

Luther and Islam

An Asian Perspective

Von J. Paul Rajashekar

I Luther research in Asia

The contributions of the 16th century reformers in general and of Martin Luther in particular have not elicited a great deal of interest or discussion in Asia. A survey of theological literature produced there would confirm such a general observation. There are of course some exceptions, most notably in Japan where a tradition of Luther research emerged early this century, coinciding with the Luther renaissance in Europe. In recent years efforts have also been under way to engage in Luther studies in Korea und India.¹ Apart from these exceptions, Luther has received scant attention in Asian theological discourse. Such a lack of interest seems all the more surprising given the fact that there are about four million followers of Lutheran confessional tradition in Asia.

In spite of Luther's remoteness – both geographically and culturally – from Asia, he has been generally looked upon with reverence as a Reformer and his fundamental theological insights have been accepted and acknowledged as meaningful to the life and ministry of Asian churches. Among his voluminous writings his two catechisms are the best known; they have been translated into various Asian languages and widely used. However, as far as I am aware, none of

1 Luther research in Japan seems to coincide with the Luther renaissance early this century. For reasons of its own religio-political history, Japan has displayed some fascination with European theological and philosophical developments. It showed considerable openness toward German intellectual movements from World War I onwards. From 1925 onward, a »Journal of Luther Studies« was published and a great deal of Luther's original writings were translated into Japanese. This tradition of Luther studies is still continued and new translations of Luther's works are being published under the leadership of Prof. Yoshikazu Tokuzen. For a survey of early Japanese Luther studies see Kenji MASUDA: Luther studies in Japan. ChH 31 (1962), 227-231; Yoshikazu TOKUZEN: Die Lutherforschung in Japan seit 1967. LuJ 44 (1977), 89-104.

Luther research in Korea has concentrated on the publication of a 12 volume Korean language edition of selected works of Luther under the editorship of Dr Won Yong Jiu. Recently the complete »Book of Concord« was also published in Korean language. For developments in India, see note 4 below.

his other writings seems to have drawn the attention of Asian Christians to the extent of generating further contextual reflections on them. Luther's theological thought has seldom triggered the imagination of Asian theologians.²

The fact that Luther's writings were not readily accessible to Asian Christians until the appearance of the American Edition is only part of this overall neglect. Far more importantly, Asian theological research has for the most part been preoccupied with indigenization, contextualization, the relationship between the Gospel and Asian cultures, the challenge of Asian religions and ideologies and with concerns related to Christian mission, witness and ministry. Until the appearance a decade or so ago of certain socio-economic and political issues on the Asian theological agenda, the focus of theological reflection had been centered more or less exclusively on religio-cultural issues.³ Seen from the perspective of Asian theological preoccupation, Luther appears to offer little that directly enlightens Asian concerns. This is not to say that Luther's dominant theological concerns are alien to the Asian milieu. Rather, Asian theological reflection has sought to go directly to the Christian scriptures for its contextual reflection and has depended less upon later interpretations or interpreters.

Added to this predilection, there has been a good measure of reservation in Asian reflection – especially in the first part of this century – in regard to all forms of European theology. In their efforts to articulate the relation between the Gospel and Asian cultures and religions, Asian theologians came into confrontation with the theology of Karl Barth (1886-1968), through the missiology of Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965), which looked upon non-Christian cultures and religions in a rather negative light. Asian reservations about the neo-orthodox theology of Barth brought about a general suspicion in regard to the sources of that school of thought. In other words, Luther and other Protestant reformers were seen as part and parcel of a long tradition of European theology culminating in the thought of Barth; they were considered to be indifferent or negative towards religions and cultures of Asia. With the exception of Japan,

2 Two of the best examples of Asian reflections on Luther have come from Japanese theologians: Kazoh KITAMORI: *Theology of the pain of God*. Richmond, VA 1965, and Kosuke KOYAMA: *Waterbuffalo theology*. Maryknoll, NY 1974.

3 This becomes obvious if one looks at the extensive bibliography on theological research in Asia, appended to *ASIAN VOICES IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY*/ ed. by Gerald H. Anderson. Maryknoll, NY 1976.

this attitude aroused little genuine interest in studying Luther in Asia. Interestingly enough, however, the essentials of Luther's thought were transmitted through the writings of neo-orthodox or dialectical theologians whose interpretations were somewhat distorted or colored by their own particular theology. For want of direct access to Luther's writings, Asian theologians were unwittingly influenced by second hand interpretations of Luther and I suspect that this further diminished interest in him.

