

LUTHER AND ISLAM

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If it weren't for Islam, we might not be celebrating the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. In fact, there might not even be a Lutheran Church today. The Protestant Reformation might have been snuffed out.

OK. Do I have your attention?

We Americans have learned a lot about Islam in the last few years, thanks largely to the many conflicts in the Middle East. We think these conflicts are new, but in reality Martin Luther was dealing with similar hostilities 500 years ago.

One of our Lutheran Church historians, speaking at our Montana Synod Pastors' Conference some years ago, mentioned that people sometimes question why it's important to study church history. Her response: "Because objects in the rear view mirror are closer than they may appear!" Our relationship with Islam would certainly be a case in point.

To set the scene: Historians have chosen the year 1517 as the starting point of the Protestant Reformation because that was when Martin Luther nailed the *95 Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. If that was the spark that ignited the Reformation, the fire was almost out of control 13 years later.

We associate the year 1530 with the Augsburg Confession, the founding document of the Lutheran Church. But how did we get there?

The answer: The Turks! Well—that was what Luther called them. That was their nationality and their language, not their religion. Today we would say "Islam" although even in our time we sometimes call Muslims by their religion rather than their national name—Iraqis, Egyptians, Saudis, etc. And then, as now, it was a Church-State issue. Back then they would have said "Religion-Empire."

And back then there was nothing like our "separation of church and state" concept. The Empire (meaning the Holy Roman Empire) and the Church (meaning Roman Catholic Church) were closely entwined.

LUTHER TAKES HIS "STAND"

The Empire often did the Church's bidding. For example, it was at the famous "Diet of Worms," (source of so many jokes), where Luther was called upon to recant—take back all he had said and written. It was then that he made his most-quoted statement, "Here I Stand." Interestingly it was the Emperor, not the church, presiding at the trial and condemning Luther. Incidentally Emperor Charles V was only age 21; Luther was 37.

And it was the same Emperor, not the Pope or other church official, who called for a meeting in Augsburg in 1530 in order to end the religious disunity which the Reformation had caused.

Why would an Emperor have such interest in religious matters? The answer: Politics! Emperor Charles V ruled over one third of the whole continent of Europe—Germans, Italians, Spanish and many more, but they were literally an unruly bunch. Charles needed all the help he could get, including the Church (One Holy Roman Catholic) which he hoped could be the glue which would help hold his one empire together.

To make things worse, a new threat had arisen, indeed another empire—this one from a whole different continent, namely Asia. This was the Empire of the Ottoman Turks with its capital Istanbul (not Constantinople). They were Muslims, but not Arabs. They had been battling another empire from the East, namely Persia (who were also Muslims, but not Arabs, and they were Shia, not Sunni).

Confusing? Good! Then as now it is important not to lump all Muslims together any more than Lutherans want to be lumped together with all Christians.

So—when the Turkish army was moving up through the Balkans heading toward Vienna, Emperor Charles V called them “Turks” but also referred to them as “that traditional foe of ours and of the Christian religion.” In other words, he wanted to make it a religious war, and the Lutherans used similar anti-Islamic language. But the Lutherans hoped that this external religious threat to the Empire might finally give them an opportunity they had been looking for, a chance to explain their faith in a relatively peaceful manner.

It was the old principle that, when your enemy is under threat, he might be more willing to compromise. “Politics made strange bedfellows,” even back then.

LUTHERANS WRITE THEIR “CONFESSION”

So the Lutherans set about to prepare a document outlining their differences with the Catholic faith. It seemed strategically wise, however, that they begin not with the items under dispute but rather with the many ways in which they were in agreement. In this way they could begin the conversation on level ground. Plus they wanted to make it clear “...that Lutherans were not casually to be lumped together with the other opponents of Rome...” of which there were apparently several.

The Lutherans read their document, allegedly in a loud, clear voice and with the windows open so that ordinary people on the street could hear it. It didn’t take long before the Emperor indicated that he was unlikely to accept the document, and the ultimate result was that the Lutheran Germans were unwilling to take up the sword and engage the “Turks” militarily.

Charles V was evidently smart enough to know that he shouldn’t go to war if the Germans weren’t enlisted so he didn’t pursue that option. The “Turks” stayed in that area of southeastern Europe (The Balkans) until they were driven out 153 years later, in 1683.

[Remember the horrible battles in the former Yugoslavia back in the 1990’s, including the “ethnic cleansing” of so many “Bosnian Muslims” by (Serbian Orthodox) Slobodan Milosovic? Some of those hostilities were a carryover from the conflicts of Luther’s time. Objects in the rear-view mirror.....]

So, back to 1530—on the surface it would seem that the work which the Lutherans had done preparing their document was for naught, but the “law of unintended consequences” seemed to work back then, even as it does today. The Twenty-Eight Articles publicly read on June 25, 1530 in Augsburg, Germany, came to be known as the *Augsburg Confession*. It soon came to be regarded as the founding document of the Lutheran Church.

AUGSBURG CONFESSION BECOMES FOUNDATION FOR LUTHERANS’ “STAND”

From that point on, the Lutheran Church came to regard itself as a self-standing church. Its validity was based upon the Augsburg Confession as a statement of faith, not upon an historic official organizational connection with the Roman Catholic Church.

Indeed, several Lutheran Church bodies in the world today include the term “Augsburg Confession” in their name, such as the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia. Three Lutheran colleges in the U.S. are named Augsburg: Augsburg College in Minneapolis, and two colleges named “Augustana,” (the Latinized version of “Augsburg”); one in Rock Island, Illinois, and the other in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

There are many references to Islam in Luther’s writings. These tend to be theological rather than historical in nature and his comments are often examples of his most intemperate language. He had read part of the Koran and considered it “...a foul and shameful book.” He is upset that

Muhammed denies the divinity of Christ and considers him nothing more than a "...holy prophet, like Jeremiah or Jonah...."

It should be said, however, that Luther's comments about Islam are often not as virulent as some of the things he wrote about the Jews, statements which the Lutheran church has had to apologize for many times. He also condemned Islam with an anti-Catholic reference, to wit: "Let the Turk believe and live as he will, just as one lets the papacy and other false Christians live."

Luther evidently would not have had a religious test for public office. He is quoted as having written: "A smart Turk makes a better ruler than a dumb Christian".

So as we celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, it might be appropriate to remember three things: 1. Our Lutheran history has at least a mini-chapter that relates to Islam; 2. Luther said and wrote many, many things, some of which contradict each other, depending on the situation; so just because Luther said something doesn't mean we should automatically accept it as gospel truth. 3. The message of Love is central to Luther's theology, and I have found through conversation with a Muslim acquaintance, that any conversations with a Muslim today could begin with the place of love and mercy in our relationship with God and with one another.