

HARTMUT LEHMANN

MARTIN LUTHER AND THE TURKS

Ever since the National Socialists drew on Luther's writings against the Jews in their propaganda to justify their racial policy of extermination, this topic has captured the attention of Reformation scholars and the wider public. By contrast, Luther's no less controversial writings on the Turks have not garnered the same level of scrutiny. It is only a few years ago that the first extensive studies on this topic were published¹. As we now know, Luther had a keen interest in the political and religious role of the Turks for most of his life. He referred to what he called the Turkish threat time and again. At no point was he more occupied with this topic than in the late 1520s, however, when the army of Sultan Suleiman threatened to conquer Vienna and the danger of the Turkish army invading Central Europe loomed large².

In 1529 and 1530 Luther published two treatises in which he sought to tell his followers how they should see the Turkish danger: first, in 1529, the treatise "On War Against the Turks" (*Vom Krieg wider die*

¹ Johannes Ehmann, *Luther, Türken und Islam: Eine Untersuchung zum Türken und Islambild Martin Luthers (1515–1546)*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2008; see also: Hartmut Bobzin, *Der Koran im Zeitalter der Reformation: Studien zur Frühgeschichte der Arabistik und Islamkunde in Europa*, Stuttgart: Steiner, 1995; Thomas Kaufmann, "Türckenbüchlein": *Zur christlichen Wahrnehmung 'türkischer Religion' in Spätmittelalter und Reformation*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008; Rudolf Mau, "Luthers Stellung zu den Türken", in: *Helmar Junghans, ed., Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526–1546: Festgabe zu seinem 500 Geburtstag*, 2 vols., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983, pp. 647–662.

² For the context see: Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, vol. 2: *Ordnung und Abgrenzung der Reformation*, Calw: Calwer Verlagsverein, 1986, pp. 350–355; Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther: Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs: Eine Biographie*, München: C. H. Beck, 2012, pp. 544–550.

Türken)³ and then, in 1530, the “Sermon to Soldiers Fighting the Turk” (*Heerpredigt wider die Türken*)⁴. Already in 1518 Luther had explained that God would use the Turks as a rod to punish sinful Christians. They should accept this punishment and repent their sins and pray to God for mercy. Some of Luther’s adversaries sharply criticized his position as a sign of defeatism. In 1529, therefore, Luther clearly stated that Christian Europe had the right to defend itself against the armies of the Ottoman Empire. The Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, should take the lead and use the sword, if necessary, for, as Luther explained, this was a power struggle in which military considerations prevailed. In full accordance with his teaching of the two realms, or regiments, Luther warned, however, that the fight against the Turks was not a struggle of one religion against another and was not a fight in which the Church should be directly involved, nor a kind of crusade. Rather, as he had done many times before, Luther admonished his readers that the Christian position toward this conflict should be remorse and prayer. Defending one’s homeland was only justified if one repented one’s sins and strove to be worthy of God’s mercy and grace.

In the second part of his treatise “On War against the Turks”, Luther took a closer look at the religious aspects of the controversy. In his view, Islam represented a highly dangerous belief system, deeply corrupted by demonic powers. Muslims were agents of the devil, he averred, and in particular their prophet, Muhammad, was the devil incarnate. This explained, according to Luther, why the Turks set out to destroy the livelihood of Christians. For Luther, therefore, the Turks were similar in many ways to the papacy and to witches. Like the papacy, they held wrong beliefs but claimed to govern the lives of people; like witches, they had concluded a pact with the devil and set out to do harm in his name. In this situation, Luther argued, Christians should learn a simple lesson. Just as true children of God should be vigilant and shield themselves against the papal influence, they should not believe any rumors that the Sultan was a benign ruler; and just as they should

³ WA [Weimarer Ausgabe] 30/II, pp. 10–148.

⁴ WA 30/II, pp. 160–197.

defend their houses and their property against all sorts of *maleficia* perpetrated by witches, they should do the same if the Turks continued to march beyond Vienna. The real task of devout Christians was not a new crusade, Luther concluded, but armed defense. All members of the empire should support the emperor in defending the empire as best they could.

In addition, Luther continued, adherents of Islam posed a particular menace for Christians as they threatened marriage and thus the very foundation of a Christian way of life. In this context, Luther sharply criticized polygamy and, as he bluntly said, women being bought and sold by Muslims like cattle. Four years earlier, in 1525, Luther had himself gotten married. In taking this step, he had wanted to demonstrate to his supporters that marriage was a gift sent by God. This may explain why he objected to polygamy so vehemently.