What I have just observed is drawn from my experience in the context of India. Only relatively recently have some attempts been made there to read Luther seriously.⁴ In the overall context of Asia, the Lutheran World Federation has begun to initiate a series of »Luther Studies Symposia«.⁵ These efforts in Luther studies have already brought to light some degree of ambiguity in regard to the way in which the insights derived from Luther and the Lutheran tradition correspond to the religio-cultural realities of Asia. There is, I think, a genuine temptation to merely settle for a »translation« or restatement of theological meanings and categories of Luther into Asian cultural and linguistic idioms. Such attempts, though helpful in correcting past misinterpretations of Luther, may also contribute to a tendency to simply superimpose those meanings on complex challenges evident in Asian contexts. In other words, there is always

4 It is somewhat surprising that India has produced very little work on Luther. In English language, as far as I am aware, only three works on Luther have been published: Sigfried ESTBORN: *Luther and Lutheranism in the Indian church*. Madras 1961; S. W. SAVARIMUTHU: *Divine justice according to Luther and Kambar*. Madras 1978; Henry S. WILSON: *The speaking God: Luther's theology of preaching*. Madras 1982. In addition, see the unpublished doctoral dissertation J. Paul RAJASHEKAR: »Faith active in love« and »Truth realized in love«: a comparative study of the ethics of Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi. Iowa City 1981. — Iowa City, University of Iowa, Department of Religion, 1981. A Tamil language translation of selected writings by Luther is expected to appear soon.

Some amount of Indian theological reflection on Luther was stimulated in the context of ecumenical conversations in the 1950s, and on the occasions of the 450th anniversary of the »Augsburg Confession« (1980) and the 500th birth centenary of Luther (1983). See THE C.S.I. — LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL CONVERSATIONS, 1948-1959/ ed. by Joshua Russel Chandran. Madras 1964; THE AUGSBURG CONFESSIONS AND ECUMENISM IN INDIA/ ed. by Herbert E. Hoefler. Madras 1980. Also as yet unpublished seminar papers on »Encounters with Luther in India«, held in Gurukul Theological College, Madras, in 1983.

5 See APATS LUTHER STUDIES SYMPOSIA: reports 1980-1984. Geneva: LWF, Department of Church Cooperation, 1985.

the temptation to point out the putative relevance of Luther in Asia rather than to engage in a critical dialogue or interaction with his thought and to build on it.

The future of Luther research in Asia will therefore depend very much on the extent to which Luther is read from the perspectives of Asia, especially in relation to religio-cultural issues, and the extent to which their theological implications are wrestled with. Luther was of course hardly aware of Asian religions and cultures, nor was he particularly interested in learning about them. Unlike some of his Catholic contemporaries (Erasmus, for instance), Luther neither had the time nor the inclination to reflect on the theological implications of European geographical explorations or about concerns of salvation outside the church. Though concerns of Christian mission were not absent from his thought, he was not an explicit advocate of cross-cultural mission. One can therefore hardly expect Luther to have been aware of the kind of issues faced by Asian Christians living as a minority in the midst of a majority of non-Christians.

Nonetheless, the possibility of Europe coming under the sway of Turkish rule is the closest parallel that Luther could have imagined in this regard. Apart from Judaism, the only other religion Luther was interested in and with which he had some acquaintance was Islam. We know that his attitude towards both those religions was negative; however, a critical evaluation of his attitude may be instructive and may perhaps enlighten us on possible encounter between his thought and the religiously pluralistic milieu of Asia.

Since Luther's views on Jews have been an extensively researched topic and pose a unique theological problematic for Christians in general, I have chosen in the remainder of this paper to evaluate somewhat cursorily Luther's attitude toward Islam only. In restricting myself to a small facet of Luther's thought, I am quite conscious of the limitation of such an approach in exploring Luther's contemporary relevance in Asia. However, it is my hope that it might serve as a valid case study, beneficial to ongoing theological reflection in Asia.

II Luther and religions: the case of Islam

From Luther's manifold references to or writings about »Turk(s)« – a common medieval expression that in our day is synonymous with Islam or Muslims – we are able to gather a fairly adequate picture of his attitude toward Islam. His views on this subject went through a number of phases, although remaining

consistent with only slight shifts in accent. Without chronologically tracing the development of his thought in this regard, it is nonetheless possible to evaluate it from many different angles. We can, for example, view it from the perspective of his *political thought*, touching on the issues of the Two regiments theory, his attitudes toward war and peace, his view of nationalism; we can view it from his *theological thought*, referring to the centrality of justification by faith, Law and Gospel, his views on work righteousness, etc. We can also survey his thought on Islam from the standpoint of his *eschatology* (i.e. his apocalyptic view of history, the devil and wrath of God); or from the perspective of a *translator*, *exegete*, *apologist* or *educator*; or even from the angle of a vituperating *polemicist* (especially in relation to his major opponents, the Pope, Jews and radical reformers). All these perspectives together make up a composite picture of Luther's stand toward Islam.

It is not my intention in this paper to examine all these perspectives since there are a good many secondary sources on them.⁶ Having said that, I must also note that, compared with other aspects of his thought, Luther's understanding of Islam has not been an overworked theme. While the immediate political and ecclesiastical contexts have often been examined, what has been somewhat neglected is his view of Islam seen against the long tradition of medieval interpretation of Islam. A thorough analysis from this perspective might perhaps enlighten us more in regard to the extent to which Luther simply perpetuated or transcended a somewhat distorted view of Islam prevalent in the medieval European world.

