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William W. Emilsen

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Calvin on Islam

William W. Emilsen

In June 2009 a controversy erupted in the Netherlands over the unveiling of a sculpture commissioned for the quincentenary of John Calvin's birth. The controversial sculpture was created by Aziz Bekkaoui, a Dutch Moroccan artist, for the city square of Dordrecht, one of the first cities in Holland to accept the Reformed faith in the sixteenth century, and to this day, a city renowned for its Calvinist character. The sculpture named Het Mekka van Calvijn (Calvin's Mecca) is a four metre cube, consisting entirely of reflective glass, resembling the Ka`ba in the courtyard of the Great Mosque in Mecca, the central shrine of Islam, and the specific point to which Muslims face when performing their daily prayers. The symbolic significance of the sculpture was not lost on Gert de Boon, the sexton of the nearby St Augustine’s Church, who objected to this replica of the House of Allah intruding into the heartland of Dutch Calvinism. He objected on three counts: the sculpture was too large for the square; it was offensive to both Christians and Muslims; and, most importantly, ‘Calvin had nothing to do with Mecca and certainly not with Islam’, it was unduly provocative to make a link between the two.

It is true that there are very few studies linking Calvin to Islam or, for that matter, even on the more general but related subject of the Reformation and the Turks. Unlike Luther, who has had numerous books, chapters and articles written on his views of Islam, as evidenced in the comprehensive bibliography to Adam Francisco’s recent monograph, Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics (2007), similar studies on this aspect of Calvin’s writings are notable by their absence. Apart from some scurrilous material on the internet seeking to identify Islam with the Antichrist in Daniel 7 and the symbol of the Beast in Revelation 13, there are only three substantial studies on the topic. The first is an article, an older work written over eighty years ago in French on ‘Calvin et les
"Turks" in Revue Historique by Jacques Pannier, editor of the critical 1541 edition of Calvin's Christian Institutes. Its strength is that it places Calvin's views on Islam in the context of the Ottoman threat, something that this paper will also seek to do. The second, 'Calvin and the Turks', is by the Dutch author, Jan Slomp. It was first published as a chapter in Christian-Muslim Dialogue (1995), edited by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Z. Haddad, and later republished in the journal Studies in Interreligious Dialogue in 2009. Slomp offers a constructive view of Calvin on Islam within the context of his long-term commitment to contemporary Christian-Muslim dialogue, no doubt a response in part to the relatively large Muslim population in the present-day Netherlands (5–10%) and the emergence of the very radical anti-Islamic Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom) led by Geert Wilders. The third is a rather polemical essay by the Brisbane theologian and historian, Francis Nigel Lee. Lee's essay on 'Calvin on Islam' is available both as a booklet and on the internet. One of its strengths is that it lists a collection of valuable statements made by Calvin on Islam, but, unfortunately, it is done without almost any awareness of historical context or sensitivity to Calvin's rhetorical technique, with the express purpose, it would seem, of demonising Islam. Lee's essay is a most unsympathetic treatment of Islam. It is coloured with negative statements such as, for example, the following rubric from the 1645 Westminster Assembly's Directory for the Public Worship of God which calls upon ministers to pray for deliverance 'from the cruel oppressions and blasphemies of the Turk'.

It is commonly assumed that Calvin had little direct knowledge of Islam and only a passing acquaintance with Muslims. Many of the leading Protestant Reformers, including Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560), Martin Bucer (1491–1551), and Martin Luther (1483–1546), took an active interest in Turkish matters—the second great public issue of the day after the Reformation controversy—and responded in writing to the politico-military threat of the Turks. Calvin, on the other hand, wrote no treatise on Islam or on the threat that the Turks posed in the sixteenth century, nor, it seems, did he enter into the debate over the propriety of holy war against the Turks. Three reasons are proffered for Calvin's silence on Islam.

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1. J. Pannier, 'Calvin et les Turcs', Revue Historique, Vol. 180, 1937, pp. 208–216. I wish to express my appreciation to Mrs Marion Smart for her assistance with the translation of this article.
7. Luther wrote three major works on the Turkish threat: On War against the Turk (1529); Anny Sermon against the Turks (1529); Admonition to Prayer against the Turk (1541). On the specific problem of war against the Turks, see G. W. F. Barrow, Luther and the War against the Turks, Church History, Vol. 14, 1945, pp. 255–271. In 1530 Philip Melanchthon approached Erasmus to express his views on the 'Turkish problem' in a letter addressed to the jurist Johannes Fink, entitled Ultrashtra consulta de bello Turcius inefecto, which was published successively in Basel, Vienna, Paris, Cologne, and Antwerp, in 1530. Melanchthon, himself, wrote a commentary on Daniel (1526/1543) where he expressed his views on Islam. The 1526 edition is entitled Emendatio Danielli and the expanded 1543 edition is entitled In Danielem Prophetam Commentarius.
Firstly, he was out of the 'line of fire', in other words, he was not a citizen of the Holy Roman Empire whose territories bordered those of the great Ottoman Empire ('the enemy of Christendom') and whose fleets vied with the Turks for control of the Mediterranean. Secondly, Calvin, being a patriotic French citizen, was more or less sympathetic with the economic, political and military interests of Valois France, especially in joining the Turks in their efforts to overthrow France's traditional enemy, the Spanish and Austrian Hapsburgs. Thirdly, Calvin's silence stemmed from his awareness that the presence of the Turks in places like central Hungary and Transylvania in Eastern Europe aided and abetted the spread of the Protestant Reformation. While it is true that Calvin was safer from the Turks in Geneva than his contemporaries in Germany were, and there is little reason to doubt his patriotism and his political acuity, there is no direct evidence to support the contention that any of these three explanations were very influential in shaping his attitude to either the Turks or to Islam.

