmet II (1451-1481), who styled himself as the "leader of Holy War against Christianity,"¹³ extinguished the Byzantine Empire once and for all in 1453. While Mehmet continued to push the borders of the Turkish Empire further into the Balkans towards central Europe, and even into Italy, he was most responsible for laying the foundations for what Bernard Lewis calls the "great *jihād par excellence*" on Europe.¹⁴

The Ottoman Turkish *jihad* on Europe reached a head three months after the conclusion of the diet of Worms when the Serbian city of Belgrade was besieged and occupied by Muslim forces in the summer of 1521. Nicknamed the gate to the domain of *jihad*—or, according to the Turks, *darülcihat*¹⁵—the Muslims continued to launch their assaults into the eastern horizon of western Europe under the leadership of sultan Süleyman (1520-1566) and his descendents over the next 150 years until, after a century of gradual decline, they were definitively defeated at Vienna, for a second time, on September 11-12, 1683.

II. Luther and Islam

It was the dawn of the first siege on Vienna, in 1529, that provided the impetus for Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the early Lutherans to begin to respond to the challenge of Islam. While their context was much different

¹² Halil Inalcik, "The Rise of the Ottoman Empire," in *A History of the Ottoman Empire to 1730*, ed. M. A. Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 17; cf. Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism*, 88; and Norman Itzkowitz, *Ottoman Empire and Islamic Tradition* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 38.

¹³ Stanford J. Shaw, *Empire of the Gazis: The Rise and Decline of the Ottoman Empire History, 1280-1808* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 60-61.

¹⁴ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10.

¹⁵ Allen Hertz, "Muslims, Christians and Jews in Sixteenth-Century Belgrade," in *The Mutual Effects of the Islamic and Judeo-Christian Worlds: The East European Pattern*, ed. Abraham Ascher, Tibor Halasi-Kun, and Béla Király (New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1979), 149.

than ours, there is much that is relevant in the early Lutheran response to the expansion of Islam. They faced similar issues to what we are facing today: the rise of ideologically inspired violence, an unprecedented level of awareness and contact between Christians and Muslims, and a breakdown in the unity of Judeo-Christian civilization while facing a resurgent Islamic civilization. So a survey of Luther's response to the challenge of Islam will hopefully be not only interesting but also instructive.¹⁶

Martin Luther was keenly aware of the expansion of Islam into central Europe, particularly as Muslim armies appeared, as he put it, on the doorstep of Germany.¹⁷ Martin Brecht has even suggested that his writings are a "treasure chest" of information on how the Turks and Islam were perceived in the first half of the sixteenth century.¹⁸ The first work in which he assessed the affront Islam posed to Europe and Christianity was his *On War against the Turk*.¹⁹ The chief purpose for this little book was to explain his position on whether or not German Christians could endorse a military response to Turkish encroachment in central Europe. Apparently many within the nascent protestant movement were advocating pacifism and appeasement as word spread that the Ottomans were more tolerant of religious diversity than the Catholic Habsburgs. Luther nevertheless responded by arguing that, first, Christian Europe should stand up to Turkish imperialism in a defensive war led by secular officials, and, second, Germans should not be duped by alleged reports of tolerance amongst the Turks. It was true, he wrote, that Christians were not physically coerced into conversion; but restrictions on external expressions of Christianity as well as the subjugation of non-Muslims as second-class citizens or *dhimmi*s would gradually lead to the extinction of Christianity.²⁰

In the middle of his argument for a resolute war against the Turks, Luther also offered a brief but penetrating analysis and critique of Islam. Based on excerpts of the Quran that he found in medieval polemical

¹⁶ An extensive analysis can be found in Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2007).

¹⁷ WA 30.II:207.

¹⁸ Martin Brecht, "Luther und die Türken," in *Europa und die Türken in der Renaissance*, ed. Bodo Guthmüller and Wilhelm Kühlman (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2000), 9–27.

¹⁹ See LW 46:157–205.