For my limited purposes, it will be helpful first to gain a brief overview of the medieval image of Islam as a background to Luther. I shall then proceed to examine some salient aspects of Luther's view, although only to the extent that

6 Helmut LAMPATER: Luthers Stellung zum Türkenkrieg. M 1940; C. Umhau WOLF: Luther and Mohammedanism. The Muslim world 31 (Hartford, CT 1941), 162-177; George W. FORELL: Luther and the war against the Turks. ChH 14 (1945), 226-271; Stephen A. FISCHER-GALATI: Ottoman imperialism and the Lutheran struggle for recognition in Germany, 1520-1529. ChH 23 (1954), 46-67; Harvey BUCHANAN: Luther and the Turks, 1519-1529. ARG 47 (1956), 145-159; Kenneth SETTON: Lutheranism and the Turkish peril. Balkan studies 3 (Thessalonike 1962), 133-168; George H. WILLIAMS: Erasmus and the reformers on non-Christian religions and *salus extra ecclesiam*. In: Action and conviction in Early Modern Europe/ ed. by Theodore K. Rabb and Jerrold E. Seigel. Princeton, NJ 1969, 319-370; Egil GRISLIS: Luther and the Turks. The Muslim world 64 (Hartford, CT 1974), 180-193, 270-291.

it facilitates an Asian contextual reflection on Luther. In other words, my treatment of Luther's views on Islam will in no way claim to be detailed or exhaustive.

1 Medieval image of Islam

In a general sense, Islam was an enigma and its existence posed a profound theological problem for medieval Christian, persistently calling for answers.⁷ But there were hardly any resources from the Christians past to effectively refute Islam (since the large amount of polemical literature on Judaism was inadequate). The Latin West was thus puzzled by the role of Islam in history: was it a sign of the apocalyptic end of the world, a heresy or aberration of Christianity, a schism or a new religion, a work of man or devil, an obscene parody of Christianity, or a system of thought that deserved respect? In trying to decide among these possibilities, Christian scholars lacked facts about Islam; they were steeped in ignorance compounded by linguistic difficulties, cultural prejudice, fear of contamination – factors that only encouraged a culturally confined view of the world.

The Latin West also felt uneasy about Islam as an intellectual thought. Islam was an immensely successful religion; within a relatively short span after its inception it experienced an astonishing growth. It acquired power, wealth and profound intellectual maturity and sophistication. Partly as a result of their inheritance of Greek sciences and philosophy, Muslim scholars were ahead in their intellectual development at a time when Western Christians were going through a period of stagnation. Although the Latin West did finally draw upon the thought of Avicenna (980-1037), Abu Hamid al Gazali (Algazzali, 1059-1111), Averroes (1126-1198) and other Muslim philosophers, it seldom acknowledged this indebtedness. Muslim philosophers were often seen as disconnected from anything specifically Islamic.

Islam was also a strong political force and a perpetual threat to Western Europe. Beginning with the First Crusade and up to the zenith of Ottoman

⁷ For a detailed discussion of Islam in the medieval world, see Norman DANIEL: *Islam and the West: the making of an image*. Edinburgh 1960. 2. Aufl. 1966; James W. SWEETMAN: *Islam and Christian theology*. Vol. 1 II. LO 1955, and Richard W. SOUTHERN: *Western views of Islam in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge, MA 1962 – 2. ed. 1978; in German language *Das Islambild des Mittelalters*/ tr. by Sylvia Hofer. S 1981. I am indebted to the volume of Southern for my analysis of Islam in the next few paragraphs.

imperialism in the 16th century, Muslims and Christians understood themselves to be two mutually exclusive societies at war. A good measure of Christian perception of Islam was influenced by this factor.

Given the enormity of the Islamic challenge, medieval Christian response shows considerable variation and development, depending upon the historical period under examination. At the risk of extreme generalization, four major forms of response can be identified. 1. In the early period of Christian awareness, Christians without access to substantial facts relied on their Bible for clues to understanding Islam. Thus the existence of Islam was either explained in terms of its origins (as in Bede's [672/73-735] analysis of Old Testament roots), or in terms of its ultimate fate (as in Spanish apocalyptic thought of Paul Alvarus [ca. 800 - ca. 860]). 2. Following the triumphant outcome of the First Crusade, highly fictionalized versions of Islam – partly drawing on Byzantine sources – came to be current. This was a period of »triumphant imagination«, as one scholar put it.⁸ Islam was looked upon as a religion of idolatry and sexual promiscuity, of frauds and banditry, and Muhammad as a magician, etc. All this deliberate misrepresentation had a long lasting impact on the West. 3. From the middle of the 12th century onward, in the wake of several military reverses experienced by the crusaders, Islam came to be looked at in a more rational and scholarly way. Peter the Venerable (ca. 1094-1156) made a new beginning to combat the heresy of Islam. Men like Roger Bacon (ca. 1214 - ca. 1292), Raymond Lull (1232-1315/16), Rinaldo from Montecroce (Ricolto Pennini de Monte Croce, ca. 1243-1320), John of Segovia († after 1456), Nicolas of Cusa (1401-1464) and others developed this line of thought in their own way. It was a period when the value of crusades came to be questioned and detailed argumentation and polemics were preferred. Some virtues of Islamic religion were also occasionally noted. 4. Finally there was also a development – although a somewhat weak one – that viewed Islam in a different light, as a mirror for the critical self-reflection of Christendom. John Wycliff (ca. 1320-1384) and to some extent Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466/69-1536) were its most notable figures.