It has also been observed that references to the Qur'an in Calvin's works are few and far between. Unlike his arch-opponent, Michael Servetus (1511–1553), Calvin does not quote a single sura even though the Qur'an was readily available to him in Robert de Ketton's famous Latin translation, sponsored by Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, in 1143. Nor did Calvin show any interest, as far as we know, in what Hartmut Bobzin has described as 'the most important public discussion' about the Qur'an ever to take place in Europe. The controversy surrounded the printing of a new Latin edition of Robert's translation of the Qur'an by his old friend, Johannes Oporinus (1507–1536), a humanist publisher in Basle. This new edition was prepared by Zwingli's successor in Zurich, Theodoric Bibliander (1504–1564) but when Oporinus began to print it in 1542 the Council of Basle immediately put a halt to its publication for fear that it posed a danger to those who might read it. Support for its publication came from leading theologians from the generally-tolerant centre of Basle led by Oswald Myconius (1488–1552) and a whole host of Protestant reformers from the free imperial city of Strasbourg, perhaps the most broad-minded of Protestant cities and where Calvin had recently spent three years (1538–1541) as a political refugee. Most decisive in terms of reversing the Council's decision was the senior figure of the Protestant

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4 White, 'Castellio Against Calvin', p. 585.
5 White, 'Castellio Against Calvin', pp. 578–579.
8 One of the charges against Servetus was that he was familiar with the teachings of the Qur'an, and used them to convince his readers that the Doctrine of the Trinity is false. See Michael Servetus, Christianismi Restitutio, 1553, trans. Marion Hillas, Christopher Hofiman, and Alicia Fossey, New York, Edwin Mellen Press, 2007, pp. 48, 51.
9 Robert of Ketton's translation of the Qur'an was the 'standard version' for European readers until the end of the seventeenth century. It was used by Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Hugo Grotius (1583–1645).
11 Among the names of those from Strasbourg who were in support of Bibliander were Martin Bucer, Casper Hediej, Ludwig Semp, Nikolaus Gorbellius, Ludwig Behoie, Johann Stirm, Gerald Sarndus, Petrus Daspodius, and Christian Harrlin.
Reformation, Martin Luther himself. Calvin, for his part, seems to have chosen to stand apart from the debate; certainly he did not financially support the publication of the Qur’an despite being invited to do so by Opianus.20 The reasons for Calvin’s reticence are not clear but as with all of the Protestant Reformers it is not unreasonable to assume that Calvin considered the Qur’an a ‘treasury of heresy’. John of Damascus (c. 675–c.749) had done so in the eighth century when he described the Qur’an as a dangerous book containing many heretical doctrines similar to those of Arius, Sabellius, Nestorius and other officially condemned heretics. And the Italian Dominican, Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (1243–1320) did so in the fourteenth century when he described the Qur’an as the refuse of all the ancient heresies simultaneously vomited up through Muhammad, a Satan-inspired impostor.21 In the light of this almost unanimous Protestant (and Catholic) view that the Qur’an was a dangerous book, Muslims were heretics, and Muhammad was a false prophet, Calvin may have considered it prudent not to lend either moral or financial support to its publication, but it is also reasonable to imagine that his humanist schooling and concern for truth would have aligned him with those in Basle and elsewhere who supported the Qur’an’s publication on the grounds that it was necessary to know heretical doctrine first in order to combat it.22 We will never know why Calvin avoided entering into the controversy unless further evidence is forthcoming.

The inclination to treat Islam as a Christian heresy, and not as a religion in its own right, may account in part for the fact that Calvin and other sixteenth-century authors were reluctant to use the terms ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’.23 Muslims were designated most commonly as ‘Turks’, but also the terms ‘Saracens’, ‘Moors’, ‘Tartars’, ‘Muhammadans’ and ‘infidels’ (the latter being an insult Muslims also traded against Christians)24 were used almost interchangeably with derogatory association. The most common method of denoting Islam was with the adjective ‘Turkish’, ‘Muhammadan’, or ‘Saracen’ with its complementary noun ‘faith’, ‘sect’, ‘law’, or ‘religion’. To complicate matters further, from the middle of the sixteenth century ‘Turk’ became a synonym for ungodliness, tyranny and sin itself, and ‘Turkish’ was applied

21Bobin, “A treasury of Heresies”: Christian polemics against the Koran”, p. 158.
22Nicholas of Cusa had a somewhat ironic response to Islam. He acknowledged that Muhammad was well-intentioned and that he tried his best to point the way to God. He also asserted that there were many points of agreement between the Qur’an and the Bible, believing that God had inserted some truth into it; see James Biechler, ‘Christian Humanism Confronts Islam: Sifting the Qur’an with Nicholas of Cusa’, Journal of Ecumenical Studies, Vol. 13, 1976, p. B. Also, see Biechler and Thomas Izbicki, ‘A New Face toward Islam: Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia’, The Possibility of Dialogue with Islam in the Fifteenth Century’, in Nicholas of Cusa: In Search of God and Wisdom, ed. Gerhard Christopherson and T. Izbicki, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1991., pp. 157, 176; Bobin, “A treasury of Heresies”: Christian polemics against the Koran”, pp. 152–164.
24Bernard Lewis, Islam and the West, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 7–8. Also, in Protestant polemics, Calvinists and Lutherans were not backward in attacking each other. The Calvinists had nothing but contempt for Lutheran doctrine which they maintained was still infected with papist superstition. The Lutherans could not find words strong enough to stigmatize Calvinists as the ‘real Mohammedans’. See Joseph Le Clez, Toleration and the Reformation. Vol. 1, trans. T. L. Wasetow, New York, Association Press/London: Longmans, 1960, p. 280.
to stand apart from anyone (including Christians, Protestant and Roman) having so-called qualities of the Turks, i.e., cruelty, unmanageability, and general barbarism. Later still in the sixteenth century 'Turk' was used as a name for targets on shooting ranges and 'Turkery' referred to Islam.27

