Erasmus, born 1466
Erasmus, Luther, and the Ottoman Turks: A Divergence of Theology

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Europe, in the early years of the sixteenth century, was being torn apart. Internally, the conflicts born by the dawn of the Protestant Reformation threatened to create an insoluble religious and political rift across Europe. In addition to the divide of Christianity, Suleyman, the monarch of the Empire of the Ottoman Turks, initiated an aggressive military campaign to conquer Europe. In 1526, Suleyman invaded Hungary, defeating the Hungarian army on the plains of Mohács. The Turks dominated Hungary, and in 1529, they pushed more deeply into Europe, to the point of besieging Vienna itself. The fact that the Turks made it so far into Europe, even to the point of threatening Germany, the heartland of the Reformation, shocked and terrified Christians.\(^1\) Given the terrible divide in Christendom, Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther, the giants of Christian Humanism and the Protestant Reformation respectively, surprisingly agreed on the merits of a defensive war. However, they disagreed on how the Turks should be treated by Europeans outside of combat. Because Martin Luther saw himself in a deadly spiritual battle with the enemies of his faith, particularly Turks and papists, he generally treated Muslims with hostility. In contrast, Erasmus, recognizing the complexity of the situation, advocated for a more nuanced approach. Nonetheless, their differing perspectives on the Turks highlight the theological divergences that characterized the early stages of the Reformation.

recommended staying as far away as possible from the Turks and expressed a profound antagonism toward the Turks as people, along with those who sought to join them. In contrast, Erasmus’s humanistic mind saw the Turks as barbaric, but capable of being transformed by the Gospel. Therefore, he was much more moderate in his rhetoric, and tended to emphasize peace and missionary activity. Consequently, despite their agreement that a defensive war was an acceptable response to the Ottoman invasion, the differing theologies of Martin Luther and Erasmus caused them to view the spiritual nature of the Turks in nearly opposite ways, and consequently to emphasize opposing forms of interaction between Christians and Turks.

Despite their differences, Erasmus and Luther faced similar difficulties in conveying their views to their followers. Both struggled against prior perceptions of their views, which they both said had been misquoted and taken out of context. The Catholic Church objected to one of Luther’s 95 theses in which, he stated, “To fight against the Turk is the same as resisting God, who visits our sin upon us with this rod.” Many people, including Erasmus himself, interpreted this thesis to mean that Luther unequivocally condemned fighting the Turks. However, Luther argued that, “it is not fair to forget what the situation was then…and to take my words and apply them to another situation where those grounds and reasons do not exist.” According to Luther, his 95

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4 Luther, “On War Against the Turk, 1529,” 162.
theses constituted an attack on the papacy, which used the excuse of war on the Turks in order to rob Germany. In a similar vein, Erasmus’s vehement denunciations of violent conflict were often taken to signify an absolute pacifism. However, Erasmus responded by saying, “I find this idea too absurd to need refutation, although there has been no lack of people ready to contrive accusations against me because of this…My message is that war must never be undertaken unless as a last resort, it cannot be avoided…” Both Erasmus and Luther took offense to the notion that they had argued for a complete cessation of defensive war against the Turks, and the effectual military fall of Christendom. Rather, their arguments in criticism of the politics of the day and the Catholic Church had been taken out of context.

Luther and Erasmus agreed that the Turks had to be resisted. In fact, rather than merely thinking of a defensive war as an option to counter the Turks, Luther saw it as a duty. He wrote, “[Secular rulers] do not stop to think that God’s commandment requires them to protect their subjects; they think that it is a matter for them to decide if they get the notion or if they have the leisure for it.” Luther, reading Paul’s epistles, concluded that the clear duty of the secular authorities necessarily included the protection of their subjects. For Luther, the government’s right to defend its subjects was akin to the right of personal self-defense, and an obligation of the government. Therefore, when the Turks threatened the Germans, the Holy Roman Emperor’s clear duty was to rise in Germany’s

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5 Ibid., 164.
6 Erasmus, “On the War Against the Turks/De bello Turcico,” 318.
7 Luther, “On War Against the Turk,” 187.
defense. Furthermore, since the rulers have the duty to defend their subjects, their subjects have a duty to obey and fight for their rulers. Luther argues, “Then everyone can be sure in conscience that he is obeying the ordinance of God, since we know that the emperor is our true overlord…and that whoever obeys him in such a case obeys God also, whereas he who disobeys him also disobeys God.”