2 *Luther on Islam*

The four major approaches outlined above appear in one form or another in Luther's writings. In certain respects, his was the last major contribution to the

8 Southern: Op. cit., 28f.

medieval problematic of Islam, but seen from the vantage point of the Reformation. Historical circumstances forced him to deal with Islam in two respects.

First, quite early in his career, during the controversy about indulgences, Luther followed Roger Bacon, Wycliff, John of Segovia and Erasmus and opposed the idea of crusades. His main intention was to oppose the sale of indulgences for the financing of crusades. In this regard Luther looked upon the visitation of the Turks as the well deserved rod of God for the punishment of Christian transgressions.⁹ He did not realize at the time how this statement of his would be used against him by the Pope in his bull of excommunication.

Luther defended his original statement thus: »But this article does not mean that we are not to fight against the Turk, as that holy manufacturer of heresies, the pope, charges. It means, rather, that we should first mend our ways and cause God to be gracious to us . . . All the pope accomplishes with his crusading indulgences and his promises of heaven is to lead Christians with their lives into death and with their souls into hell. This is, of course, the proper work of the Antichrist.«¹⁰

Thus in the context of the early Reformation controversy over indulgences, the attitudes towards the Turks and the Turkish threat became an issue. Turks in effect became the beating rod in an ecclesiastical controversy. Till the end Luther never abandoned his position in regard to the Turks as being an expression of God's wrath which required prayer and repentance on the part of Christians. What is evident in his early statements was his attitude of tolerance and his opposition to the notion of crusades. This, of course, was his view before he came to a full realization of the Turkish threat to Central Europe.

Secondly, with the fall of Belgrade in 1521 and Hungary in 1526 to Sultan Suleiman II (1494/95, 1520-1566), Luther felt compelled not only to clarify his earlier views on the Turkish war but also to undertake an analysis of the Turkish religion in order to educate his fellow German Christians. He now explicitly advocated war against Turks under the leadership of the Emperor. His writing entitled »On war against the Turk« (1529)¹¹ provides us with clues to his own understanding of Islam and his evaluation of it. In due course Luther pursued his interest in Islam and published the following: »A sermon against

9 Am 31, 92 $\triangle$ WA 1, 535, 30-34.

10 Am 32, 90 $\triangle$ WA 7, 443, 19-28.

11 Am 46, 155-205 $\triangle$ Vom Krieg wider die Türken (WA 30 II, 107-148. 713).

the Turks« (1529);¹² »A book on the life and customs of the Turks« (1530), compiled by one Georg von Mühlbach between 1475 and 1481 with a preface by Luther;¹³ »Appeal to prayer against the Turks« (1541);¹⁴ »Confutation of the Qur'an« by Rinaldo da Montecroce, originally published in 1320, with Luther's preface and additional refutation in 1542;¹⁵ and finally his preface to Theodor Bibliander's (1504/09-1564) Latin translation of Peter the Venerable's Qur'an (1543), published in Basel. It is interesting that the last publication, Qur'an, was made possible through the direct intervention of Luther. The City Council of Basel had withheld permission to print the book for fear of spreading fables and heresies. Luther, on the contrary, urged the Council that it was better to expose the perversities of an alien religion than to hide it from evangelical Christians. The Council agreed and permitted the publication on condition that no copies of the book were offered for sale in Basel and that neither the name of the City nor of the publisher appear in the book.¹⁶

These major publications on Turks or Islam, together with numerous references to Turks elsewhere, provide us with an astonishing amount of information on Luther's attitude. I shall now deal with some major aspects.

Writing in 1529, Luther was quite conscious of the fact that much information regarding Muslims that he and his contemporaries had inherited was inaccurate. He noted, »Some, indeed, have invented outrageous lies about the Turks to incite us Germans against them, but there is no need for lies; there is enough truth.«¹⁷ We have already seen how true this statement was against the background of the medieval images of Islam. Luther was indeed confronted with the difficult task of separating facts from fiction. He was probably referring to the numerous pamphlets produced against the Turks during the Reformation era.¹⁸ On the other hand, Luther deplored the fact that »neither our great lords nor our scholars have taken any pains to give us any certain knowledge about

12 Eine Heerpredigt wider den Türken (WA 30 II, 160-197. 713).

13 Vorrede zu Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum (WA 30 II, 205-208).

14 Am 43, 213-241 ≙ Vermahnung zum Gebet wider den Türken (WA 51, 585-625; 30 I, 679).

15 [RICOLDO Pennini de Monte Croce]: Verlegung des Alcoran Bruder Richardi Prediger Ordens/ verdeutscht und hrsg. von Martin Luther (WA 53, 272-396).