²⁰ On *dhimmitude*, see Bat Ye'or's *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985) and *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide* (Madison/Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002).

works, he focused on the basic theology of the Quran as it related to Christianity. Interestingly, he began positively, noting that the Quran spoke highly of Christ and Mary, but he quickly explained that this was no real point of theological convergence, for according to Luther, Islam totally re-envisions the person and work of Christ. It views Christ as a mere human prophet who was sent to reiterate the revelation first delivered to Adam, through all the prophets after him (especially Moses), until the aboriginal message of Islam was definitively reasserted by Muhammad and vouchsafed in the Quran. Thus, for a Muslim, while “the office of Christ has come to an end,” Luther noted, “Muhammad’s office is still in force.”²¹ In short, Luther argued that the mission of Islam was chiefly to supplant all other religions.²²

The universal message of Islam was not just theological, though, Luther argued. It was also political, and, as was the case with virtually all historical empires, was often expressed violently. The difference with “Islamic imperialism,” as Efraim Karsh has termed it,²³ was that these religiously-motivated expansionistic designs were clearly endorsed in the Quran. Unlike Christianity, which expanded “by preaching and the working of miracles,” Islam had grown chiefly “by the sword and by murder.”²⁴

To top his analysis off, Luther also described the domestic relationships of Muslims, particularly between men and women, and characterized them as unchaste, unstable, and repressive. After reading passages from Quran 2 beginning at verse 223 where wives are described as fields for their husbands plowing and ending at the rather loose Quranic divorce laws (228–237), he argued that the Quran held marriage and women with little regard. Because a woman never has any certainty or stability in her marital relation with her husband—for men can divorce their wives by simply declaring it to be so—he called Islamic marriage non-marriage (*Unehie*). Such a lax attitude toward divorce and lack of commitment to their women resembled, he wrote, the “chaste life soldiers lead with their harlots.”²⁵ Summarizing what he considered to be the essence of Islam,

²¹ LW 46:177; WA 30.II:122.

²² See LW 46:176–178; WA 30.II:122–123. Cf. Robert Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World’s Most Intolerant Religion* (Lanham, MD: Regnery Press, 2006).

²³ The phrase appears as the title of his book, Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

²⁴ LW 46:178–181; WA 30.II:123–126.

²⁵ LW 46:181–182; WA 30.II:126–127.

Luther then concluded that Muslims were destroyers, enemies, and blasphemers of our Lord Jesus Christ, men who instead of the gospel and faith set up their shameful Muhammad and all kinds of lies, ruining all temporal government and home life or marriage.²⁶

What Luther disclosed from the Quran about Islam in *On War against the Turk* was seemingly verified shortly after its publication when the Turks finally reached the gates of Vienna. Although the siege ultimately failed, shockwaves were sent throughout Europe as news of the execution, enslavement, and conscription of Christians circulated in broadsheets and through word of mouth. This, coupled with numerous reports of conversions to Islam, increased the sense of urgency, thereby prompting Luther to write his second work relative to Islamic expansion entitled *Army Sermon against the Turk*.²⁷ While the first half of this work has received scholarly attention in order to illuminate Luther's conviction that the rise of the Ottomans was prophesied by Daniel,²⁸ what has not been thoroughly investigated is the second part. In it Luther offers pastoral instruction to Christians who might, in the future, find themselves living among Muslims in *dar al-Islam* or, as he called it, *Mahometisch Reich*. The first bit of advice Luther gave was catechetical. Because one could not expect to have a pastor, the Scriptures, or evangelical literature, he urged all Christians, especially those who risked being caught behind enemy lines (such as soldiers and those living in the Habsburg frontier), to learn at least the basics of the faith—the Apostles' Creed, Ten Commandments, and Lord's Prayer. What was particularly essential, though, especially if one was living among Muslims, was the Second Article of the Creed. Not only would this article of the Creed serve to nurture one's faith, but its historical data also provided all that was needed to defend one's faith. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this work is Luther's advice that Christians finding themselves in Ottoman lands should not attempt to flee, but rather they should accept their fate and, while constantly reminding themselves of their righteousness before God in Christ, should strive to do their best to love and serve the Turks and seek ways to bear witness to Christ as a missionary sent to the Muslim not by the church but through historical circumstances by God himself.²⁹

²⁶ LW 46:195; WA 30.II:139.

²⁷ See WA 30.II:160-197.

