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MODULE 9

Lutheran perspectives on religious diversity: A review of Luther's understanding of Islam

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1. Introduction

In many parts of the world today, Lutherans live in the midst of religious diversity. In my home country Indonesia, Lutherans live next to neighbors who are Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or followers of local religious traditions. Religious diversity overlaps with ethnic diversity. The situation is quite dynamic. Previous generations have developed a meaningful culture of living together as good neighbors. However, in history as well as in today's situation, conflicts between religious communities negatively affect our relationships. The origin of such conflicts might not be religious, but a conflict over economic, political or cultural resources, but when a religious dimension is added to it, the strife can get even more fierce. Globally, relations to Muslims are often the focus of attention. The debates are quite complex and often politicized.

There is an increased awareness of the need to engage constructively in interreligious relations. We are called to build bridges and work together for just and peaceful societies. In Indonesia, as well as in Germany, where I live since some years, there are several interreligious initiatives, both at grassroots' level as well as at leadership level.

Because of a lot of mutual misrepresentations and misperceptions, even polemics, in all of our societies there is a new attempt to foster exchange that helps to build trustworthy relationships. Churches intentionally seek opportunities for mutual encounter and collaboration on issues of shared concern. There are a number of good practice examples where churches work together with mosques on social issues, to jointly help people in need or to work on environmental issues to jointly engage in care for creation. Furthermore, there is dialogue between Christian theologians and Muslim scholars in which we explore questions of theology and of ethics together.

This is quite different from the time of Luther when opportunities for such direct dialogue were not available in Germany. When we ask for Lutheran perspectives on Islam, we have to look at Luther's statements, which were made in a quite different political setting. We have to identify what in Luther's perspectives might still be relevant today, and we have to critically review Luther's polemic and destructive statements that have negatively contributed to the conflicts between Christians and Muslims and might still do harm today. Again, we need to keep in mind that Luther probably never met a Muslim, he never had direct encounter, thus was never able to discuss the matters that he was concerned about with Muslims. In several writings, Luther mentions the "Turks", often as part of a list of opponents with which he strongly disagrees, similar to the Pope, the Jews, the Anabaptists, the heathen and others. It needs to be underlined that "Islam" is not a topic of its own that Luther would have explored in its own right, rather, Luther's statements on Islam are responses to political and military developments at the time.

2. Luther's view on Islam

2.1. The context: military threat

In Luther's time, aggression and military attack was the order of the day. The Crusades were the darkest history of Muslim and Christian relations to date. At the Synod of Clermont in 1095, Pope Urban II declared a military expansion to seize the occupied city of Jerusalem. After a series of Crusades, the biggest Christian city, Constantinople fell into the hands of the Ottoman caliphate in 1453. During the Reformation era, there was fear among European Christians because of the activities of the Ottoman army in Europe. In 1521, Islamic forces conquered Belgrade, in 1541 Budapest was occupied by the Ottoman forces.

2.2. Threat by the Ottoman Empire as God's Punishment

Luther's article "On War against the Turk" (1529) deals with the question of military action. In that Luther not only critically relates to the "Turks", but also to the military response of Christian leaders at the time. Luther did not urge Christians to fight against the Ottoman military expansion, but he saw their arrival as a form of God's punishment against Christians that have fallen into sin. Due to this, Luther ordered Christians to confess their sins and be reconciled with God. Many of the passages show how Luther was shaped by a strong apocalyptic view of the end of time that was very present in his mind.

Although Luther considered Islam as a threat, he did not approve the politics of crusade that was supported by the church at that time. Luther said that war on behalf of Christ or a cross-bringing war is contrary to the principle of peace as written in Matthew 5, 38ff. Despite that, Luther himself did not reject the idea of war as long as aimed to defend oneself and the people. Luther criticized a war on behalf of Christians against Muslim troops.