16 Vorrede zu Theodor Biblianders Koranausgabe (WA 53, [561] 569-572).

17 Am 46, 176. 182 ≙ WA 30 II, 121, 24-26; 127, 4f.

18 Cf. John W. BOHNSTADT: The infidel scourge of God: the Turkish menace as seen by German pamphleteers of the Reformation era. Phil 1968.

the life of the Turks in the two estates, spiritual and temporal; and yet the Turk has come so near us». ¹⁹ He appears to have had little access to the wealth of Christians materials on Islam and seems to have suspected the authenticity of what little he did have. When he published Ricaldo's »Confutation of the Qur'an« (one of the most elaborate treatises on Islam in the medieval world) in 1542, he noted in his preface that he had long ago (1530) read the work but had found it difficult to agree with it. Only when he first saw the Latin translation of the Qur'an (probably the paraphrased version of Peter the Venerable, later published by Bibliander), he came to realize the value of Ricaldo's work. ²⁰

In spite of a lack of authoritative information, Luther had accumulated a fair amount of knowledge of Islamic doctrines and practices. Like many of his predecessors, he was quick to notice that, »Turk's faith is a patchwork of Jewish, Christian, and heathen beliefs. He [Muhammad] gets his praise of Christ, Mary, the apostles, and other saints from the Christians. From the Jews he gets abstinence from wine and fasting at certain times of the year, washing like the Nazarites (Num. 6: 1-2) and eating off the ground. And the Turks perform the same holy works as some of our monks and hope for everlasting life at the Judgment Day, for, holy people that they are, they believe in the resurrection of the dead, though few of the papists believe in it.« ²¹

Elsewhere he noted the similarities between Jewish and Islamic ceremonies: »The Jew can agree more readily with the Turk than with the Christian. The Jew and the Turk agree on the truth of God, neither believes the Trinity or Baptism. Both agree on circumcision and on other external ceremonies.« ²²

Luther clearly knew that the Qur'an is the permanent source of Muslim belief. In 1529 he claimed to possess some parts of it and called this »a book of sermons or doctrines of the kind we call Pope's decretals«. ²³ With only a limited part of the Qur'an at his disposal. Luther gleaned some important doctrinal differences between Christianity and Islam. He wrote: »In the first place, he [Muhammad] greatly praises Christ und Mary as being the only ones without sin, and yet he believes nothing more of Christ than that he is a holy prophet, like Jeremiah or Jonah and denies that he is God's son and true God. Further-

19 Am 46, 176 $\triangle$ WA 30 II, 121, 20-23.

20 WA 53, 272, 3-19.

21 Am 46, 177 $\triangle$ WA 30 II, 122, 29 - 123, 6.

22 Cited by Wolf: Op. cit., 165 $\triangle$ WA TR 5, 532, 7-10 (6195).

23 Am 46, 176 $\triangle$ WA 30 II, 121, 30f.

more, he does not believe in Christ as the saviour of the world, who died for our sins, but that he preached to his own time and completed his work before his death, just like any other prophet.

On the other hand, Muhammad highly exalts and praises himself and boasts that he had talked with God and the angels, and that since Christ's office of prophet is now complete he had been commanded to bring the world to his faith, and if the world is not willing, to compel it or punish it with the sword; there is much glorification of the sword in it. Therefore the Turks think that their Muhammad is much higher and greater than Christ, for the office of Christ has come to an end and Muhammad's office is still in force.²⁴

Here one must make certain allowances for Luther's somewhat exaggerated emphasis on Muhammad's claims; nevertheless, he is fairly accurate in reading the Muslim claim that Muhammad is the final »seal of the prophets«. Luther does not appear to have had much knowledge of Muhammad's biography and what little he says about the prophet is based on his information regarding Turkish morals, especially their sexual promiscuity.

