

The Reformers and other faiths

David Thomas, Lent sermon in Wells Cathedral, Sunday 12 March 2017

When in 1517 Martin Luther published his 95 theses, did he know he was knocking a nail in the coffin of Christendom? Probably not. But what he would have known fully and clearly is that some decades earlier Christendom had suffered a hammer blow that shook it to its foundations and altered its character for ever.

For all Christians, both in the West and the East, Constantinople had long been a symbol of Christian power and divine sovereignty, and of continuity with the empire of ancient Rome that stretched back over a thousand years. But in 1453, only thirty year before Luther's birth, the Ottoman Turks had torn down its walls, slaughtered the last emperor and made the city their capital. From there they had expanded north and south, invading the Balkans and moving into the lands of the Hungarians and Poles, and going on to threaten the Habsburg Empire itself. One of their goals was Vienna, to which they laid siege only twelve years after Luther published his objections to the teachings that came out of Rome. On that day in 1517 Luther would have been acutely aware that the menace of the Turks preoccupied the minds of European rulers, and anyone who paused to read his theses would have near the front of their mind the question why God was inflicting this new terror upon the people who were supposed to be his own.

Now, it would be too much to say that the Turks were in the fore-front of Luther's mind when he nailed up his theses. He had, of course, other matters to think about, not least his clash with the authorities of the church and the possible consequences in publishing his points of disagreement. Nevertheless, among his writings a number of works on Muslim topics feature

prominently. One is entitled *On war against the Turks*, another is a sermon written in 1529 after the Ottoman siege of Vienna, and there is also a preface to the Latin translation of the Qur'an first made in the twelfth century that was being published by the Swiss Reform printer Theodore Bibliander. So we cannot say that Luther's interest in Islam and Muslims was negligible.

In these works he makes his sentiments crystal clear. The faith of the Turks, Islam, is for him an aberrant form of Christianity and certainly not a new revelation from God. As for the Turks themselves, they are the servants of the devil who have been sent by God as a punishment for the sinfulness of Christians. The Qur'an was put together by Muhammad himself and not delivered to him from God by an angel, and it contains numerous departures from Christian scripture. While Luther felt a measure of admiration for the zeal with which the Muslim Turks applied themselves to their religious observances, in general he found scant value in the faith. In fact, he wondered whether the Turk or the pope was the more ungodly.

In expressing these sentiments Luther was reflecting the stock attitudes of his day. His fellow Reformer John Calvin, for instance, had no doubt that the Turks were entirely opposed to the truth and followed a false religion; in his major work, the *Institutes of the Christian religion*, he categorically states: 'Although they proclaim ... that the Creator of heaven and earth is God, still, while repudiating Christ [they] substitute an idol in the place of God'. Many other Reformers, and also Catholics, would agree, in this perpetuating attitudes that can be found in Christian writings on Islam as early as the eighth century. These were intensified through the time of the Crusades to frame a total condemnation of Islam as the work of a fraudulent pseudo-prophet who was inspired and informed on the best reading by Christian heretics, and according to the more general interpretation by the devil himself. For Western Christians in the sixteenth century, both Reformers and Catholics, Islam was a dark misrepresentation

of the truth, a distortion of the true teachings about Christ, and a wilful departure from the light of the Gospels intended to take people away from God's final revelation of truth.

Of course, this scornful attitude is understandable both historically and theologically.

Historically, because as Christians saw it Muslims were aggressors who had wrested the holy places from Christian possession, spread through the Christian Byzantine Empire in the east and the Iberian Peninsula in the west, and from their lairs along the Barbary coast had harried European seaboard from the Greek islands all the way to the Cornish coast.

Theologically, because Muslims claimed that their faith superseded Christianity, and presumed to replace the Trinity, the eternal demonstration of divine love, with a dense, unknowable unity, and to make Jesus, who was God on earth, no more than a human prophet who did not die on the cross.

It is, then, only to be expected that in the Middle Ages and Early Modern period work after Christian work should portray Islam as an inverted form of Christianity that had nothing to do with the real God, and should model Muslims as cruel, unreliable, immoral and aggressive creatures who were hardly human.

Given all this, it is surprising and maybe disturbing to see that a few Christian works from this period took a rather different view: they perceived in Islam something of God and regarded Muslims as within the scope of God's redeeming love. None of these were by Reformers, it should be admitted, though given the emphasis the Reformers laid on the Bible alone as the source of truth this is not surprising. What these few divergent works do show is that there were Christians who questioned the accepted dictum that every non-Christian was condemned, no matter how saintly their lives, because salvation was restricted to those inside the church.

One example of these works is *On peace in believing* by the fifteenth century cardinal Nicholas of Cusa. He wrote it just a few years after the Ottoman capture of Constantinople, and rather than being a fulmination of wrath and condemnation he makes it a serene vision of a heavenly council in which Saints Peter and Paul explain to Muslims and others how Christian doctrines are actually in harmony with theirs. To Muslims they explain how the doctrine of the Trinity is in fact about one God, who Christians perceive as the source of fecundity represented by the three modes called Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He thereby intimates that The God of Christianity is also the God of Islam, albeit perceived in fuller form. His conclusion is that the various faiths are in essence *una religio in rituum varietate*, 'one means of relating to God through a variety of religious observances' – thus, a Christian is drawn through the bread and wine, but a Muslim may be drawn through regular reciting of the Qur'an, which is an equally valid practice. This little catchphrase is worth pondering, because it anticipates later developments in Christian theology of religions by about 500 years. In a startling insight, it places the various religions on a par and interprets their differences in teaching and practice as their localised expressions of what is a serious and sincere commitment to God.

It follows from this insight that Muslims should not be condemned out of hand, although if he were pressed Nicholas would quite probably have wanted to champion Christianity as the fullest of the various expressions of the human relationship to God. A second example appears to be even more open. This is a mysterious work written sometime around the end of the 16th century by an unknown Polish Catholic. Again it is a vision, this time of the Last Judgement, and the visionary sees that all who have done good deeds during their lifetime are being admitted by God to heaven, irrespective of the beliefs they hold. What is important is how they have acted. Muslims are included with everyone else, and regardless of their

dogmas that include rejection of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus Christ they are admitted into the presence of God by virtue of their just actions and behaviour. This is even more unexpected and startling than Nicholas of Cusa, and even today it retains the power to unsettle tidy minds.

Can we see, I wonder, in these two curious apocalyptic visions signs of unease with the general stance of Martin Luther's time that all non-Christians, and the cruel, aggressive Muslim Turks in particular, are excluded from communion with God? If so, their authors anticipate attitudes that are more characteristic of the present day than the Early Modern era.

If they have any lesson for us, then this must surely be that rejection of all Muslims, Jews or Hindus for the simple reason that they differ from Christians is too rash and harsh a judgement. More than that, they suggest that in his mysterious providence God does not restrict his activity or his grace to the church or to Christians. If this is so - and it is a weighty thought to ponder - then the task laid on Christians is not to obstruct or reject out of hand, but to look in the wider world where God is at work among and through sheep of another fold, and to seek by his grace to be his helpers there.