Calvin may not have had the same knowledge of Ottoman culture, religion and history as Luther had,28 and there is only the slightest possibility that he had any real contact with Turks, but it is a complete mistake to assume, as George Huntington Williams does, that Calvin had no knowledge of the Turks and to underestimate what he knew about Islam.29 There are at least a dozen references to Turks and Saracens in the Institutes and his some 2,400 sermons, letters and commentaries are laced with casual references to them. Anthony Lane has noted that there are thirty-three mentions of Muhammad in the fifty-nine volumes of the Calvinis Opera, more than any other medieval author, including Gregory I and Calvin's beloved Bernard of Clairvaux.30 Moreover, Lane rightly observes that Calvin's knowledge of medieval writers like Muhammad is not limited to what he quotes.31 The same is true for Islam generally because, as mentioned earlier, the great public issue of the day was what pamphleteers of the period variously called the 'Turkish menace' or 'Turkish threat' or the 'Turkish peril' and what some modern historians have described as 'the counter-Crusade' by the Ottoman Turks.32 So in order to appreciate what Calvin does say about Islam, it is necessary to read the passages relating to the Turks from Calvin's writings, appreciate something of the sixteenth-century context in which they were written, and understand Calvin's rhetorical style.

This essay then has three parts. Firstly, it will briefly outline the advance of Ottoman imperialism in the late fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century and demonstrate how Calvin's comments on Islam were determined to a large extent by the political and military context in which he wrote, especially the ever-present threat of Turkish aggression. In this way, it will show how his perceptions of Islam were to some measure magnified by the widespread fear that gripped Europe in the first-half of the sixteenth century at the real prospect of Western Europe being overrun by the Turks and the possible demise of Christendom. Secondly, it will demonstrate how Calvin's intemperate language against the Turks (especially in his sermons) is often a rhetorical strategy for attacking his Catholic opponents' theology and a means to admonishing his congregation in Geneva. When reading Calvin's statements on Islam, one has carefully to take into consideration the instrumentalisation of Islam. Islam becomes a kind of rhetorical device, a 'whipping boy', and not every anti-Islamic statement is primarily directed

28 Francisco, Martin Luther and Islam, pp. 110–112.
30 Anthony S. Lane, John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1999, p. 83; Anthony S. Lane, Calvin and Bernard of Clairvaux, (Studies in Reformed Theology and History), Princeton, NJ, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1996.
31 Lane, John Calvin, pp. 9–10.
against Islam. In the politically-charged environment of the mid-sixteenth century, Calvin's polemic against Islam is akin to calling a spade a shovel. And thirdly, I will make a case that Calvin ought not to be viewed as 'the peak of Protestant intolerance' as the renowned church historian, Roland H. Bainton (1894–1984) and others have done, especially when one takes into consideration the wide range of threats facing the Reformation and the legal and cultural situation of the time.

I

By the mid-sixteenth century the Ottoman Empire was at the height of its influence. Politically it was united. Militarily it was powerful. Culturally it was vital and generally tolerant of non-Muslims within its spheres of influence. Marshall Hodgson notes in his essay on the role of Islam in world history that a visitor from Mars in the sixteenth century would have thought that the whole world was on the verge of becoming Muslim. Thus, there were good reasons for Western Europe's heightened anxiety and gloom. Its powerful Islamic neighbour was advancing at a pace.

The Turkish or Ottoman menace emerged in the late fifteenth century with the imperialistic ambitions of the Sultan Mehmet II (r. 1451–1481). When Mehmet II captured Constantinople in 1453, almost fifty years before Calvin's birth, Western Europe was shocked but neither totally surprised nor disappointed. The fall of Constantinople may not have been a major turning point in world history as some have maintained, but it certainly was, as Andrew Hess has convincingly demonstrated, 'a major turning point in Middle Eastern military history'. The old Byzantine capital of Eastern Christendom had fallen. The Turks now had their capital in Europe and were quickly developing a navy to rival the powerful Venetians in the Mediterranean. The momentum of Turkish conquests westward escalated when Mehmet II overran the Serbian and Bosnian kingdoms, brought most of Albania under his control, and subdued the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia. He also captured the Genoese outposts in the Aegean, a remnant of the Fourth Crusade, the Genoese slave-trading towns Kaffa (Feodosiya) and Tana (Azov) on the Black Sea, lands in the Peloponnesse and the imperial kingdom of Trabzon (Trebizond) on the Black Sea. Within thirty years Mehmet II had created an empire stretching across two continents, from Anatolia in the east, encompassing two seas (the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea), and much of eastern Europe in the west.