If the secular government called for a war to defend the German people from Turkish encroachment, German soldiers had the duty to rise up and drive the Turks back.

Erasmus also thought that governments operated within their rights if they used war to protect their citizens. However, Erasmus hated war with such a fierce passion, that he could not unequivocally accept even a defensive war as Luther did. Rather, he tried to balance his acceptance of a limited, defensive war with calls for it to be only of the “last resort.”

However, besides hating war as an evil unto itself, Erasmus also loved the ideals of peace and order. As such, he recognized war as an extension of the right of the government to dispense justice and establish order. Erasmus wrote, “But if Christians are to be entirely denied the right to make war, by the same reasoning magistrates will have to lose the right to punish offenders. For war is no more than judicial retribution meted out on a large scale.” Since the Turks, as a collective group, broke the laws and threatened peace and order among Christian nations, it was admissible to fight them as a last resort.

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9 Luther, “On War Against the Turk,” 185.
10 Erasmus, “On the War Against the Turks/De bello Turcico,” 318.
11 Ibid., 319.
Beyond the theological justification for war against the Turks, Erasmus and Luther both thought that God was using the Turks to punish Christendom. Erasmus said, “there can be no doubt that the Turks have won an immense empire less by their own merits than because of our sins, whose just reward is the destruction of our empire.” In regards to armies of bloodthirsty men who are “Christian” in name only, Luther wrote, “perhaps there are worse people in the eyes of God in that army than are the Turks.” As reformers, both Erasmus and Luther were acutely aware of the failings of Christendom. Therefore, they interpreted the triumph of the Turks as a sure sign of God’s displeasure and a call from him for the repentance of Europe.

Furthermore, Luther and Erasmus emphatically and conjunctively condemned an official crusade against the Turks. Although they both adamantly set themselves against Catholic calls for a crusade, they differed in their reasons. For Luther, the primary issue existed in the theological divide between the secular and spiritual authorities. Luther believed that the secular authorities should lead the defense against the Turks in a war totally divorced from spiritual undertones. In the words of one scholar, Adam Francisco, Christians “ought to fight as imperial subjects under the emperors’ banner and not under the banner of Christ.”

13 Erasmus, “On the War Against the Turks/De bello Turcico,” 316.
14 Luther, “On War Against the Turk,” 165.
15 Francisco, 76.
the spiritual level, fighting by praying and leading their flocks to repentance. Luther wrote, “It would be less harmful to have three devils in the army than one disobedient and apostate bishop who had given up his office and assumed the office of another.”

Furthermore, not only should priests and bishops not engage in physical battles, but also “if I were a soldier and saw a priest’s banner in the field, or a banner of the cross…I should run as though the devil were chasing me….” He believed that ‘holy wars’ were contrary to the spirit of Christianity. The agents charged with spreading the Good News of Jesus had no place in a battlefield.

Erasmus’s objection to “holy wars” and a crusade against the Turks was grounded more in a personal religious ideal than in a theological divide between secular and sacred. Personifying peace, Erasmus cried out to soldiers, “you carry the banner of salvation as you hasten to destroy your brother, to kill in the name of the cross one who was saved by it.” Later, he wrote, “Priests dedicated to God should intervene in wars only to put a stop to them.” Erasmus, driven by this ideal of a peaceful Christianity, was horrified by war and mortified that the agents of Christ’s peace actively promoted such violence. Although Erasmus reluctantly accepted a defensive war, his detestation of war demanded that his beloved church take no official part in it. Priests should be