Luther recognized the centrality of absolute monotheism in Islam. But from the standpoint of his theology, such a conception did not amount to much, for one can know the same from nature and human speculation. However, he acknowledged how abhorrent idolatry was to the Turks, and noted the central Islamic creed »There is no God but God«, however, he was unwilling to recognize the Muslim »Allah« as a true God, notwithstanding semantic similarities which he found between the Hebrew »Eloha« and the Arabic »Allah«. Questioning the logic of the Muslim creed, he looked upon »Allah« as nothing but devil. As he put it, »he must just smite the Turk's Allah, that is his god the devil, and overcome his power and divinity«.²⁵

This is a logical conclusion to his belief that the Turk as an »instrument of the devil« must owe allegiance to his master who must also be the devil. In equating the Turkish or Muslim God with the devil, Luther went far beyond the medieval tradition. Earlier Christian scholars on Islam had generally recognized that Christians, Jewish and Muslims share a common conception of God.²⁶ But Luther, at the height of his rage against the Turks and influenced by his

24 Am 46, 176f $\triangle$ WA 30 II, 122, 2-15.

25 Am 46, 183f $\triangle$ WA 30 II, 128, 10-16.

26 Cf. Daniel: Op. cit., 39-45.

apocalyptic reading of history, was uncharitable about the Muslim notion of God. In the tradition of medieval apocalyptic interpretation of Islam, Luther in his »A sermon against the Turks« developed an eschatology of Turkish struggle. In this there is clearly a reluctance to identify the Turkish religion as an instrument of the devil; rather the Sultan and his army are seen as such.

It is possible to cull other aspects of Islamic doctrine from Luther's writings but it will suffice here to note that Luther repeatedly refers to one of the central differences between the two religions, i.e. the doctrine of Christ.

In his preface to »The book on life and customs of the Turks«, he succinctly states the shortcomings of Islam: »Muhammad denies that Christ is the son of God. He denies that He has died for our sins. He denies that He rose for our life. He denies faith in Him remits sin and justifies us. He denies that His coming judgment of the living and the dead. Perhaps there is a resurrection of the dead, but he believes in a judgment by God. He denies the Holy Spirit and His gifts.«²⁷

In alluding to a portion of Luther's writings on Islam, it has been my intention to demonstrate only Luther's grasp of Islamic doctrines. Luther gets high marks for his comprehension of Islam, given the paucity of materials he had in his possession. But some additional comments are needed to see how Luther used this information to judge or evaluate Islam. Here we should constantly bear in mind the polemical context of his thought on the one hand, and his own theological convictions based on his reading of the Christian Scripture on the other. It is the latter that gave him the handle for evaluating Islam and it is therefore hardly surprising that, from the standpoint of his central doctrine of »justification by faith«, Islam appeared to him to be woefully inadequate. For him it was nothing but a »doctrine of works«.²⁸

Because it denies that Christ is not God, it is a religion that pleases reason. Luther would grant no revelatory significance to the Qur'an because for him it contained only human reason without God's word and spirit,²⁹ notwithstanding the amount of Old and New Testament material it contains. The Turkish threat had indeed colored his perception to such an extent that he could only see in the Qur'an the sword as the noblest work. He thus dismissed it as a »foul and

27 WA 30 II, 207, 40 - 208, 2.

28 Am 46, 177 $\triangle$ WA 30 II, 122, 21.

29 WA 30 II, 168, 16-21.

shameful book«. ³⁰ It was in order to expose the perversities contained in the Qur'an that Luther thought he should translate it into German, but never did.

Because Islam contradicted certain crucial aspects of Christian doctrine, Luther could see nothing of value in that religion. As he put it, »Muhammad's Qur'an is such a great spirit of lies that it leaves almost nothing of Christian truth remaining, how could it have any other result than that it should become a great and mighty murderer, liar and murderer under the appearance of truth and righteousness.« ³¹ Luther levelled three basic criticisms against Islam: it is a religion of deceit and murder and it advocates utter disregard for marriage. These criticisms are typical of the virulent polemics that he levelled against all his opponents, whether Pope, Jews, radical reformers, etc. Luther was absolutely certain that Turks were the enemies of Christianity, an image that medieval Christian tradition had bequeathed to him. In his view, the Turks not only destroyed the Christian faith but the temporal government as well. However, Luther was unwilling to recommend the destruction of »Turkish religion«. He opposed such views and argued that there was no point in using the sword to destroy »unbelievers and non-Christians« on account of their wickedness. He realized that the vices of which Islam or Muslims were accused were equally rife in Latin Christendom. His attitude was therefore to: »Let the Turk believe and live as he will, just as one lets the pope and other false Christians live.« ³² In this regard, Luther was far more charitable to Muslims than he was to the Jews.

One would suspect that part of this generosity is due to Luther's observation of high virtues among Muslims. In his later writings, he explicitly acknowledged this. In his preface to the »Book on life and customs of the Turks«, he noted that the Muslim morality can indeed put Christians to shame. ³³ Again in his preface to »Confutation of the Qur'an« he noted the laudable work of Muslim philosophers but like some of his medieval forebears, he hardly considered them to be real Muslims and felt that they did not really believe in the Qur'an. ³⁴ Whatever praise Luther heaps on Muslim morality, it allows him to criticize the immorality and fraudulent piety of Catholic Christians, especially

³⁰ Am 46, 176 $\triangle$ WA 30 II, 122, 1f.

³¹ Am 46, 181 $\triangle$ WA 30 II, 126, 10-14.

³² Am 46, 185f $\triangle$ WA 30 II, 131, 6-8.

