

Luther's Theology of the Cross in *A Muster Sermon against the Turks* (1529)

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Abstract: This article explores Martin Luther's theology of the cross as articulated in his 1529 sermon, "A Muster Sermon against the Turks." Luther was deeply concerned with the challenges posed by Ottoman imperialism, including the way Christians might bear witness to the gospel to Turkish Muslims. Ultimately, Luther's theology of the cross provided a framework for understanding Christian suffering and mission in a hostile world, affirming the hope that even in the most challenging circumstances, God's work could be accomplished through His faithful followers.

Luther was not a missionary in the conventional sense of the term, but he was interested in seeing the gospel proclaimed to those who had never heard it,¹ including the oldest of Christianity's foes: the followers of Islam.² He wondered why no one had sent preachers to the Muslim world, and he was critical of Christians in a position to do something about it but who nevertheless failed to do so. Early on in his career, for example, he criticized the pope for neglecting to send missionaries to the Ottoman Turks and issuing a call for a crusade instead.³ If the pope were indeed the vicar of Christ, he wrote, "he would risk life and limb to preach the gospel to the Turks."⁴ Luther once expressed hope that he would get the opportunity himself,⁵ but as time passed, it looked like the task would have to fall to someone else. "I sincerely hope to see the day when the gospel will come to the Turks.... It is not likely that I will see that day. But you might, and then you will have to deal with the Turks carefully...that one of them might receive [the gospel]."⁶

That day seemed to be getting closer in the late 1520s. The once-distant world of Islam had extended its reach deep into Christendom as Sultan Suleyman and the Turks laid siege to Vienna in 1529. Muslims had already begun migrating to Hungary.⁷ Buda's massive Mátyás Templom had been converted into a mosque. And reports of Christian conversion to Islam were beginning to spread.⁸ "The Turk and his religion," wrote Luther in a preface to a work on the rites and customs of the Ottomans, are now "at our very doorstep."⁹ Even so, while the situation was dangerous and the Turks



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were notoriously violent, he began to think about the possibility of Christians living among Muslims, and in a work addressing his “dear Germans, the drunken swine,” he offered advice for vulnerable Christians with the hope that with the right frame of mind they might “perhaps convert many” of the Turks.¹⁰

The booklet is entitled *A Muster Sermon against the Turks*. It was written shortly after the Turks abandoned their siege on Vienna in mid-October 1529 as news began to filter into Germany about the atrocities that accompanied their march into lower Austria. And it was terrifying. Whole towns had been depopulated. Men of fighting age were gathered and executed. Women were systematically raped. Young adults and children who were spared execution by impalement or being cut in two were sent back east to be sold in slave markets. Thus, Luther began the *Muster Sermon* by admonishing his readers “in these dreadful, dangerous times” to “take heart and no longer think of peace and good days.”¹¹ The days of tribulation had arrived. The Turks sought world domination and the destruction of Christendom, for they were “the final and worst fury of the Devil against Christ.”¹² In fact, “according to scripture,” he wrote, the rise of the Ottoman Turks was predicted long ago in Daniel 7:2–14. They were none other than the little horn that sprouted up from the head of the fourth beast of Daniel’s vision, who displaced three of the original ten. The horn’s human-like eyes were symbolic of the Qur’ān, for it lacked the “divine eye. . . for it teaches nothing different than what human wisdom and reason can accept,” and its blasphemous mouth was symbolic of the false teachings of Islam.¹³

Luther’s apocalyptic description of the Turks was meant to encourage and comfort his readers. That the Ottoman Empire was the little horn meant that their days were numbered, “for the Turk will not knock off more than. . . three horns” and they had already accomplished this—in the Turkish conquest of Asia Minor, Egypt, and the Balkans.¹⁴ Thank God for this, he wrote elsewhere,

For this is sure: there are no more temporal events to wait for according to the Scriptures. It has all happened, all has been fulfilled—the Roman Empire is finished, the Turk has come to the peak of his power, the power of the Pope is about to crash—and the world is cracking to pieces as though it would tumble down. . . for if the world were to linger on, as it has been, then surely all the world would go Muhammadan or Epicurean, and there would be no more Christians left.¹⁵