16 Luther, “On War Against the Turks,” 168.
17 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 309.
peacemakers, not warmongers. Despite this agreement about a defensive war on the Turks, Erasmus and Luther interpreted the nature of the Turkish threat in theologically different ways, which caused them to have starkly divergent viewpoints regarding the spiritual state of the Turks and the best way for Christians to treat Muslims. Luther saw himself at the forefront of the titanic and apocalyptic struggle between God and the devil for the souls of men. In Luther’s mind, both the Turks and the Pope were agents of Satan, out to claim souls for hell. Therefore, his rhetoric was, possibly not without reason, brimming with an “us against them” mentality. In fact, not only were the Turks and papists emissaries of Satan in Luther’s mind, but also the Turkish invasions signaled the beginning of the end times, paving the way for Christ’s return. According to Francisco, Luther’s theology of eschatology “cannot be divorced from his beliefs about the Turks.”

In a letter from early 1529, Luther wrote “Last Day may be at hand…Only the Turk, the final Gog and Magog is to glory in his supreme victory and is to perish, together with his companion, the pope.” In his rhetoric, Luther tended to put all of his spiritual opponents in the same category, and he became convinced that the turmoil caused by the pope and Turks came as a direct fulfillment of the Biblical prophecies in Daniel and Revelation.

Therefore, since the Turks were the devil’s direct minions, he painted the Turks and the spiritual threat they held to the souls of believers extravagantly darkly in his sermons and his writings. In contrast, Erasmus did not equate the current struggles, either within

21 Francisco, 84
23 Francisco, 82
Christendom or without, with anything apocalyptic. According to one scholar, John Bohnstedt, Catholics in general, “do not discuss such subjects as the Antichrist, the devil, and the end of the world” in their writings on the Turkish threat.\(^{24}\) In conjunction with Bohnstedt’s assessment, Erasmus viewed the Turkish threat more as a massive invasion of robbers intended as a warning to Christendom. He pleaded, “Let us not turn a deaf ear to the repeated warnings of the Lord; He is now calling out once again through the cruelty of the Turks…”\(^{25}\) War, even against the Turks, was the offspring of human sin and the devil’s designs, but hardly apocalyptic in nature.

These contrasting opinions on the substance of the Turkish threat in conjunction with Luther’s Reformation polemics and Erasmus’s idealized Christianity polarized their differing opinions. In Luther’s mind, doing the devil’s work and being a devil were hardly different. The Turks were devils who must be resisted both spiritually and materially. In his sermon “On War Against the Turk”, Luther said, “But just as the pope is the Antichrist, so the Turk is the very devil incarnate. The prayer of Christendom against both is that they shall go down to hell…”\(^{26}\) According to Francisco, Luther “thought that the Turks were completely repugnant servants of the Devil.\(^{27}\) If the Turks stood as mere robbers, they must simply be resisted in the physical world; but if the Turks inherently aligned with the devil’s schemes against Christian souls, then a potentially apocalyptic struggle must be initiated.

\(^{24}\) Bohnstedt, 25.

\(^{25}\) Erasmus, “On the War Against the Turks/De bello Turcico,” 315.

\(^{26}\) Luther, “On War Against the Turk,” 181.

\(^{27}\) Francisco, 236.
Luther was so convinced that the Turks were devils and had to be fought that, besides the role of pastor, exhorter, and defender of Christianity, he also played the military tactician against the Turks. “And although I am not qualified to give instruction on this point…,” he wrote in 1528, “My advice, then, is that we not insufficiently arm ourselves and send our poor Germans off to be slaughtered.” Luther goes on to recommend military strategies, particularly lamenting the fact that usually the Turks outnumber European armies and advocating only engaging the Turks with sufficient numbers. “It is tempting God to set out with a smaller force against a stronger king,” Luther wrote. On the principle of counting the cost, Luther urged the German princes to avoid needless bloodshed and only fight when they had a chance of victory.