²⁸ See John T. Baldwin, "Luther's Eschatological Appraisal of the Turkish Threat in *Eine Heerpredigt wider den Türken*," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 33 (1995): 185-202.

²⁹ WA 30.II:185-195.

It is clear from the *Army Sermon against the Turk* that Luther thought Christian interaction with Islam was inevitable. Thus, he and his colleagues sought to keep on top of Ottoman affairs. In 1530, he published a fifteenth-century account of the life and customs of the Turks (which modern historians consider to be the most important record of affairs in late medieval Turkey).³⁰ His colleagues translated, from Italian, a history of the Turkish sultans from Osman until Süleyman.³¹ Other than this, the republications of the *Army Sermon against the Turk* and *On War against the Turk*, and the drafting of some appeals for prayer, Luther failed to offer any further responses to Islam. This was due to two factors. First, although there were a few episodes of Turkish aggression in the 1530s, for most of the decade Süleyman and the Sunni Ottomans had to deal with the Shia Safavid empire in Persia. Second, Luther was, for the times, unusually careful with what he said about Islam, and wanted to wait until he could get his hands on a copy of the Quran before he dealt with Islam again.³²

Much to Luther's expressed delight, the University of Wittenberg's library received a copy of the Quran in Latin translation on Shrove Tuesday (21 February) of 1542.³³ The occasion afforded him the opportunity finally to engage Islam at its source. He did so not by composing a new polemic or apologetic from scratch, but by translating, paraphrasing, and assimilating the work of a Dominican missionary named Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (1243–1320) in his coarse German under the title *Refutation of the Quran*.³⁴ He did so for practical and apologetic reasons, to equip Christians faced with Islam. "What I have written, I do for this reason," Luther wrote, "whether this little book arrives through print or the mouth of preachers struggling against the Turk, I write that those who are now or in the future under the Turk might protect themselves against Muhammad's faith, even if they are not able to protect themselves against his sword."³⁵ By exposing the errors of the Quran, and thus Islam, in a negative apologetic, Luther was convinced that

³⁰ *Libellus de Ritu et Moribus Turcorum*, ed. Martin Luther (Wittenberg: Hans Lufft, 1530). See Georgius de Hungaria, *Tractatus de Moribus, Conditionibus et Nequicia Turcorum-Traktat über die Sitten, die Lebensverhältnisse und die Arglist der Türken (1481)*, ed. and trans. Reinhard Klockow (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1993).

³¹ See Paolo Giovio, *Ursprung des Turkischen Reichs bis auff den itzigen Solyman*, trans. Justus Jonas (Augsburg: Steiner, 1538), and *Turcicarum rerum commentarius*, trans. Francisco Negri (Wittenberg: Klug, 1537).

³² WA 30.II:208.

³³ WA 53:272.

³⁴ See WA 53:272–396.

³⁵ WA 53:392.

German Christians would find their faith strengthened. He also hoped, confessing the difficulty, that through a positive apologetic those who had been "led astray by this law [the Quran] might return back to God."³⁶

The methodology of Luther's *Refutation of the Quran* is remarkable for several reasons. First, the Reformer adopted and employed a similar methodology as proposed by Thomas Aquinas and the Dominican scholastic school of apologetics, briefly summarized by John Tolan as: expose and destroy error first before arguing for the truth.³⁷ In Luther's words, "One must not deal with them [that is, Muslims] at first by asserting and defending the high articles of our faith . . . but adopt this way and manner: take and diligently work with their Quran, demonstrating their law to be false and unsubstantiated."³⁸ Once this was accomplished, then the Christian could begin to offer evidence for the truth of the Christian religion. It is this aspect of Luther's methodology that is even more noteworthy, for the Reformer based his defense of the gospel on key passages of the Quran and by appealing to common sense.