Luther’s view of the world, especially later in his life, was always apocalyptic. The expansion of Islam into Christendom played an increasingly prominent role in the drama. But it was not all doom and gloom. He thought it was part of God’s plan and the arena in which God’s mission would take place. According to Michal Valčo, for Luther,

God's mission, the *missio Dei*, does not take place on neutral ground. . . The history of the world has an apocalyptic framework; a continuous battle is being waged between God and the Devil. . . Final victory is in God's hands because the decisive battle has been won by Christ on the cross, but while in this world,

Christians must suffer persecution and pain and remain a minority in a hostile world.¹⁶

Continuing, he adds, “Luther pointed to Christ’s promise in the New Testament that the gospel would be preached in all the earth before the end comes, believing that the Holy Spirit’s mission, ... was then, in his lifetime, shortly before the final apocalypse, centered on Germany.”¹⁷ So, despite the time, including the prospect of subjugation—a life of dhimmitude—under Islam, Luther believed that God might just be at work through Christians living amidst Muslims. He thus dedicated the last section of the *Muster Sermon* to advising Christians—whether they be prisoners of war, slaves, or servants of the Turks—for the task.

“At this point,” he wrote, “I need to give an exhortation and consolation to the Germans who are already captive in Turkey or who might still be taken captive.”¹⁸ “Make no mistake, life will be hard there. You will be treated like chattel, and your faith will be challenged, for you will not hear the Gospel nor learn anything about Christ and your soul’s salvation.”¹⁹

God was nevertheless at work, but the first thing you need to do in preparation is to learn the basics of the Christian faith. Most importantly, Luther insisted,

Learn the article [of the creed] where we say, ‘And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and buried, descended into hell, on the third day rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of God the Almighty Father from where He will come to judge the living and the dead.’ For everything depends on this article...by this article our faith is distinguished from all other faiths.²⁰

He even went on to suggest some devotional practices a Christian might perform that would not draw undue attention or persecution from Muslims. “In Turkey, where you can have neither a preacher nor books, recite to yourself—be it in bed or at work, be it with words or thoughts—your Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. When you get to this article,” [the article on Christ; instead of making the sign of the cross], “press your thumb against a finger or give yourself some other sign with the hand or foot to firmly fix this article in your mind and make it distinct, especially in cases where you are presented with a Turkish stumbling block or are tempted [by Islam].”²¹

The term Luther used for temptations of this sort was *Anfechtung*. What he meant by it is more than a sinful urge or tempting distraction; it was more of a spiritual assault from the outside accompanied by doubt and despair. According to Alister McGrath,

It must be emphasized that Luther does not regard *Anfechtung* as a purely subjective state of the individual. Two aspects of the concept can be distinguished, although they are inseparable: the *objective* assault of spiritual forces upon the believer, and the *subjective* anxiety and doubt which arise within him as a consequence of these assaults.²²

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Luther was no stranger to such temptation either.

Whoever is interested may learn a lesson from my example. A few times—when I did not bear this principal teaching [the doctrine of Christ] in mind—the Devil caught up with me and plagued me.... Then all the works and laws of man were right, and not an error was to be found in the whole papacy. In short, the only one who had ever erred was Luther. All my best works, teaching, sermons, and books had to be condemned. The abominable Muhammad almost became my prophet.²³

Luther believed that every Christian was susceptible to *Anfechtung*. They should, in fact, expect it—whether in Christendom or, in this case, the Ottoman Empire. “Every Christian has his temptations. He who would believe, let him reconcile himself to the fact that his faith will be assaulted with temptations. The Devil will do all he can to quench the spark of faith before it comes to a flame.”²⁴ This would be the case for Christians living in subjugation (or dhimmitude) under Islam. While there might not be state-sponsored coercion or compulsion to convert, there would certainly be social pressure.