In contrast to Luther’s sweeping condemnation of the Turks and the Catholics to hell, Erasmus had a “certain respect” for Muslims. Although he acknowledged the spiritual inferiority of the Turks, he did not see them as hellish servants of Satan. Rather, “the Turks are men, and what is more, half-Christian,” Erasmus wrote. But, the Turks are not only men and half-Christian, but also only half-Christian. Erasmus painted a “curiously hybrid Turk,” who had some of the truth of monotheism, but was polluted by barbarism and lack of knowledge about Christ’s divinity. Erasmus hoped to humanize

28 Luther, “On War Against the Turk,” 201.
29 Ibid., 202.
the Turks in his rhetoric while simultaneously acknowledging the falsity of their religious beliefs. Because the Turks were men, they could be converted to Christianity and raised above their barbaric natures. Conversely, because they were only half-Christians, to make war on the Turks was more acceptable than on fellow Christian princes, if war proved completely unavoidable. Erasmus wrote “But perhaps it is the fatal malady of human nature to be quite unable to carry on without wars. If so, why is this evil passion not let loose upon the Turks?...that kind would be a lesser evil than the present unholy conflicts and clashes between Christians.” Erasmus hated all war, but he had a hierarchical view of the sin of such violence. Christians warring against Christians was completely deplorable, but Christians fighting Turks was, although less than ideal, more acceptable.

These two conflicting interpretations of the spiritual nature of the Turks caused Luther and Erasmus to advocate very different methods of interacting with the Turks on a personal or religiously motivated basis. Luther, in his relentless spiritual war for faith, feared that nearly any contact with the Turks would kill the faith of Christians. According to Francisco, Luther’s “writings reveal an intense concern with the prospect of Christians making contact with Muslim Turks.” In fact, although Islam existed as a “blatant and cosmic danger… to Christendom,” Luther’s greatest fear was that Christians subject to the Turks would apostatize from Christianity and convert to Islam. The defense of Christendom was important not only to protect the physical lives and

35 Francisco, 85.
36 Ibid., 149.
belongings of the German citizens, but also to shelter the very faith and souls of weak Christians from the encroaching Muslim religion.

Luther felt so much responsibility toward the souls in his care and such terror at the danger that Protestant Christians might abandon their faith, that he told pastors to condemn everyone who went to or even consorted with the Turks. Luther wrote, “He who willingly goes over to the Turks is their comrade and accomplice in all they do.” In fact, because the Turk is a “destroyer, enemy, and blasphemer of our Lord Jesus Christ…He who consorts with the Turk has to be party to this terrible abomination…” Furthermore, if the Turks forced Christians to apostatize and convert to Islam, their souls were lost. When Luther wrote this, in 1528, the Turks were winning the upper hand across Europe. Luther’s fear and anger over the threat to his spiritual sheep drove his somewhat extreme opinion.

If the Turkish invasion imposed more than a military threat, even a spiritual danger, then more than swords were needed to repel it. Luther wrote, “The great need of our time should have moved us to this prayer against the Turk, for the Turk…is the servant of the devil…” As one theologian notes, “Luther’s long-standing distrust in the efficiency of military force had a theological foundation: those that fight against the Turk

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37 Luther, “On War Against the Turks,” 195.
38 Ibid.
40 Adam Francisco contends that Luther advocated activity to the Turks by planting Christian populations among the Muslims rather than by sending in outside missionaries. See Francisco, 176-189, 236-237. Although Luther might have hoped for the conversion of Muslims, it is still beyond dispute that his primary goal was the protection of the faith of those already Christians.
41 Luther, “On the War Against the Turks,” 174.
Recognizing this, Luther repeatedly advocated the use of prayer as a weapon against the Turks. He exhorted pastors to warn the people “to be careful not to anger God by not praying and not fall under his judgment…” In 1530, after the Turks had been driven from Vienna, Luther wrote, “It is said that the Turk has promised, or rather threatened, to return to Germany next year with very great forces…Word and prayer will fight against [the Turks].” The fight with the Turks existed on a higher plane than a mere military confrontation; Christians were battling the devil. Therefore prayer was necessary in order to guarantee God’s favor and protection. Having continuously berated the Catholic Church for its hypocrisy, Martin Luther could do no less than follow his own exhortation and fight against the Turks on the spiritual plane for the rest of his life. In 1543, many years after the fall of Hungary and the siege of Vienna, Luther wrote, “About the Turk we hear monstrous things. I am praying against him, but I am uncertain against which Turks [God] will hurl my prayer.” The terror of the Ottoman Turks had not left Europe. Turkish armies were still engaged in Europe, conquering and aiding their ally, Francis 1 of France. As such, Luther still considered them a dire threat to the Christian faith and continued to wage war against them in the best way he knew how. Another necessary way to spiritually battle the Turks was through prayer.