2.3. Luther's Theological Perspective on Islam

Luther's deep concern throughout his life was to nurture true faith. He perceived around him a lot of false Christian teaching and false Christian practice. In addition to these immense threats from within, he observed threats from outside, of which the Muslims were part.

For Luther, the issue was not only about military strength, but also theological questions. Luther pointed out some key theological differences between Islam and the Christian faith. But, and this to be underlined first, Luther acknowledged in his explanation of the Creed in the Large Catechism that Muslims "believe in and worship only the one, true God" (p. 440). Yet "they do not know what his [God's] attitude is towards them" (ibid.).

The key theological difference that Luther highlights is the view of Jesus Christ as Lord (Christology). For Luther, faith in Christ is central. Islam recognizes Jesus as the son of Mary and accredits him the status of a prophet. Yet, Islam does not recognize that Jesus was killed and crucified. For Luther it is central that Christ reveals God's love and grace to us, outside Christ the source of grace is not found.

This theological judgment has then been politicized and used quite prominently in a negative way in the Preface of the Augsburg Confession. There "the Turk" is described as "that most dreadful, hereditary, and ancient enemy of the Christian name and religion" (p. 31). How do we deal with such statements today? With regard to the conflictive relations to the Roman-Catholic Church, with regard to the Jewish people, and also with regard to Anabaptists, the global Lutheran communion has already self-critically reviewed the negative and harmful passages and publicly committed to conciliatory relationships. With regard to Islam, some theologians have already started a critical review.

2.4. Luther's Engagement with the Qur'an

From Luther's text "Contra legem Saracenorum," we know that he actually read the Qur'an only in 1542, in Latin. In 1543, Luther along with Melanchthon, wrote the introduction of the translation of Qur'an in Latin that was edited by Theodor Bibliander, published in 1543. In that introduction, it is difficult to find Luther's argument about a dialogical meeting with Islam. It is clear, however, that Luther's argument in his introduction is much influenced by the situation of war and the secondary translation of the Qur'an.

Luther first used the *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (On the Rites and Customs of the Turks). As he regarded adequate knowledge as essential for any judgement, he published this document with his own preface so that others could also form their judgement. He used Nicolas of Cusa's, *Cribratio Alkorani* (Sifting the Qur'an), and translated Riccoldo of Monte di Croce's *Confutatio Alcorani* (Confutation of the Qur'an) into German.

Furthermore, in 1543 Luther strongly supported the reprinting of Robert of Ketton's Latin translation of the Qur'an in Basel, adding a theological preface in which he set forth his perspective towards Islam.

Luther's writings on the Turks and especially his polemical comments en passant need a critical reading today. His efforts to obtain authentic information remain an important reminder for Lutherans to move beyond stereotypes and preconceived ideas. Being aware of this heritage, Lutheran churches have in recent decades developed information and educational material about Islam. Furthermore, they have tried to revisit the core Lutheran insights and asked whether these insights can be used to build bridges instead of building walls.

2.5. Luther's theology of grace

In his theology, Luther unfolds the understanding of grace and faith: God gives His grace to humanity so that they may believe in Him. Grace is the mercy of God to human beings which can not be replaced or obtained by deeds. God grants His grace far before the understanding of Solus Christus is defined by the fathers of the Church. Therefore, God's grace must be understood inclusively and universally. Theologically, God's Grace pre-dates the advent of Christianity itself.

Sola Fide teaches that faith is a gift from God and measured through God's prerogative right. Based on this understanding, no one can claim that his or her faith is better than others; God is the ultimate determinant of the perfection of that faith. This understanding opens ways for dialogue and mutual learning among religions.

Martin Luther emphasised that our identity as Christians cannot be explained by naming specific characteristics or properties, but by exploring the constitutive relationships in which we live. In his theological writings, the preposition *coram* (in face of/in relation to) is of key importance. Luther explores how we exist in relation to God (*coram Deo*), in relation to the world (*coram mundo*) and to ourselves (*coram meipso*). Our being can only be grasped as being in the presence of God, world and ourselves.