It would also come through the doubt stirred up by certain and, in a way, impressive aspects of Islamic culture. There were many, Luther thought, including the notable piety and austerity of Muslim clerics and dervishes, the discipline and liturgical devotion of Muslims generally, the sobriety, modesty, and regimentation of Muslim society, and reports of signs and wonders at the tombs of famous Muslim saints.

The greatest, however, was the power of the Turks. They have enjoyed “so many victories, have so often defeated Christians (or so they think), and up to now have expanded so impressively, that,” it seems, “can only indicate that their holiness, faith, and way of life pleases God.”²⁵ All these things are but a “holy façade,”²⁶ though, he quickly added, for despite their temporal victories and earthly successes, because they deny Jesus to be the son of God, who died and rose from the dead, “they blaspheme God the Father and honor the Devil in place of God.”²⁷

So how should a Christian think about life among the Turks? First, Luther encouraged his readers to “be patient in their captivity and to endure and bear all their misery willingly for God’s sake.”²⁸ If you are taken captive by the Turks, it is because God has allowed it. So be of this mindset, he continued, to “accept and endure such misery and servitude sent by God patiently and willingly for God’s sake and that you serve your master (to whom you are sold) with total faithfulness and diligence regardless of the fact that you are a Christian and your master is a heathen or Turk.” Do not try to run away, and certainly do not commit suicide, for life under Islam is what God has planned for you. The scriptures exhort servants and slaves to be obedient “even though the masters are non-Christians or wicked.”²⁹ Such service and subjugation, he went on, is “good and useful...as your cross in which your faith is practiced and proven.”³⁰ In fact, there were plenty of examples of this in the history of God’s people—Jacob, Joseph, the nation of Israel (under Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon), Paul, John, and many of the other apostles. The greatest example is, of course, Jesus. “Didn’t Christ have to allow the Jews and the gentiles, Pilate, and Herod

to do what they wanted with Him?” So, he asked those vulnerable to subjugation, “Why would you have it any better than your Lord Christ Himself along with all His saints in the Old and New Testament?”³¹

This is the Christian life. Every Christian will bear a cross (or crosses) and should be prepared to endure it. As Luther put it in a sermon on suffering and the cross written around the same time that he wrote the *Muster Sermon*,

Christ by his suffering not only saved us from the Devil, death, and sin, but also...his suffering is an example, which we are to follow in our suffering. Though our suffering and cross should never be so exalted that we think we can be saved by it or earn the least merit through it, nevertheless we should suffer after Christ, that we may be conformed to him. For God has appointed that we should not only believe in the crucified Christ, but also be crucified with him.³²

Christians should therefore be prepared for a life of suffering—not over-spiritualized, self-induced suffering but “the kind of suffering that is worthy of the name and honestly grips and hurts, such as some great danger of property, honor, body, and life.”³³

Christian persecution, temptation, and stumbling blocks are a form of suffering visited upon us by the Devil or the world. ... we must suffer, in order that we may thus be conformed to Christ....

When one knows this it is all the more easy and bearable, and one can comfort oneself by saying: Very well, if I want to be a Christian, I must also wear the colors of the court; the dear Christ issues no others in his court; suffering there must be.”³⁴

It is in and through suffering that God works. In Luther’s mind, it was the *modus operandi* of his mission. As he put it in the *Muster Sermon*,

With stubbornness and impatience, you accomplish nothing more than making your master, whose servant you are, angrier and even worse. On top of that, you also disgrace the teaching and name of Christ, as though Christians are such wicked, unfaithful, treacherous people who will not serve but will rather run away and steal themselves away as scoundrels and thieves, and in doing so they are hardened and made stubborn in their faith. On the other hand, if you were to faithfully and diligently serve, you would adorn and glorify the gospel and the name of Christ so that your master and perhaps many others, no matter how wicked, would have to say, ‘Sure enough, the Christians really are a faithful, obedient, godly, humble, diligent people.’ And with that, you would also put the Turkish faith to shame and perhaps convert many when they would see that Christians surpass the Turks in humility, patience, diligence, faithfulness, and similar virtues.³⁵