To destroy the foundation upon which Islam stands, Luther started his refutation by launching a full frontal assault on the Quran. Muhammad, he began, did not provide any evidence—either by performing a verifiable miracle or pointing to a legitimate prophecy—to vindicate his status of a prophet, unlike Christianity which was "established with verifiable and significant miraculous signs."³⁹ The Quran likewise was full of internal contradictions. Passages inciting Muslims to treat non-Muslims kindly (29:46) are contrasted with those that incite them to make war upon them (9:29), just as are passages that claim Christians and Jews will be saved (2:62) and others that claim the opposite (3:19). Following on, Luther also charged that Islam was not just irrational, as the Latin text from which he paraphrased read, but "bestly and swinish,"⁴⁰ drawing attention primarily to Muhammad's condoning of violence, his open adultery, and especially the Quran's licentious description of paradise.⁴¹ In addition to its

³⁶ WA 53:278.

³⁷ On the Dominican apologetic strategy, see John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 233–255.

³⁸ WA 53:284.

³⁹ WA 53:312.

⁴⁰ WA 53:312; cf. WA 53:311.

⁴¹ One sixteenth-century Quranic commentator went so far as to describe paradise for men as follows: "Each time we sleep with a houri [a young woman] we find her virgin. Besides, the penis of the Elected never softens. The erection is eternal; the sensation that you feel each time you make love is utterly delicious and out of this world and were you

contradictions and irrationality, the Quran also contained several factual errors such as its insinuation that Christ's mother Mary was the sister of Moses' brother Aaron (19:29). The significance of this error was not simply that it was so obviously untrue, but, according to Luther, it was placed there purposely, through some sort of divine intervention, to make it easy for anyone reading the Quran to be convinced that it was not from God.⁴² After berating Muhammad and the Quran even further for its endorsement of the violent propagation of the faith and unjust description of God's nature, Luther rounded out his attack by exposing the spurious history of the Quranic text, drawing particular attention to missing portions of it still referenced by modern scholars as well as the curious history behind the compilation of the authorized version under Uthman ibn Affan (580-656) the third caliph of Islam.⁴³

After finishing what Philipp Melanchthon referred to as a "useful and pious dispute against the insane Muhammadans,"⁴⁴ Luther continued his apologetic even further, challenging Muslims to "recognize and convert to the truth."⁴⁵ Interestingly, and seemingly counter-intuitive, he based his case upon what he thought was *prima facie* evidence derived from the Quran itself, for Luther was convinced that it expressed, although unwittingly, the doctrines of the deity of Christ and tri-unity of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Even more surprisingly, Luther—making his own theological additions to the medieval text he was working from—suggested that the Holy Spirit had "driven Muhammad to express the highest articles of our faith."⁴⁶ Although Luther often asserted that the Spirit's work was only objectively knowable through the external means of word and sacrament, the conservative Reformer did not restrict his activity. The eminent Luther scholar Bernard Lohse remarked that, apart from soteriology, Luther maintained that the "Spirit is present and at work

to experience it in this world you would faint. Each chosen one will marry seventy hours, besides the women he married on earth, and all will have appetising vaginas." See Ibn Warraq, "Virgins? What Virgins?" *The Guardian*, January 12, 2002.

⁴² WA 53:334.

⁴³ See, for example, Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 23-39, 41-57, 59-75.

⁴⁴ Philipp Melanchthon, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Carolus Gottlieb Bretschneider, 28 vols. (Halis Saxonum: C. A. Schwetschke, 1834-1860), 4:807. For Melanchthon's attitude towards and work on Islam, see Manfred Köhler, *Melanchthon und der Islam: Ein Beitrag zur Klärung des Verhältnisses zwischen Christentum und Fremdreigionen in der Reformationszeit* (Leipzig: Leopold Klotz Verlag, 1938).

⁴⁵ WA 53:364.

⁴⁶ WA 53:366.

in all creation as well as in every human deed, even in every natural occurrence."⁴⁷ In any case, Luther began his literary reproach to Muslims by honing in on Quranic passages that suggested a plurality within the godhead. He does so by specifically citing the several instances where Allah is recorded referring to himself in the plural just like one finds in passages from the Bible, particularly Genesis. The most convincing passage betraying the subtle trinitarian theology of the Quran, according to Luther, was a fragment from chapter 4:171, which reads, "O People of the book, do not become lax in your law and say nothing about God except the truth, that Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, is a messenger of God, and is God's Word, which he impressed upon her through the Holy Spirit." Here was the trinitarian formula found discreetly in the Quran, Luther thought, but anticipating a Muslim response, especially in light of what follows the excerpted passage—where it reads, "desist from professing the trinity"—the reason it was not taken as such was because Muhammad and the Muslims were not able to comprehend the Christian concept of three persons in one being.