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37See Fischer–Galati, Ottoman Imperialism and German Protestantism 1521–1555, p. 9.
Sultan Mehmet II, justly called the Conqueror (Fatih), had even greater ambitions. Mehmet thought of himself as a new Alexander the Great, with the difference being that his plans were for western rather than eastern conquest. In 1480, Mehmet II’s gaze extended towards Rome, because he was well aware that if he could take Rome then the Papacy’s central role in unifying Christendom and the reconquest in Spain could be undermined. Mehmet II’s western venture almost succeeded. In 1480, an estimated 18,000 Ottoman soldiers landed near the city of Otranto in southern Italy. Some 12,000 people were slaughtered and as reports of the Turk’s savage treatment of the Otrantini became known, panic spread throughout the peninsula. Mehmet was acknowledged by the Muslim world—at least the Sunni Muslim world—to be the ‘leader of Holy War against Christianity’. Were it not for the cool head and the vigorous efforts of Pope Sixtus IV in mustering aid to repel the Turks, the Ottomans may have established a permanent bridgehead on Italian soil and threatened Rome. Ironically, Mehmet II’s bold advances galvanised rival national and regional states to the defence of Christendom and a year later the Turks were driven out of Italy. The subsequent news of Mehmet II’s death was announced in the West amidst great rejoicing and deep feelings of relief.

Under Mehmet II’s successor, the cautious and tolerant Bayezid II, the Ottoman Empire only expanded marginally. Internally, the Sultan used the period of inactivity to reorganize the financial structures of the Empire and to apply the resultant increase in revenues for war. Rather than winning great land victories, Bayezid presided over the unparalleled development of a large and effective navy, an undertaking that would eventually have grave consequences for Europe and the Mameluke Empire which for some 250 years had successfully maintained its position as the leading state in the Arab world.

The next strong Ottoman leader was Sultan Selim I, known as Selim the Grim (r. 1512–1520). His imperial attentions were more drawn to the East rather than the West, perhaps in part to circumvent Portuguese and Dutch naval incursion in the Indian Ocean, but whatever the reasons, indirectly these activities in the East were to intensify the Islamic character of the Ottoman state. First, Selim put down a new challenge in the East led by the fanatical heretic, Shah Ismail (1486–1524), the Sheik of the militant Safavids who was stirring up resentment against the Ottomans among the Anatolian tribes. Once Selim had blocked the Safavid advances, he destroyed the Mameluke states in Syria and Egypt (a not unfriendly power, in spite of Selim’s claims to the contrary), and incorporated into the Ottoman

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42 Hess, *The Ottoman Conquest of Egypt (1517)*, p. 64.
43 Hess, *The Ottoman Conquest of Egypt (1517)*, p. 63.
44 He followed Bayezid II (1481–1512) considered ‘the most pacific of the first ten rulers of the Ottoman Empire’ though he did not ease Ottoman pressure on the West altogether, see Brandon H. Beck, *The English Image of the Ottoman Empire 1560–1710*, Unpublished PhD, University of Rochester, 1976, p. 14.
realm most of the Arab world, including Damascus, Jerusalem and Cairo and Islam's holiest sites, Mecca and Medina. Virtually the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean had fallen to the Turks in the years 1516 and 1517. These conquests lent great prestige to the Ottomans, already renowned as the foremost warriors of Islam in war against the Christians. Now for the first time an Ottoman sultan was given the title of Caliph (literally meaning successor to the prophet Muhammad) and honoured with the title 'servant of the Two Holy Cities'. These two titles made Selim I and his successors the pre-eminent rulers of the Muslim world. The Turks until then had been Muslims and adopted Islamic customs and manners, but they never entirely submerged themselves in the Muslim world. With Selim's conquests in the East, however, the Ottoman Empire not only doubled in size when it defeated the Mameluke dynasty in 1517 but, according to Karen Barkey, changed from being a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society to one more clearly Islamic, moulded in the Sunni Orthodox tradition.

When Sultan Suleiman (or Sulayman) (r. 1520–1566), son and successor of Selim I, took the throne in 1520, the Ottoman Empire reached the zenith of its powers, becoming one of the world's greatest empires. Suleiman known both as 'the Magnificent' and 'the Lawgiver' inherited a vast unified empire, rich in resources and more forcefully Islamic in its identity. Under Suleiman's wise and energetic leadership the Ottoman Empire expanded alarmingly, almost doubling in area—some 877,800 square miles plus and additional 350,000 square miles if vassal states are taken in consideration. This doubling of Ottoman power not only began what Andrew Hess has starkly described as 'the sixteenth-century world war' but also tilted the balance of power in the Afro-Asian area towards Istanbul. Whereas much of Selim I's energies had been spent fighting other Muslims, whether orthodox or heretic, Suleiman returned to holy war against the infidel. He was now in a powerful position to resume the offensive against south-eastern Europe on a scale more formidable than ever before. His armies quickly overran most of Hungary, capturing Belgrade, the key fortress on the Danube in 1521, Rhodes, the main Christian stronghold in the eastern Mediterranean (and Bodrum, the last Christian citadel on the mainland of Asia Minor) in 1522, routing the armies of King Louis of Hungary at Mohács in 1526, and laying siege to Vienna in 1529. These and other Ottoman advances shocked Europe. Within twenty years Suleiman had secured a northern border along the Drave–Danube line, buttressed by vassal-states on the far side, and wiping out the Christian enclaves and outposts still remaining to the south. Frightened people believed that Suleiman would next advance into central Europe. Martin Luther's famous hymn, 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God', often taken as the battle hymn of the Protestant Reformation, was written in the same year as the siege of Vienna, and may equally be interpreted to reflect the defensive posture that a divided Europe felt when faced by the powerful Ottomans.