So, Luther urged Christians to accept the otherwise undesirable circumstances of dhimmitude. One never knows how God might be working through His people—even the simplest among them whether man, woman, or child. Servitude and suffering are part of what it means to be a Christian in the world, and there is no escaping it. Why would there be? The Devil is the world's landlord. "There's nothing but the Devil on both sides and all around."³⁶ Therefore, Christians should expect difficulties, especially in these last days. "At the end it must happen in such a way that the Devil will attack Christianity with all his power on all sides, both physically and spiritually, and tempt it as best and as much as he can."³⁷ But it will end. Christians, then, should serve their neighbor, whoever it may be, and "wait to see what God will do."³⁸

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In the years after the assault on Vienna and the publication of the *Muster Sermon*, Luther did what he could to further prepare Christians for life under Islam, as he anticipated future conquests and the subsequent subjugation of Christians under Islamic rule. In 1541, he appealed to Germans everywhere to pray against the Turks, but also to be prepared for them as well. He reiterated the advice he gave in the *Muster Sermon*. In addition to men and women, he singled out children, writing, "I strongly urge that the children be taught the catechism. Should they be taken captive in the invasion, they will at least take something of the Christian faith with them. Who knows what God might be able to accomplish through them."³⁹ He was especially interested in fortifying their faith so that they might defend the faith in a Muslim context. The surest defenses,

our greatest protection and stoutest weapons are the articles about Christ, namely, that Christ is the son of God, that he died for our sins, that he was raised for our life, that by faith in him we are righteous and, with our sins are forgiven, are saved, etc. These are the thunderclaps that destroy not only Muhammad but even the gates of hell.⁴⁰

Though the chances were slim, he hoped that Christians strengthened in the gospel and prepared to address the specifics of Islamic doctrine might be used to call Muslims "led astray" by the Qur'ān "back to God."⁴¹

The theology of the cross, as it has come to be defined,⁴² is apparent throughout Luther's advice to Christians facing the prospect of life under Islam. The first thing he urged Christians to do as a matter of preparation is to learn the basics of the Christian faith, and he singled out, as both a soteriological and theological (perhaps even epistemological) concern, the doctrine of Christ as the central and most fundamental article of the faith. Everything else depended on it. Christ crucified for sins is why "we are called Christians and are also called and baptized into that by the gospel and thus are numbered and taken into Christianity," he wrote. "And through it, we received the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins as well as the resurrection of the dead and eternal life. For this article makes us God's children and Christ's brothers so that we become coheirs and like Him eternally."⁴³ Nothing can change this. The cross of Christ (and all that is associated with it—from the incarnation to the resurrection and ascension) is an accomplished historical and theological fact. So regardless of the success and impressive and pious trappings of Islam, he emphasized, "know and bear in mind that they still know and believe nothing of your article nor of your Lord Jesus Christ. So, for that reason [Islam] must be false."⁴⁴

He has permitted Christians to suffer under the Turks so that they may practice and prove their faith—not for their benefit before God but for the sake of the Muslim.

The theology of the cross also extended to his practical advice for how to live under Islam. It is tough council for sure, but since God does not promise Christians a life of ease, much less success, it was necessary. The Christian life, he taught, was a life that would be marked by suffering. One should expect to carry any number of crosses in this life. God permits it, plans it, and works through it. He has permitted Christians to suffer under the Turks so that they may practice and prove their faith—not for their benefit before God but for the sake of the Muslim.

Luther was not naïve. He knew full well, especially as he learned more about Islam in the years following, that Muslims are not so easy to convert. He described them as obstinate and almost impossible to convert at one point. Even so, he believed God might just be using their subject Christian population for their conversion. And so, coming back full circle, he insisted throughout his advice that Christians keep Christ and the cross at the center of their worldview so that when it came time to carry their own cross among the Turks they would be rooted and ready for the task. "Who knows what God might be able to accomplish through them. Joseph as a seventeen-year-old youth was sold into slavery into Egypt, but he had God's word and knew what he believed. And he converted all Egypt. The same is true of Daniel and his companions."⁴⁵ Perhaps he would also use the Germans.