Following his attempt to defend the doctrine of the Trinity, Luther also argued that the Quran explicitly endorsed the Gospels. For example, referring to Quran 5:46—"We sent Jesus the son of Mary confirming the Torah . . . we sent him the Gospel; therein was guidance and light"—he claimed that Muslims were obligated to read at least the narratives of Jesus' life. If the historical accounts were not compelling enough, Luther had even more evidence to support the veracity of their testimony. Not only did the Gospels and the rest of the Bible cohere with secular history, but among its numerous books written over a thousand years the message remained the same from Genesis 3:15 through the prophets up until its fulfillment in Christ and proclamation in the epistles. Moreover, the testimony of the prophets, Christ himself, the apostles, and even the church fathers, he argued, was backed by the testimony of miracles. Lastly, if one just compared the life of Christ to that of Muhammad they would certainly see the superiority of Christianity.

Luther's polemical apologetic against Islam is quite different than what one might expect from the man who, two decades earlier, had written, "How should we present our case if a Turk were to ask us to give reason for our faith? . . . We would have to be silent . . . and direct him to the Holy

⁴⁷ Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 235.

Scriptures as the basis for our faith."⁴⁸ While it appears as if he may have abandoned his earlier convictions, what seems to have happened is that he soon realized that, as far as Muslims are concerned, one was not engaged in inter-Christian polemics, but as he suggested in his Galatians commentary, "another area"—an area in which the Christian did not share the same common ground as the Muslim. One must therefore "use all . . . cleverness and effort and be as profound and subtle a controversialist as possible."⁴⁹

Perhaps the greatest legacy that Luther left behind with regard to Islam was his involvement in a controversy over the publication of the Quran in Basel in 1542 and 1543.⁵⁰ Despite attempts to suppress its printing by the city counsel, Luther argued that, in following the example of the church fathers and so that Christians in his day would be prepared to be "lion hearts" in their defense of the gospel, the Quran had to be published so that everyone could read it for themselves.⁵¹ Publication of the Quran was essential for the apologetic task. Therefore, in addition to his letter of support, wherein he warned that if Basel continued to censor the work he would find a press in Wittenberg for its publication, Luther (as well as Melancthon) drafted a preface for the forthcoming book. Finally, in early 1543, the Quran—along with several traditional Islamic texts, historical works, and polemical treatises—left the press.⁵² For the first time Christian scholars had easy access to it, as Luther envisioned, so that further study could take place in order to prepare for engagement with Islam, whether it be in the study of a scholar in Turkey where "perhaps God would call some of the Turks out of their darkness through their trained Christian captives," or at the very least to strengthen Christians experiencing doubts (*Anfechtung*) while living amongst Muslims.⁵³

Much more could be said about Luther and Islam. One thing is clear, nonetheless, even though he was relatively removed from Islam—in fact, he never once met a Muslim, although he did decline an opportunity for an audience with sultan Süleyman—Luther found time, amidst his numerous other activities, to study Islam. He had no choice. He knew from

⁴⁸ LIV 32:10; WA 7:315.

⁴⁹ LIV 26:29–30; WA 40.I:78.

⁵⁰ On the controversy, see Harry Clark, "The Publication of the Koran in Latin: A Reformation Dilemma," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 15 (1984): 3–13.

⁵¹ WABr 10:162.

⁵² See Hartmut Bobzin, *Der Koran im Zeitalter der Reformation* (Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1995), 153–275.

⁵³ WA 53:571.

its history and ideology how aggressive it was, and so he did what he could to disperse information and prepare those whom he called his "dear Germans" to respond to the challenge of Islam.

III. Lutheranism and Islam Today

What about us? What sort of conclusions might we arrive at concerning Islam? Does it really present as big of a challenge to Christianity as Luther thought? It might be helpful to cover its basic motifs relative to the faith we profess so as to get a taste for a theology that we will inevitably face.