45Kofod, 'The Ottomans and Europe', p. 608.
47Donald Edgar Pitcher, An Historical Geography of the Ottoman Empire from earliest times to the end of the sixteenth century (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 134–135.
48Hass, ‘The Ottoman Conquest of Egypt (1517)’, 75.
49Hass, ‘The Ottoman Conquest of Egypt (1517)’, 70; Pannier, ‘Calvin et les Turcs’, 272.
holiest sites, Mecca: Turks in the years when the foremost sultan was given the pre-eminent Islamic customs and Selim's conquests aided the Mameluke, multi-religious

I, took the throne in its greatest empire, as its leader, the quarters miles plus and subling of Ottoman ity world war but areas much of Selim 1's power that was to dominate southern most of Hungary, ristian stronghold (of Asia Minor) ing siege to Vienna in 1529, 1 had secured its side, and wiping people believed that A Mighty Fortress is ten in the same year, sure that a divided

In the Mediterranean Ottoman sea-power was also flexing its muscle. From the mid-1530s to the mid-1540s, the Ottoman admiral, Khair-ed-Din (popularly known as Barbarossa), formed an alliance with Francis I, King of France. He captured Tunis, annexed Venetian outposts, and led savage raids against the coastal towns of Spain and Italy. Barbarossa's death in 1546 brought no respite to Mediterranean Europe. The famous pirate, Turgut (better known as Dragut), Barbarossa's ablest protégé, continued to attack Christendom from his North African strongholds. He seized Tripoli in 1551 and, until his death in Malta in 1565, terrorized Italy, Elba, Corsica, Catalonia and the Balearics. These audacious Turkish successes took place throughout Calvin's lifetime until peace negotiations and eventually formal truces resulted in the 1570s and 1580s between the Ottomans and the Hapsburgs.

In this context of Ottoman advances and military victories, Calvin was clearly aware of the dangers and even the opportunities that the Turks posed. He was no ivory tower theologian cut off from the political issues of his time. Calvin had his finger on the pulse as best one could in the sixteenth century. It is too easily forgotten that Calvin was, as Rodney Stark has convincingly demonstrated, 'a master strategist of subversive activities, having trained and directed an international network of “Secret” missionary-agents who very successfully built a massive “Reformed” underground'. Calvin was more politically informed about national and international events than one might imagine. Pannier, for example, lists many examples from Calvin's extensive correspondence to demonstrate how well-connected Calvin was with scholars and political observers throughout Europe on events relating to the Turks. For example, in April 1541 Calvin attended a convention in Ratisbonne where he received news from Hungary describing the military progress of the Turks. The following year, Oswald Myconius from Basle wrote to Calvin informing him that many volunteers have enlisted to fight the Turks. From Rome, in January or February 1543, Aonio Paleario, a renowned humanist teacher from Sienna, sent a circular letter to Luther, Melanchthon, Bucer, Calvin and others concerning peace negotiations with the Turks. From Berne, in September 1542, the philosopher, Simon Sulzer informed Calvin of the fragile Franco-Turkish relations and of a storm that greatly afflicted the Turkish fleet. And in a letter to Calvin written in May 1544 from Neuchâtel, Guillaume Farel expressed his indignation on the Franco-Turkish alliance and his disgust with the King of France who had granted permission to the Turkish fleet to disembark on to the coast of Provence:

Having disembarked in France, the Turks are free to observe all their impious practices, whereas our friends, men who know true piety, whose only quest is the glory of Christ, are not only prevented from celebrating His religion, but are persecuted in the most horrible, cruel fashion, and that is being done in the kingdom and under the authority of the one who

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64Pannier, *Calvin et les Turcs*, p. 277.
is called the Very Christian King.\footnote{Pannier, ‘Calvin et les Turcs’, p. 282.}

The correspondence was not simply one way. Calvin was interested in political events and how matters relating to the Turks impacted upon the course of the Protestant Reformation. He certainly had a good awareness of the Turkish advances and their ramifications for Europe. For example, in letters to Gabriel Farel written in January 1539 and March 1541, Calvin provides clear evidence that he is knowledgeable of specific Turkish advances in eastern Europe, of uprisings against the Turks both from without and within, of concern about the indifference of those nations remote from Turkish advances, and wise to the political impact of the Ottoman presence on the very survival of the Reformation: ‘They [some of the princes opposed to the Reformation] are, however, kept in restraint by the more prudent, who foresee that the Turk will not remain quiet if he sees Germany engaged in civil war. Already he [the Turk] has possessions of Upper and Lower Wallachia, and has declared war upon the king of Poland, unless he allows him free passage through his territories.’\footnote{John Calvin to Farel, January 1539, John Calvin: Tracts and Letters, Vol. 4: Letters, Pt I, 1529–1546, ed. Jules Bannet, trans. David Constable, Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2003, Vol. 28, p. 105.}

In one of Calvin’s most eloquent tracts, ‘The Necessity of Reforming the Church’, written in the form of an Address to the Diet of the Empire which met in Speyer in 1543, he pleads with the Emperor and the Princes to give priority to reforming ‘the fearful calamities’ within the Church even over the fear of an attack from Turkey.\footnote{John Calvin, ‘The Necessity of Reforming the Church’, in John Calvin: Tracts and Letters, Vol. I, Pt I, pp. 231–32.}