As it turned out, the Turks never made their way back to the German borderlands in Luther's lifetime, and soon thereafter the expansion of the Ottoman empire waned. Even so, Luther's advice and the theology of the cross would persist and, while not in name, remain central to Luther's thinking about the essence of Christian theology and life in a world full of trials, tribulations, and temptations as well as in populations—whether weak or powerful—who need Christians to bear their cross so that the cross

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of Christ might be seen and heard—so that “the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14–15).

ENDNOTES

¹ See Volker Stolle's collection of Luther's missiological texts in *The Church Comes from All Nations: Luther Texts on Mission*, trans. Klaus Detlev Schulz (St. Louis: CPH, 2003).

² The preface of the Latin edition of the Augsburg Confession describes the Turks (and Islam) as the “most dreadful, hereditary, and ancient enemy of the Christian name and religion” *The Book of Concord*, eds., R. Kolb and T. J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 31.

³ On the various responses to Turkish expansion during Luther's life, see Adam S. Francisco, “Crusade, Pacifism, and Just War: Responses to Ottoman Imperialism in the early Reformation era,” *Muslim World* 107:4 (October 2017): 621–631.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Weimarer Ausgabe*. Edited by Karl Drescher et al. 127 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–2009). WA 8:708; cf. WA 2:224–225. Unless otherwise noted, translations by the author. Hereafter cited in the form WA volume number: page number.

⁵ WA 17/1:509.

⁶ WA TR 5:221.

⁷ See Géza Dávid and Pál Fodor, “Hungarian Studies in Ottoman History,” in *The Ottomans and the Balkans: A Discussion of Historiography*, ed. Fikret Adanir and Suraiya Faroqhi (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002), 342–346; Gábor Ágoston, “Muslim Cultural Enclaves in Hungary Under Ottoman Rule,” *Acta Orientalia Hungaricae* 45 (1991): 181–204.

⁸ Antonia Zhelyazkova, “Islamization in the Balkans as a Historiographical Problem: The Southeast-European Perspective,” in *The Ottomans and the Balkans*, 259.

⁹ WA 30/2:207.

¹⁰ WA 30/2:195.

¹¹ WA 30/2:161–162.

¹² WA 30/1:162.

¹³ WA 30/2:168.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: American Edition*. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia; St. Louis: Muhlenberg Press; Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), Vol 35:300 (WA DB 11/1:12). Hereafter *American Edition* cited as AE volume number: page number.

¹⁵ WA DB 11/2:381.

¹⁶ Michal Valčo, “Mission and Christianization,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Martin Luther*, eds. Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2:556.

¹⁷ Valčo, 256.

¹⁸ WA 30/2:185.

¹⁹ WA 30/2:183.

²⁰ WA 30/2:186.

²¹ WA 30/2:186.

²² Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 170.

²³ AE 14:37 (WA 31/1:355–356).

²⁴ WA 29:63–64.

²⁵ WA 30/2:191.

²⁶ WA 30/2:191

²⁷ WA 30/2:191.

²⁸ WA 30/2:192.

²⁹ WA 30/2:193. He cites 1 Cor 7:20–21, Eph 6:5–6, Col 3:22, and 1 Pt 2:13,18.

³⁰ WA 30/2:193.

³¹ WA 30/2:194.

³² AE 51:198.

³³ AE 51:198.

³⁴ AE 51:199 (WA 32:28–30).

³⁵ WA 30/2:194–195.

³⁶ WA 30/2:196.

³⁷ WA 30/2:196.

³⁸ WA 30/2:196.

³⁹ AE 43:239 (WA 51:621).

⁴⁰ AE 59:261 (WA 30/2:207–208).

⁴¹ WA 53:278. To this end, he was instrumental in getting the Qurʾān and other literature on Islam published, including an apologetic manual entitled *A Refutation of the Qurʾān*. See Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁴² See Joel Okamoto, “Mission and the Theology of the Cross,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* (May 2024): 67–78.

⁴³ WA 30/2:186.

⁴⁴ WA 30/2:187.

⁴⁵ AE 43:239 (WA 51:621).