Naturally, any assessment of Islam should begin with the Quran. As many of us no doubt know, Muslims consider the Quran to be the word of God. A few passages from its rather esoteric text suggest that it has existed for all eternity, but to lead human beings "out of the depths of darkness into light" (14:1) it entered the world, descended upon, and was delivered orally through Muhammad from 610 to 632 (13:39, 97:1-5). Thus, devout Muslims today take the Quran to be the perfectly preserved, uncreated, yet inscripturated, word of God.

The central theological motif of the Quran is the unicity of God – this is known as the doctrine of *tawhid*. In a passage said to encapsulate one-third of all Islamic doctrine, the Quran instructs Muslims to confess that, in addition to being one, God is also the eternal, incomparable, sustainer of all humankind (112:1-4). While this may at first seem compatible with Christian teachings about the nature of God, this passage goes one step further and forever divorces Islam from Christian theism by asserting that he "begets not." Elsewhere and more poignantly it addresses Christian theology specifically when it commands: "Do not say [or confess the] 'Trinity' . . . for Allah is one God" (4:171), for the teaching that three persons comprise the one divine essence of God is viewed, at best, as a subtle form of polytheism – known as *shirk* or associating partners to God – in the Quran.

Nowhere is the Quran's challenge to Christianity clearer than its treatment of the person and work of Christ. While it maintains that Christ was born of a virgin (19:20-21), it flatly denies that he was the son of God, and claims that it is not fitting for God to have a son (19:35, 92), describing the doctrine of the incarnation as a "monstrous" assertion (19:89). Explaining the logic of this, it rhetorically asks, "How can He have a son when He has no consort" (6:100-101)? "Exalted is the Majesty of our Lord: He has taken neither a wife nor a son" (72:3). To be sure, as many note, Christ is revered in the Quran, but it is the Christ of the Quran – who is

only a messenger of God (4:171, 5:75)—not the historic Christ revealed in the Scriptures.

If this were not troubling enough, the Quran even denies that Christ was crucified. Instead, it claims that someone who looked like him took his place while he ascended into heaven to await his return on the Day of Judgment (4:157–159). Despite the contradiction with both the biblical and extra-biblical historical record, that Christ was not crucified is of no consequence to a Muslim, for the Quran denies that human beings are inherently sinful and, furthermore, that sins need to be expiated. While Adam and Eve did fall prey to temptation in the Quran, they were immediately absolved and forgiven (2:36–38, 7:23–24). Neither they nor their descendents fell under the curse of sin and the law.⁵⁴ Rather, God simply and capriciously forgives sins as he wills (11:90; 39:53–56), and humans earn their salvation by submitting themselves to God and doing good (4:125, 41:33).

Complimenting this rather low view of sin, or at least of the consequences of sin, the Quran has a very high view of humankind. All human beings are born in a state of righteousness, and, according to their nature (*fitra*), predisposed to worship the god of Islam (30:30). Therefore, according to Islamic anthropology, every human being brought into the world is a Muslim. It is only the misguided nurturing of their parents (and other influences) that turn them from it.⁵⁵

This motif that Islam is the aboriginal religion of humanity and history is prominent in the Quran. All the prophets beginning with Adam through Moses unto Jesus, Muslims allege, proclaimed essentially the same message that Muhammad preached. “God sent down to you (step by step), in truth, the Quran, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the Torah (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to mankind, and He sent down the criterion [the Quran]” (3:3, 9:111). Despite the obvious contradictions, however, Muhammad did not start a new religion, the Quran claims. Instead, he revived the religion of Moses and Jesus, whose messages had been corrupted (*tahrif*) by Jews and Christians who purposely altered the biblical text and skewed the message of Moses and Jesus. Thus, God sent Muhammad to reiterate what truth was left in

⁵⁴ See George Anawati, “La Notion de ‘Péché Originel’ Existe-t-elle dans l’Islam?,” *Studia Islamica* 31 (1970), 29–40, and Johan Bouman, *Gott und Mensch im Koran* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977).

⁵⁵ *Saḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, 6:60.298.

the Judeo-Christian tradition and to secure the full revelation of God once and for all in the Quran.