The Turkish war now occupies the minds of all, and fills them with alarm. It may well. Consultation are held to prepare the means of resistance. This, too, is prudently and necessarily done. All exclaim that there is need of no ordinary dispatch. I admit that there cannot be too much dispatch, provided in the meantime, the consultation which ought to be first, the consultation how to restore the Church to its proper state is neither neglected nor retarded… The fuel of the Turkish war is within, shut up in our bowels, and must first be removed, if we would successfully drive back the war itself.\footnote{Calvin, ‘The Necessity of Reforming the Church’, p. 233; Pannier, ‘Calvin et les Turcs’, p. 282.}

Over against the astrologers and diviners who attributed the ‘vogue’ of Islam to occult planetary forces, Calvin maintained, as Erasmus and Luther had done before him, that the Turk was God’s instrument of judgment upon a faithless Christendom.\footnote{John Calvin, ‘Castellio against Calvin’, p. 594.}

He believed that the Turkish conquests in Eastern Europe had occurred because of ‘the prevalence of every kind of base and shocking licentiousness in those countries’ had provoked God’s anger.\footnote{John Calvin, Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Vol. 3, trans. William Pringle, Edinburgh, Calvin Translation Society, 1850, p. 89.}

Even on the domestic front Calvin warned the people of Geneva that they would come under ‘the thumb of the Turks and the Anti-Christ’ should they continue to be negligent of Sunday observance.\footnote{John Calvin, ‘Sanctification of Sunday. The civil and religious orders of the city’, 5 August 1548, in Sermons on Jeremiah, trans. Blair Reynolds, (Texts and Studies in Religion, Vol. 46), Lewiston, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990, pp. 232–233.} Moreover, he argued that the Turk’s extensive dominion and
prosperity did not reflect on the impotence of God, rather their success was in accord with God’s divine plan which had ‘allowed him [the Turk] greater freedom, for the purpose of punishing the ungodliness and wickedness of men’.63

It is not surprising, then, that in the light of the perceived Turkish threat that Calvin did not have a lot to say that was positive about Islam. There is no doubt that he considered the Turks to be the cruellest, proudest and most powerful enemies one could imagine. He abhorred the devastation that the Turkish fleet had brought on the people of Apulia in Italy in September 1557. He was under no illusion that some areas of Europe were at the complete mercy of the Turks. He was not sanguine about Europe’s capacity to defeat such a large and effective fighting force as the Turks could quickly muster. And he realised that if the Turks were to conquer all of Europe it would be the end of Christianity as a power to be reckoned with. ‘The danger exists that there will be a greater barbarity in Christianity than ever before’, he proclaimed with some exaggeration in a sermon on Daniel 11:30–32, ‘because the Turk will be able to come to gain everything. After that he will cause Christianity to be abolished to such an extent that there will be no memory left of it’.64

II

Although Calvin was aware of the military victories that the Turks were having in Western Europe and the subjection of Christian peoples to Ottoman rule in Eastern Europe, Calvin considered the Papacy an equal, if not greater, threat. In the Protestant–Catholic polemics of the period, anti-Catholic and anti-Islamic (and sometimes anti-Judaic) polemics were inter-connected. For Calvin these three—Jews, Papists, and Turks—in changing order, were like three impostors who deviate from the truth. In 1559 in a commentary on Isaiah 25:9 Calvin remarked: ‘Although the Jews, the Turks and the unbelievers contend that they worship God the creator of heaven and earth, in fact they worship an Imagination [fictitium] as their God’.65 Again, in a sermon on Ephesians 2:16–19, Calvin launched a tirade on these ‘three impostors’, ‘The Jews blaspheme on the one hand our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Turks deride him and hold him for a phantom, and the Papists rob him of most of his graces’.66 And similarly in a sermon on knowing God on Acts 7:38–15: ‘It has been like that from time immemorial. We still see it today. The Turks, the Jews, and the papists will confess that there is one God, Creator of heaven and earth, but they nonetheless overflow with thousands of superstitions, and instead of worshipping the living God, they have idols upon idols.’

Calvin’s continual frustration with Roman Catholic theology and ecclesiastical practice boils over in

63Stimp, Calvin and the Turks, p. 129.
64Stimp, Calvin and the Turks, p. 132.
65Stimp, Calvin and the Turks, p. 132.
a sermon on Galatians 5: 4–6, titled 'Not Ceremonies, but Faith Which Works by Love', 'The Papists have never understood the meaning of faith, though they warble on about it. A Magpie in a cage has some understanding, yet they display such awful stupidity that they reveal, as in a mirror, the terrible vengeance of God; for they have forgotten the work of the Holy Spirit, and know nothing of the Holy Scriptures. They know no more than a pagan or Turk who has lived his entire life in barbarism, and who has never heard of God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Calvin's heavy, 'two-edged sword' cuts most deeply in his discussion of Scripture. He was particularly critical of those who were not content with revelation as it is found in the Old and New Testament. 'The Papists contend that when we have what is contained in Holy Scripture it is not enough, but that there are other mysteries which God has reserved for His church. How did they fabricate all this? Exactly in the same way Mahomet has said that his Alcoran was the great perfection. So also the Pope says that there are secrets which have been preserved in addition to Holy Scripture.' Again in his commentary on the Samaritan women in John 4:25, Calvin writes: 'I wish that those who now boast of being pillars of the Christian Church, would at least imitate this poor woman, so as to be satisfied with the simple doctrine of Christ... For whence was the religion of the Pope and Mahomet collected but from the wicked additions, by which they imagined that they brought the doctrine of the Gospel to a state of perfection?'