For Luther, the foundational relationship within these relations is God's relationship to us in God's unconditional love. God grants justification by faith through grace alone. Being justified, however, is not a property that we possess, but something from outside of ourselves. Thus, it is not because we belong to the group of Christians that we are justified, but because God grants his unconditional love to us in Jesus Christ. It is the living relationship with God that shapes who we are, not our belonging to a specific group of people.

In the midst of all kinds of identity politics and controversial identity markers in the religious field, Lutheran theology offers the possibility to rethink the foundational meaning of "relationality" and the living relationship with God. From this perspective, essentialist views of Christianity and Islam must be questioned. In the midst of our struggle to deepen Christian self-understanding and our understanding of Islam, we are called to meditate on our understanding of God and God's relationship to us.

3. Embarking on the journey of reconciliation and repentance

At the LWF Assembly in May 2017, the outgoing LWF President Bishop Munib Younan from Palestine has shown the way forward. He said in his address:

“The road from conflict to communion in relation to our commemoration of the Reformation was a journey of reconciliation and repentance. In the same way, our global communion must recognize that troubled interreligious relations are also part of our history. Just as Luther wrote against the Pope and Catholicism, he wrote against Jews and Muslims, Judaism and Islam.

As a Communion, we have participated in many processes to recognize and respond to our Lutheran tradition’s difficult legacy in relation to Jews and Judaism. Today, each of our churches, including my own, the ELCJHL, have strong, open relationships with both the Jewish people and many of their institutional expressions. We must also recognize that this difficult history of interreligious relations also extends to Muslims and Islam. Just as 50 years of dialogue have produced major steps forward for historic reconciliation with Catholics and improved relationships with Jews, we must now embark on intentional processes of engagement with Muslims and Islam.

Luther never could have imagined the historic reconciliation between Lutherans and Catholics. Neither could he have imagined the growing strength of our relationships with Jews and Muslims around the world. As we confessed in 1984 in our LWF Assembly in Budapest, we not only disagree with but repudiate his writings against Jews. We have taken strong steps to reverse his condemnations of the Catholic Church. We also disagree with his writing on Islam and Muslims.

We argue with Luther. We receive with gratitude his explicit and clear theology of justification by grace through faith. But we refuse any of his ideas that harm others and build up ourselves alone. It is worthwhile to debate his decision to side with the nobility against the peasants. How can we uncritically accept his actions, when he sided with political power? We argue with Luther. And I am confident that he would encourage us to do so! Self-critique is the essence of reformation. We must always ask what we have done right and what, despite our best intentions, we have committed and omitted. This is an essential element of *ecclesia semper reformanda*.

This dynamic, self-critical approach to building relationships and trust beyond confessional and religious boundaries will help us confront some of the most pressing interreligious problems in our world today.” (p. 6f.)

I end this lecture and look forward to deepen this in an interactive dialogue.

Further reading:

- Martin Luther, "On War Against the Turk," in Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works*, vol. 46: *Christian in Society III*: (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1967), 161-205.
- Johannes Ehmann, "Martin Luther and Islam", in: Simone Sinn (ed.), *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love in Relations with Neighbors of Other Faiths* (Geneva: LWF, 2008), 19-30.
- Sarah Henrich and James L. Boyce, "Martin Luther-Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam: Preface to the *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (1530), and Preface to Bibliander's Edition of the Qur'an (1543), in: Frederick Gaiser, ed., *Word and World*, vol. XVI, Number 2 (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 1996)
- J. Paul Rajashekar, "Rethinking Lutheran Engagement with Religious Plurality", in: Karen Bloomquist, *Transformative Theological Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2009), pp. 105-116 (the article can be found in <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTS-TLC06-full.pdf>).

Questions for reflection:

- 1) How should Lutherans today deal with Luther's view on Islam?
- 2) Which insights of Lutheran theology give you helpful guidance in dealing with the reality of religious plurality today?