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42 Egil Grislis, “Luther and the Turks,” *Muslim World* 64, no. 3 (July 1974): 86.
43 Luther, “On the War Against the Turks,” 174.
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a truthful knowledge of exactly what the Turks believed. Luther, although fearing for the souls of Christians living in lands under Turkish control, personally aided the publication of the Qur’an in German. A Christian cannot battle for his faith against the Muslims unless he knows the Islamic beliefs and their errors. “Some, indeed, have invented outrageous lies about the Turks to incite us Germans against them,” wrote Luther, “but there is no need for lies; there is enough truth.” Francisco wrote, “Luther was primarily not after the conversion of Muslims, but the strengthening of Christians.” Luther insisted on learning about Islam and expressing accurate descriptions of Muslim religious practices in order to transmit the knowledge to Christians so they would not fall away under Muslim influences.

If Luther saw himself in a battle for the souls of Christians against the Muslim threat, Erasmus saw himself as a voice of conscience, trying to issue a moderate appeal to Christian rulers. “I am not against war,” he wrote, “I am merely giving our rulers a warning to consider this undertaking with greater care.” Erasmus had two issues he wanted Christian rulers threatened by Islam to consider. First, he wanted missionaries sent to convert the Turks to Christianity, and in lieu of that he wanted Christian armies of such upright moral character and conduct that “the Turks will be glad to have been defeated.” Erasmus saw the Turks as a political and military threat, not a spiritual danger. He viewed the spiritual nature of the Turks as men in darkness that Christ could

46 Clark, 11.
47 Luther, “On War against the Turks,” 176.
48 Francisco, 236.
49 Erasmus, “On the War Against the Turks/De bello Turcico,” 333.
50 Ibid., 333.
bring to salvation, not as devils that were intent on destroying the Christian faith. Consequently, “The best solution of all would be to conquer the Turkish empire the way in which the apostles conquered the peoples of the earth for their master, Christ…”

Erasmus wanted Christians actually to act like Christians, and through their example to show the superiority of Christianity to Islam. It was not necessary to fear the advance of Islam, but to use the opportunity to expand the kingdom of Christ.

Although Martin Luther believed that it might be possible to convert the Turks and he might have recommended that Christians live among Muslims as missionaries, he primarily focused on the spiritual defense of those already Christian. He considered everyone, papists or Ottoman Turks, who threatened his beliefs to be devils after the souls of Christians. He was driven by an inexorable fear that the new Protestant Christianity would be driven off the face of the earth. Because the Turks were the aggressors and against Christ, he favored a defensive war divorced from association with the other Antichrist, the pope. In contrast to Luther’s terror, Erasmus was a moderate, driven by a deep sadness and an intense anger against meaningless bloodshed. He reluctantly acknowledged that a defensive war might be called for, but sarcastically said of the Turks, “Of course, it used to be thought preferable, even in their case, to win them over to the religion of Christ by teaching and by example of good deeds and a blameless life rather than by mounting an armed attack.”

Although Erasmus and Luther both

51 Ibid., 333.
53 Francisco, 236-237.
agreed on the acceptability of a defensive war against the Turks, their recommendations for further interaction with the Muslim world remained very different.