The closest Calvin comes to demonising Islam relates to Scripture. He attributes Islam's lack of contentment with the revelation given in the Holy Scripture, and its consequent assertion of supersessionism, to a kind of 'diabolical curiosity', yet nearly always the main target of Calvin's attack in these and related passages is the Pope, or the 'pillars of the Christian Church', or the so-called 'Papists'. Thus Muhammad becomes a convenient bugbear. For example, in a sermon on 1 Timothy 4:1–2 Calvin calls Muhammad 'the companion of the Pope who has done his very best to seduce those poor people who were enraged and saturated and poisoned by his false doctrine'. Yet, even Muhammad's prophecies, it would seem, are almost preferable in Calvin's eyes to the calumnious 'Papists' who claim with magisterial authority that 'their inventions are the oracles of the Spirit'. Calvin would have probably approved of Luther's rhetorical flourish when the latter remarked that compared to the Pope, Muhammad appears before the world as a pure saint.

When Calvin deals with the centrality of Christ as the revelation of God, Islam is again caught up in his anti-Catholic polemic. Certainly, there is no denying that in Calvin's opinion the greatest omission

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70 Stimp, 'Calvin and the Turks', p. 135.
74 Francisco, Martin Luther and Islam, p. 84.
of the Turks was their failure to acknowledge the centrality of Christ for a true knowledge of God; nevertheless, Muslims are usually secondary to his political and theological attacks on papal claims. Calvin believed that the whole papal religion had no other intention than to silence Jesus Christ. This is best seen in his sermons on Galatians where he pushes his rhetorical skills to the limit. In the sermon 'Salvation Has Always Been in Christ Alone' on Galatians 3:15–18, Calvin states: 'Unless we come to Jesus Christ and are gathered unto him, it is certain that God will disown us... We see the world blown about here and there, with the Papists (as well as Turks and Jews) creating an infinite variety of ways to approach God; though they all leave aside the Lord Jesus Christ, let us learn to cleave to him entirely.' Again in a sermon on Galatians 2:20–21 titled 'Redemption by the Son of God': 'The Papists say that we are not good enough to obtain salvation without the help of the Lord Jesus Christ; Yet by this they mean that men [sic] can half save themselves, and make up what is lacking through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. They think this is a suitable method of salvation... This is where the Papists are mistaken, and not only they; for this same error is common amongst the Turks.' And finally, in a sermon on Galatians 5:1–3 Calvin ridicules his Catholic opponents by comparing them to 'Turks and pagans' who have not even known Jesus Christ and believe that they can earn the grace and favour of God through good deeds. ridicules his Catholic opponents by comparing them to 'Turks and pagans' who have not even known Jesus Christ and believe that they can earn the grace and favour of God through good deeds.

Calvin's statements on Islam were particularly coloured by his homiletical agenda. It should always be remembered when assessing Calvin's statements on Islam that the image of the Turk portrayed therein was intended to have a particular effect on his audience. For instance, there is ample evidence that Calvin was not averse to using the example of the Turks to shame his congregation in Geneva and to stir them up to greater faithfulness. Often Calvin calls upon his congregation to 'Look at the Turks' or 'Think of the Turks' and see how willing they are to die for their law with the clear object of shaking his congregation who seemed so willing to renounce their God-given calling. For Calvin the example of the Turks condemns those Christians who are 'negligent and cold and even freezing' in their worship. In sermon 4 on the Book of Acts, Calvin states: 'This much is certain. When God comes to judge the world, the Turks, gentiles, papists, and other unbelievers will be treated more gently than we,

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[John Calvin, 'Salvation Has Always Been in Christ Alone' (Gal. 3:15–16), in Sermons on Galatians, pp. 304–305.]

[John Calvin, 'Redemption by the Son of God' (Gal. 2:20–21), in Sermons on Galatians, p. 216.]

[John Calvin, 'Absolved Only Through the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ' (Gal. 3:15–19), in Sermons on Galatians, p. 467.]


unless we take better advantage than we usually do of the kindness and benefits God provides for us daily. Such must be uppermost in our minds. 86

III

Calvin is often painted as an intolerant bigot, yet despite his rhetoric of disdain, and didactic use of the zealous and fearless Turk in his preaching, there are at least four indications in Calvin’s writings that he had a more positive appreciation of Islam than is commonly attributed to him which have relevance for interfaith dialogue in today’s pluralist society. Firstly, there is some evidence that Calvin shared a Gallic appreciation of Ottoman culture with other French civilians. Clarence Dana Rouillard’s detailed study of the image of the Turks in French thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, based on firsthand accounts of travellers, ambassadors, diplomats, traders and merchants returning from journeys to the Mediterranean and North Africa, provides an indication of French admiration for Ottoman social, cultural and political institutions. 87 Rouillard says little about religion but the French estimation of the superior culture of the Ottomans may very well have influenced Calvin’s view of Islam. Rouillard’s study illustrates that French travellers repeatedly expressed admiration towards the Ottoman social and political institutions while contrasting them with western styles which seemed inadequate at the time. Calvin, too, was well aware of the religious devotion, endurance, frugality, sobriety, cleanliness and hospitality practised by the Turks, even, as we have seen, pointedly indicating that their religious practices were superior to those exercised by Christians in Geneva. “The Jews and Turks, at least, have some reverence for their religion. But the “devils” in our midst come to the sermon like dogs and bulls, without any sincerity or modesty.” 88 Calvin was certainly no admirer of Islam nor an apologist for Turkish culture like the German reformer, Sebastian Franck (1499–1542) was, but there are several small indications in Calvin’s writings that he respected the devotion of the Turks. By the mid-sixteenth century, Protestant leaders were changing their attitude to Islam and Calvin was at the very beginning of this change. Within a decade after Calvin’s death, for example, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, composed a prayer calling upon God to ‘have mercy upon all Jews, Turks, infidels and heretics’ and Queen Elizabeth I of England, espoused the virtues of Islam and insisted that Muslim sultans had more in common with Protestant Christianity than with the idolatry of Catholicism. 89

