

This essay by [Matt Taylor](#) is the second in a new series that will appear monthly (the second Wednesday of the month), with contributions from members of the [Company of Teachers](#) designed to relate the Reformed tradition to current events. Feel free to reproduce and circulate these pieces as you see fit.

## WHEN THE PROTESTANT REFORMERS PUBLISHED THE QUR'AN

This month marks the 499<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther's nailing of his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenburg church, a moment that precipitated the massive upheaval that was the Protestant Reformation. As we draw near to the big anniversary next year, there will be many stories that we tell about the people and events of those pivotal years, stories that carry deep personal and denominational meaning. But there are some stories of the Reformation that are little remembered and less told. And one of those lesser known stories involves the Qur'an.

The Qur'an and Islam were objects of fascination and horror for late medieval and early modern Europeans. Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turkish armies in 1453, removing what had been a bulwark against foreign invaders at Europe's southeast corner. In the 1520s the Turks moved into and conquered Hungary, and by 1529 and again in 1532 Turkish armies were laying siege to Vienna. Many Europeans in the period—Martin Luther among them—lived with the real fear that their lands would be conquered within their lifetimes by foreigners with a foreign religion. They saw the Turks as a sign that the world itself was ending.

What the Europeans knew about Muslims was primarily filtered through hackneyed polemics passed down through the centuries that imagined the Turks (or the Mohammedans as they were often called) as vicious, sensual, violent heretics. There was, however, one relatively accurate source of information about Islam available to some late-medieval scholars: a twelfth-century Latin translation of the Qur'an, copies of which, given that they had to be transcribed by hand, were prized possessions in the libraries of many medieval monasteries and universities. Luther, who references the Turks more than 5,000 times in his collected works, often lamented throughout most of his life his inability to get his hands on one of these copies so that he could read the Muslim scriptures for himself and know whether the polemics were true.

Alongside and contributing to the Reformation was the flowering of the printed word in sixteenth-century Europe. Gutenberg's famous printing press was invented in 1439, and by the early 1500s publishers and printers had come into their own. Combined with the Renaissance fixation on ancient and classical texts (*Ad fontes!* – “Back to the sources!” - was the cry of the day), the advent of the printing press meant that many Greek and Latin books and translations were the first to be widely distributed. It was a veritable Information Age. And yet, for 100 years after Gutenberg's invention, no printer had the impulse—or courage—to widely publish the Latin Qur'an.

It was actually a lesser-known Protestant, a backbencher of the Reformation, who championed and executed the publishing of the Qur'an in the early 1540s. Theodore Bibliander was a Swiss theologian and linguist who took over Huldrych Zwingli's teaching position in Zurich after Zwingli's death. He was a talented scholar who demonstrated some facility with as many as thirty different languages, including Arabic. Along with his mentor Zwingli, Bibliander believed (in contrast to the teachings of the Calvinists) that God's grace and Christ's atoning work extended to all (*unlimited atonement*), and even that some Muslims and Jews might be saved through Jesus.

Bibliander had access to a copy of the twelfth-century Latin translation of the Qur'an that was in a library in Basel, and he also managed to obtain an Arabic manuscript of the Qur'an from an Italian merchant. Using the two of them side-by-side and his albeit limited understanding of Arabic, he began revising the older translation, and in 1542, he convinced a printer in Basel to publish it. Unfortunately, the Council of Basel was not excited about having the Muslim scriptures printed with their city's name on them. It was widely seen as a text full of

blasphemy and heresy, and the Council thought such things ought not to be spread around. They had Bibliander's printer arrested and shut down his press.

Here is where the story gets interesting: Bibliander began a letter-writing campaign, sending missives to his fellow Reformers including, among others, Luther and Calvin, requesting their aid in petitioning the Council of Basel to allow the publication. There is no record of Calvin ever acknowledging the letter, but Luther and a host of other Protestants threw their support behind Bibliander. They insisted they wanted accurate information about Muslims and the Qur'an in order to refute them. Luther even wrote a letter to the Council saying that if they continued to prevent the publication, he would find a printer in Wittenburg who would do it. In the end, the Council of Basel relented and allowed the publication, on the condition that the name of Basel not be included with the book.

In 1543, Bibliander was able to publish his revision of the Latin translation of the Qur'an. It was titled *Alcoran: The Lives of Muhammad, the Chief of the Saracens, and of His Successors, Their Teachings, and the Qur'an Itself*. In the volume he also included a preface by Martin Luther, a preface by Philip Melancthon, and several other medieval tracts, polemics, and treatises about Islam. It was, as one scholar put it, a "virtual encyclopedia of Islam for sixteenth-century Europe."<sup>1</sup> Bibliander's version of the Qur'an was the most systematic comparison between the Qur'an and the Bible ever written up to that point, and it was in wide circulation for several hundred years, with a number of copies still present in European libraries.

To be sure, Bibliander's *Alcoran* and many of the prefaces and treatises included within it were harshly critical of Islam and recapitulated many of the inaccurate medieval polemics. This is not a simple story of heroic and intellectually generous Reformers. It is not a story of sublime interfaith understanding. The story of the publishing of the Qur'an by the Protestant Reformers was, like so many aspects of the Reformation, complicated. The Reformers lived at the intersection of two very different ages: the medieval age, where knowledge was the realm of the elites and accurate information, particularly about people in other parts of the world, was largely myth and invective, and the modern age, where accurate and factual knowledge is, ideally, widely available and accessible. *Alcoran* was part and parcel of both of these worlds. If nothing else, this whole episode might serve as a reminder for all of us who trace our religious lineage back to the Reformation that real understanding of other religious traditions is profoundly hard to come by, but that is what makes the pursuit of accurate interfaith knowledge and conversation all the more important and urgent.

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<sup>1</sup> Rollin Armour, *Islam, Christianity, and the West* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 113.