

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Will we choose dialogue over demonization?

Luther's dark side fed bitter divisions, but tolerance, understanding slowly evolved



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The German and American Societies for Reformation Research marked the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in the summer of 2017 by holding an international conference in Nuremberg, Germany. The choice of Nuremberg was poignant as the city was the economic hub of Germany in the 1500s and was the first Free Imperial City to embrace the Reformation in 1525.

It is a sign of changing attitudes that this conference focused on the interactions of "Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Reformation Era." While Martin Luther has been embraced as a cultural hero across Germany in this anniversary year, the darker sides of Luther's legacy, including his negative views of Turks, Jews, Catholics and many of his Protestant co-religionists, also have been brought into focus.

The goal of this conference was to discern the degree to which the "establishment of internal distinctions within Christianity in the wake of the Reformation also altered the relationships and points of reference between Christianity, Judaism and Islam."

The Late Middle Ages had not been kind to the Jewish residents of Germany. Many of the Jewish communities of the Empire had been destroyed in the post-Black Death pogroms. Nuremberg's own stately market square — site of the famous annual Christmas market — had been the Jewish quarter of the city, until the Jews were expelled in 1349 and their houses destroyed to open space for the new market, and the site of the former synagogue used for the Gothic Church of Our Lady.

SHARED ANTI-SEMITISM OF THE DAY

Luther initially had something of an open stance toward the Jews and wrote a relatively conciliatory pamphlet, "That Christ was Born a Jew." However, as his career advanced, he became more hostile. He had little direct contact with Jewish rabbis, but became inflamed by some of the anti-Christian Jewish polemic that he picked up secondhand.

Luther eventually published the vitriolic "Against the Jews and Their Lies." While this type of Christian anti-Semitism was relatively common for the era, Luther brought a heightened level of apocalyptic intensity in that he felt he was living in the Last Days,

and that the Jews, Turks and Catholics all (to some degree) represented diabolical forces loosed in the world.

Luther's harsh words have been a problematic legacy for Protestants, but the Renaissance and Reformation also launched a more positive stream of interest and engagement in Jewish learning known as Christian Hebraism. A chief representative of this trend was the Nuremberg pastor Andreas Osiander, who attempted to defend the Jews against the infamous blood libel.

ISLAM SEEN AS MILITARY ENEMY

The Reformation was also a time of intense hostility toward Islam. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire in 1453, the Islamic Turks were perceived to be the greatest military threat to the Western Christians. Nuremberg was likewise the scene of many attempts to organize against the feared Turkish onslaught.

The Ottomans overran much of south-eastern Europe and laid siege to Vienna in 1529. The Islamic Turks were the demonized "other" through much of the early modern period, and Christian pastors would urge their congregations to repentance by calling upon the threat of divine wrath visited upon sinners in the form of the merciless Turk.

Despite this demonization, the Ottomans were generally more tolerant of religious minorities in their midst than most Western countries, and some scholars have found evidence of increasing acceptance of Christian clergy in the Ottoman Empire. An important stride forward in understanding was made

with the publication of the first Latin translation of the Quran by the Swiss Protestant Theodor Bibliander in 1543.

These hopeful trends notwithstanding, genuine interfaith dialogue was in short supply. Most Western Christians only began to develop tolerance as an unhappy compromise after a series of wars among Christians in the 1500s and 1600s.

Christians were so divided among themselves, they had no choice but to learn to coexist with others who did not share their religious beliefs, and eventually most came to view this compromise as a virtue. Although not his intent, Luther had set into motion a train of events that would give birth to our more tolerant modern world.

Unfortunately, expectations of apocalyptic violence and intensified inter-religious and inter-confessional polemics were also a legacy of the Protestant movement. Tragically for Nuremberg, some of the romantic features which make it so central to the story of the German Renaissance and Reformation made it especially beloved by the Nazi Party in the 20th century, and thus ultimately led to totalitarianism, genocidal warfare and mass destruction.

As the world continues to grapple with problems of cultural assimilation, environmental threats, heightened military tension, and a growing refugee crisis, faith communities must embrace the lesson twice offered by Nuremberg: that dialogue, not demonization, is the only viable path to the future.

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