³³ WA 30 II, 206, 31-34.

³⁴ WA 53, 388, 32f; 389, 31 - 390, 5.

the Pope. But ultimately, Luther finds no value in such a moral religion, and in comparison with Islam, Christianity is more than a matter of good behavior and good works;³⁵ it is rather of salvation through Christ.

In summing up this somewhat cursory treatment of Luther's attitude towards Islam, we may note that his writings on Islam provide us with another handle in understanding his general theological convictions. But to what extent Luther's analysis throws any new light on Islam is a question worth posing. As we noted earlier, Luther inherited a certain image of Islam and in many respects reiterated them, adding some of his own, albeit in the Reformation perspective. He provides us with no particular answer to the challenge of Islam that had plagued the medieval world for centuries. As a theological challenge, Luther looked upon the existence of Islam more as a religious innovation and an irrational aberration of Christianity, and hence as a work of the devil. Despite his desire to take Islam seriously in its own terms, he at times dismisses it in summary fashion as containing no word of God and that therefore Muslims are like »filthy sows, they do not know why they live or what they believe«.³⁶ Such judgment hardly allowed him to come to grips with the theological problematic of Islam.

What one notices in Luther – as the last major contribution to the medieval discussion on Islam – is a sense of despair. He was quite certain that Muslims – like the Jews – were too hard headed, despised the Christian Scriptures, rejected Christian exegesis and arguments, and were impossible to convert.³⁷ So at best, Luther saw Muslims as instruments of God's wrath, pointing to the end of the world; the only positive value of Islam's existence was that it ought to prompt Christians to repentance and prayer. He could not imagine any political solution to the Islamic challenge and, like Wycliff and others before him, thought it therefore fruitless to fight against Islam and the Turks except in self defense. He seems to have been persuaded by the probability that Christendom would soon be engulfed by Islam. So he wrote to comfort evangelical Christians, telling them not to despair unduly but to continue to abide in the Word of God and to separate themselves from Jews, Turks and Gentiles.³⁸

35 WA 30 II, 206, 31f.

36 WA 53, 391, 18f.

37 WA 53, 276, 12-15; 30 II, 191, 7f.

38 WA 53, 570, 35 - 571, 28.

III Some remarks on the relevance of Luther's thought in Asia

1. From our preceding analysis, it may be evident that Luther's views on Islam do not in themselves provide us with new insights that go beyond his time and into ours. His views are in all respects an integral part of his theology and must be seen as such. Luther's theology – as scholars never fail to remind us – was a contextual theology. As a major theological figure prior to the dissolution of Western Christendom, he was largely preoccupied with concerns of its renewal. Unlike some of his Catholic predecessors and contemporaries who had already begun to focus their attention on the significance of Christianity far beyond the confines of Christendom, on issues of mission in other lands, and on issues of morality and salvation outside the church, Luther was overwhelmingly preoccupied with issues of salvation within the church. In this sense his theology was not only context bound but also culture bound. His theological vision was culturally circumscribed and therefore those of us engaged in theological reflection in the context of religious and cultural plurality of Asia should be cautious of an uncritical adaptation or translation of Luther's theology, methodology and categories of thought in Asia.

2. Having said that, we should also note that Luther's thought was derived from his deep understanding of Scripture. It was characteristic of his age that the Bible served as an effective tool for interpreting the historical realities that made least sense to the interpreter. Luther could thus see the significance of the Turkish threat on the basis of Daniel's apocalyptic vision and conclude that the Muslim God was none other than the devil. Few of us in our time would use the Bible in that manner (except for those Christians who subscribe to a dispensationalist theology). There are indeed serious limitations in quoting Scripture to defend Christian particularity and exclusivism. Almost three centuries before Luther, a Flemish Franciscan by the name of William of Rubroek (1215/20 - ca. 1270) discovered the difficulty involved in such an approach. Having come from Europe to the capital of Mongolia with the mistaken belief that the great Genghis Khan (1155/67-1227) was a Christian and could therefore be enlisted to side with Christian crusades, he found himself in a situation of interreligious dialogue with Muslims, Buddhists and Nestorian Christians. He soon realized that quoting Christian Scripture was fruitless because others too did the same with theirs.³⁹

39 Southern: *Op. cit.*, 47-49.

Luther, of course, had no experience of interreligious dialogue and therefore hardly recognized this problem. Even if he had recognized it, his superior exegesis of Christian Scripture could have effectively refuted both Rabbinic exegesis of the Old Testament and Qur'anic view of Jesus. He was absolutely certain of Christian monopoly of truth and his interest in learning about other faiths was limited to their refutation. Asian Christians would be ill advised to follow Luther in this respect. We cannot excuse ourselves from the task of understanding people of other faiths in their own historical and fiduciary framework by simply resorting to the Bible. Those who have had experience in interreligious dialogue are far less confident than Luther about claims of Christian uniqueness, not only because such claims have many times in the past served as an ideology for suppressing and oppressing other peoples and cultures but also because in an age which decries all claims to superiority – whether racial, sexual or cultural – it is dubious indeed to claim Christian superiority over others. The tremendous changes that have taken place between Luther's times and ours in regard to Christian perceptions of others certainly warrant a rereading and reinterpretation of Christian Scriptures.