In his “Sermon to Soldiers fighting the Turks”, published in 1530, in the same year when the Augsburg Confession was issued, Luther offered yet another interpretation. In this treatise he attempted to explain what the Turkish threat meant in the context of salvation history. He pointed out that the Roman Empire was the last of the four empires prophesied by Daniel. Furthermore, he explained that the Holy Roman Empire was the last extension of the Roman Empire. The destruction of this empire would be immediately followed by the Second Coming and the Last Judgment. Therefore, Luther expected the battles with the Turks to be the battles between Christ and Gog and Magog, i.e., the two nations led by Satan in the decisive battle at Armageddon against the Kingdom of God. Within this apocalyptic scenario, Luther contended, attacks by the Turks were an essential next step, representing danger for Christians but also hope as divine redemption was near. The Turks were only able to claim temporal victories, Luther added, but could never conquer God’s realm. In the end, they were doomed. For Luther, Christians who died in these battles were martyrs because they had given their lives for a just cause.

Neither in 1529 nor 1530 were the Turks able to conquer Vienna, nor were they able to advance further north. Among Luther’s followers, and certainly for Luther himself, however, the fear persisted that the Turks might do so in the near future. In fact, during the last several years of his life, in the early 1540s, Luther was obsessed by fear that

the reform movement he had initiated and lent his name to, would fail because powers opposed to his aims, including the Turks, would take over Central Europe. In ever-stronger words, he now attacked those whom he considered his main enemies, namely, the papacy, the Jews and the Turks. These were the years when he wrote his tracts against the Jews, insisting that the Jews should be expelled and their synagogues destroyed. His pleas against the Turks, written in the same period, were also dictated by anger and equally full of similar phantasies of destruction and extermination.

Even at that time, however, Luther's main concern was the sinfulness of the Christian society. For example, in his "Admonition to Prayer Against the Turks" (*Vermahnung zum Gebet wider den Türken*)⁵, his main focus was on manifest sins of people in all walks of life. From Luther's point of view, his contemporaries were asking for punishment, and they should not be surprised if God used the Turks to do precisely that. Again, he repeatedly referred to the well-known theme of repentance and prayer. Therefore, when defending themselves against the Turks, his countrymen should always remember that they were fighting against a large army of devils because, as he continued, the Turkish army was in fact the devil's army.

At about the same time, sitting at the table with family and friends, Luther remarked that he was not interested in the personal life of Muhammad⁶. But Christians should nonetheless fight against Muhammad's teachings, that is, in his view, against the lies of the devil. This is why in 1542 Luther also published a German translation of a late medieval refutation of the Quran⁷. According to Luther, people should be able to read themselves how corrupt and dangerous the Koran was. Until his death, Luther never revised his earlier opinion that Christ's realm was a realm of mercy, while Muhammad's realm was one of revenge and rage⁸.

⁵ WA 51, pp. 585–625.

⁶ WATR (Table Talk) vol. 5, no. 5536 (winter 1542/43).

⁷ WA 53, pp. 272–396 (originally written by the Dominican brother Richard).

⁸ WATR, vol. 2, no. 1516 (May 1532).

Let me sum up with a question: How should we deal with this part of Luther's legacy as we approach the year 2017, when Lutherans from around the world prepare to celebrate the beginning of the Reformation? In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Turks form the biggest minority both in Protestant and Catholic parts of Germany. Until now, representatives of Turkish clubs and societies have not taken note of Luther's vitriolic attacks against the religion of Islam in general and against Muhammad in particular which, in my opinion, are no less insulting than the Danish caricatures of Muhammad that have caused so much trouble and confusion around the world in the past few years. Should the Protestant churches simply hope that the Turks in Germany, and Muslims in other countries, will not take much interest in Luther's writings, not even in 2017 when Protestants commemorate the beginning of the Reformation and Luther's historic achievements? Or should Protestants address this issue head-on? But how should they do it? Should they distance themselves from these particular writings of Luther? Should they argue that religious pluralism and religious tolerance were not part of the teachings of Luther and his disciples but that, over the years, Protestantism has moved beyond Luther's views and now respects other faiths and religions? Should they try to explain how strongly Luther feared the power of the devil and how he saw the evil doings of God's eternal adversary at work in various groups and movements, from rebellious peasants of 1525 and the papacy to the Jews as well as the Turks? It is not my intention to offer advice or provide answers to the questions that I have raised. But I am convinced that those who are preparing for the Luther jubilee of 2017 have yet to overcome many obstacles and conceive new ways forward and around difficult issues. Foremost among these will be a new and convincing interpretation of Luther's infamous writings against the Turks.