This, obviously, is a polarizing view of Islam, but it is also a necessary one, for theologically speaking there are very few commonalities—and certainly no meaningful ones—between Christianity and Islam. The debate that seems to be taking place among Evangelicals of every stripe over whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God—because they are both monotheistic—is sorely misguided.⁵⁶ Those Lutherans who would attribute such a view to Luther, based on an erroneously translated text,⁵⁷ seem to be revealing more about their own theology rather than Luther's. In fact, in *On War against the Turk*, Luther identifies Allah as the devil.⁵⁸ It must be recalled that the god in the Quran has not and, in fact, cannot beget a son whereas the God of Christianity is the God who did beget a Son and it is only this Son who reveals the one true God.

Clearly Islam presents a significant theological challenge to Christianity (not to mention the political and demographic challenges). So how should we respond? First, we must not underestimate or misunderstand what we now face. Make no mistake, Islam is expanding, even into the West. While much of its growth is due to high birth rates and immigration, conversions are occurring as well. The reasons behind this phenomenon are plentiful. Certainly attacks on the authority of the Scriptures, disregard—if not contempt—for orthodox doctrine (especially concerning the Trinity, Christology, and the depravity of humanity), and others waged by those who are often regarded as the intellectual elite (for example, Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels) coupled with similar assaults launched by Islam (especially the corruption of the Bible [*tahrif*], rejection of the deity of Christ, denial of the Trinity) resonate well with those whose faith has already been weakened or those who have lapsed into cynicism. Regardless of the causes, the best we can do is to circumvent this by, one, exposing the errors of Islam and, two, rigorously defending the veracity of

⁵⁶ See Timothy George, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad: Understanding the Differences between Christianity and Islam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002); Mateen Ellass, *Understanding the Koran: A Quick Christian Guide to the Muslim Holy Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003); and Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002).

⁵⁷ See the exhaustive work of Edward Engelbrecht, *One True God: Understanding Large Catechism II*. 66 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007).

⁵⁸ See, for example, LW 46:184 (WA 30.II:129) and LW 21:102 (WA 32:384).

Christianity. Luther himself expressed this in his preface to the 1543 edition of the Quran:

All this should not be thought of lightly especially by those of us who teach in the church. We ought to fight everywhere with the armies of the devil. How many varieties of enemies have we seen in this age of ours? . . . We must prepare ourselves now against Muhammad. But what are we able to say about things of which we are ignorant? Hence, it is useful for those who are experienced to read the scriptures of the enemy in order to accurately refute, damage, and destroy them so that they might be capable to correct anyone, or surely to strengthen our people with solid arguments.⁵⁹

Moreover, Luther argued that those Christians who were caught behind enemy lines—in *Mahometisch Reich*—were not to run or separate themselves from the Muslims; rather, he instructed them to accept their fate as subjects (and neighbors) of the Turks, and, in doing so, to love and serve them in the same way that they would their neighbors back in Germany. In the twenty-first century, Muslims are now found among us, many coming here to escape Middle Eastern despotism and violence. True, some have revolutionary and evil designs,⁶⁰ and they must be dealt with even as the violent and rebellious peasants had to be dealt with during Luther's day (1524–1525). We are also, however, to be ready, willing, and able to approach our Muslim neighbors, colleagues, and friends *as* neighbors, colleagues, and friends. We are, moreover, to approach them as those who, like all others, desperately need to hear God's word of law and gospel so that, as Luther hoped, God will call some from their darkness through Christians who have been instructed to respond to the challenge of Islam.⁶¹ Luther himself had hopes of this. In a conversation he had with his successors at his home, he expressed, "I hope dearly to see the day when the gospel will come to the Muslims, as is now a real possibility. It is not likely that I will see the day. But you might, and then you will have to deal with them carefully."⁶² God grant that we fulfill Luther's wish—and indeed that of God, who desires that all humans would be saved—and begin to approach this tremendous challenge by witnessing without

⁵⁹ WA 53:572.

⁶⁰ See especially Steven Emerson, *Jihad Incorporated: A Guide to Militant Islam in the US* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006).

⁶¹ WA 53:571.

⁶² WATR 5:221.

comprise to the gospel of Christ—the crucified and risen One—with grace, charity, and love.