3. It is not Christian Scripture in itself that is the problem in our engagement with people of other faiths in a religiously pluralistic context but quite often the doctrinal assumption that we impose on Scriptural texts in order to draw negative conclusions about non-Christians. Our cherished dogmas and doctrines and our theological categories tend to take precedence in our encounter with others. We have done much injustice and violence to those of other religions by imposing our Christian doctrinal assumptions on them. Consequently they have no truth as we Christians know it. At best they are aberrations of truth. For instance Luther's categories of Law and Gospel which function so well in interpreting Christian Scriptures lead to certain predictable conclusions when imposed upon other religions. The beliefs and values of people of other religions will only appear as expressions of Law and reason and therefore promote only »good works« or work righteousness. We seldom pause to think what kind of an image we have of God who is reduced to be an operator of Law and reason when it comes to non-Christians but is both an operator of Law and Gospel when it comes to Christians? Similar difficulties also besiege us when we use Luther's category of »general revelation« as well. On the basis of this category we can ascribe all sorts of moral values in creation and cultures but of course they carry no salvific significance. To grant any salvific value in other

faiths would indeed land us in difficulties regarding the necessity of Christ's work and so we must insist on a historical knowledge of »proper revelation«. Our doctrinal assumptions which follow their own inner logic serve primarily to bolster our Christian claims of self identity and exclusivism and to see what we want to see in others. One can cite several other examples of difficulties posed by our inherited categories of understanding, but my point is that using Christian grammar and logic to evaluate other religions will invariably place these in a distorted light.⁴⁰

I am not oblivious of the fact that Christianity accords a normative value to its doctrines and that we cannot fully avoid using those norms in evaluating the beliefs of others. But Christians in Asia and elsewhere must first seek to understand others in the totality of their beliefs and experiences, and learn to respect their self definitions. We need to evolve a theology of religions that neither violates the integrity of our faith nor that of others. In religiously pluralistic situations of Asia, any theological approach which is content only in exercises of self-justification, self-legitimacy and claims of self-sufficiency is radically questioned and rejected. Asians and others elsewhere are in a situation where we not only need to take a responsible view of the belief of others but, far more importantly, take the religious experiences and claims of others into account in our theological methodology and articulation. This implies that Asian Christians interested in Luther will need to critically test and evaluate the adequacy of Luther's categories and his doctrinal assumptions in actual engagement in interreligious dialogue. If we fail to take our engagement with others seriously, whatever theology of religion we may proffer will turn out to be mere postulates of our doctrines rather than interpretations of religious realities around us.

4. We thus live in an age of dialogue in which Christians are forced to recognize a »rough parity« between religions. Such a parity has always been a fact of life in Asia and a characteristic view of many religions of Asian provenance. At about the same period in the 16th century when Luther was engaged

40 For a discussion on the problem of Lutheran categories in relation to other religions refer to *RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND LUTHERAN THEOLOGY*/ ed. by J. Paul Rajashekar. Geneva 1988. (LWF Report 1988; 23 f) and especially in relation to the Asian context see *THEOLOGY IN DIALOGUE: theology in the context of religious and cultural plurality in Asia*/ ed. by J. Paul Rajashekar and Satoru Kishii. Geneva: LWF, 1987.

in virulent polemics against Jews and Muslims, another Muslim – the Moghul King Akbar (1542, 1556-1605) – was experimenting in interreligious dialogue. He was aware that there were resources in different religions that could enrich humanity. Luther too saw that but in a very negative sense. He looked upon Turks as a chastisement for Christian apostasy and unfaithfulness. There are many in our time who also view the contemporary resurgence of non-Christian religions and new religious movements in much the same way. However, there is in Luther's view an element of positive significance that is relevant for us today. Without seeing other religions as instruments of God's wrath, we can regard their continued existence as an opportunity for repentance and self-introspection. We have to repent for our uncharitable view of others, our lack of love and our acts of violence (crusades, Holocaust, etc.) against others, and for our failure to take up the cross. Luther's »theology of the cross« is an extremely helpful posture in our encounter with people of other faiths in Asia. It permits no triumphalist view of Christianity; it certainly allows us to hold steadfastly to our knowledge of Christ through the cross and leaves the mystery of God's work in other faiths as an open question. A theology of the cross in our time means practicing a theology of Christian hospitality.

Luther rightly emphasized sola gratia in his theology, and this grace of God rightly understood is far beyond our doctrinal comprehension of it and the theological limitations we impose on it. Acknowledging this fully opens us to the miracles of God's reign in life and history of other nations and cultures. We Christians would be richer and more blessed for that.