

Do Martin Luther's Warnings About Muslims Ring True Nearly 5 Centuries Later?

Five hundred years ago, in 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door Wittenberg Castle church and forever altered the course of church history. More than a decade after this defiance, the scholar continued to weigh in on religion, especially Islam, which was rapidly surrounding Europe with the rise of the Ottoman Empire.

As Islam is slated to become the No. 1 religion in the world, some believe Luther's words have turned into a prophetic warning of sorts.

Luther detailed his opinions on the Turks in prefaces to two books, *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* and *Bibliander's Edition of the Qur'an*.

"Since we now have the Turk and his religion at our very doorstep, our people must be warned lest, either moved by the splendor of the Turkish religion and the external appearance of their customs, or offended by the meager display of our own faith or the deformity of our customs, they deny their Christ and follow Muhammad," Luther wrote, according to a translation.

"Rather let them learn that the religion of Christ is something other than ceremonies and customs and that faith in Christ has absolutely nothing to do with discerning what ceremonies, customs, or laws are better or worse, but declares that all of them squeezed together into one mass are not enough for justification nor are they a work for them to perform. Unless we learn this, there is danger that many of our people will become Turks, disposed as they are to much less splendid errors."

In 21st-century America, Christianity is rapidly on the decline.

Politicians who proclaim Christ have been accused of Islamaphobia.

Christianity is openly mocked in the media, while Hollywood writers dare not take the name of Muhammad in vain.

The country founded by Puritans seems to have drifted away from the piety of those who fled Europe seeking religious freedom. In an attempt to enhance culture, it seems many Americans, even professing Christians, fail to acknowledge this warning from the founder of the Protestant church.

To counteract the Muslim influence, though, Luther offers a prescription.

"However effectively this author attacks the absurdities and evils of the Turks and candidly and rightly refutes their specious scandals (to which, as he confesses, he himself at one time was so moved as to fall prey), still it is clear that at that time our greatest fortification and strongest arms were not so publicly vigorous," Luther wrote.

"These defenses 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 justified by faith in him our sins are forgiven and we are saved, etc. These are the thunder that destroys not only Muhammad but even the gates of hell. For Muhammad denies that Christ is the son of God, denies that he died for our sins, denies that he arose for our life, denies that by faith in him our sins are forgiven and we are justified, denies that he will come as judge of the living and the dead (though he does believe in the resurrection of the dead and the day of judgment), denies the Holy Spirit and denies the gifts of the Spirit. By these and similar articles of faith consciences must be fortified against the ceremonies of Muhammad. With these weapons his Qur'an must be refuted."

The translators of Luther's words acknowledge they are harsh, and suggest they may even be un-Christlike.

"Luther was a person of his time, and his language expresses the roughness of the age. It is not helpful to point out that most commentators of his time were far less informed and much more diatribal than Luther. It is better to remind ourselves that here we have an aspect of the 'burdensome past' which calls us to penitence and apology," according to the translation introduction.

It continues:

All the same, Luther was far ahead of his time, and is helpful to us in reminding us of the importance of the Islamic reality. He expressed regret that scholars were not seeking to study and understand Islam in its own terms. Above all he points us to the essential distinctiveness of the gospel message of the free gift of forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life from a gracious God. Perhaps he might approve of this special issue. Perhaps, too, if he were here he might say, "Let us be little Christs to the Muslims." As little Christs, we are called upon in advance to express regret to Muslim readers who might be offended by the intemperate language, even as we recognize that we may all learn from our respective histories.

What do you think? Sound off!