88 Raymond A. Blacketer, The School of God: Pedagogy and Rhetoric in Calvin’s Interpretation of Deuteronomy, Dordrecht, Springer, 2006, p. 120.
The second indication of a positive appreciation of Islam stems from Calvin's belief that Turkish threat was part of the divine plan and should not be opposed. Unlike most Protestants and Catholics of the period, Calvin was opposed to war with the Turks. Like Erasmus, Calvin spoke of the Turks as the 'voice of God' (the *Vox Domini*), calling upon the people of Europe for inner conversion, reconciliation with God, and a life regulated by God's divine law. Just as the voice of God in Psalm 28 thunders over the waters, tears down the cedars, shakes the wilderness, strips the forest bare and extinguishes the flames of fire, so the voice of God is heard through the coming of the Turks. For Calvin, Islam had the same role in God's plan of salvation. Although he was sympathetic with Erasmus' desire clearly expressed in the latter's *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (1518) that Europe keep the conversion of the Turks at the forefront of their minds by demonstrating the exemplary morality of Christianity, there is no suggestion that Calvin considered the Turks as 'half-Christians' as Erasmus did, or as 'friends of God' as Theodoric Biblender did, or even as potential members of the universal church of the elect as Thomas Muntzer (1490–1525) did.

Thirdly, Calvin's treatment of the so-called 'terrible Turks', though harsh, was more favourable than that found in the vast amount of anti-Turk literature of the period. The image of the 'bloody and cruel Turk' in these tracts (*Tuerkenbuchlein*) represented all things damnable about their religion. The cruel and intractable Turk was the 'arch-enemy of Christendom' threatening to systematically Islamize the entire Christian world. In Luther's well-known theological treatise, *On War against the Turks*, published in 1528, he calls the Turk a scourge of God and a servant of the devil. Sometimes the Turk was depicted as the Antichrist himself. Even hymnbooks narrated Turkish atrocities—cruelest to women, barbaric practices, complaints from prisoners at Constantinople, persecution, and the enslavement of Christian captives. Liturgies, too, contained prayers 'against the Turks' beseeching God to preserve Christians from 'the monstrous designs of the Turks.' Johannes Brenz (1499–1570), a leading Reformation figure in the town of Schwabisch-Hall in 1537 wrote a 'Booklet on the Turk' subtitled 'How Preachers and Laymen Should Conduct Themselves if the Turk Were to Invade Germany'. Fearful of a Turkish

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91 Bibliographers have identified nearly 2,500 booklets and other forms of literature such as hymns, ballads, plays, and so on which, in some way or another, addressed the turmoil caused by the Ottomans in the sixteenth century. See John W. Boehrstedt, "The Infiel Scourge of God: The Turkish Menace As Seen by German Pompilhoeurs of the Reformaion Era", *American Philosopical Society Transactions* 50, No. 8, 1968, p. 50.
incursion, Brenz urged German resistance to the Turk writing:

they are nothing but undisguised criminals the Turk themselves prove, not only by their deeds but by their law, for their Mahomer commanded them to commit perpetual aggression, to conquer lands and peoples. They are under the illusion that God promised to Mahomer sovereignty and power over the earth; they allege that only through the Mahometan empire will God fulfill His promise to Abraham, namely to make him lord of all the world. Since the Turks boast that this is their law, it is fitting for all civil authorities to combat them as avowed criminals.93

Brenz then recites a litany of Turkish atrocities and warns that all Christians are duty-bound to avoid coming under the Turkish regime because the Turks, based on a common interpretation of the fourth empire prophecy in Daniel 7, were clearly God's enemy. Similarly, Justus Jonas (1495–1555), Professor of Theology at the University of Wittenberg, was equally damming of the Turks in his commentary *The Seventh Chapter of Daniel; Concerning the Blasphemy and Horrible Murderings of the Turk*.94 By contrast Calvin's language against the Turks was quite restrained. He never portrayed Mohammed as the anti-Christ and never became involved in eschatological speculations about Muslims, as did both Luther and Melanchthon.95 Commenting on Daniel 7:9 Calvin chided those commentators whose interpretations distorted the meaning of the text with the express purpose of casting the Turks in a bad light: 'some twist this to mean the pope, and others the Turk; but neither opinion seems to me probable; they are both wrong, since they think the whole course of Christ's Kingdom is here described'.96

Finally, there is a passage in the first (1536) edition of the *Institutes* where Calvin demonstrates clemency towards the Turks. In this irenic reference Calvin exhorts his readers to treat 'Turks and Saracens and other enemies of religion' in the same way as 'excommunicated persons', that is to say, to deal with them gently and mercifully:

[T]hough ecclesiastical discipline does not permit us to live familiarly or have intimate contact with excommunicated persons, we ought nevertheless to strive by whatever means we can, whether by exhortation and teaching or by mercy and gentleness, or by our own prayers to God, that they may turn to a more virtuous life and return to the society and unity of the church. And not only those are to be treated, but also Turks and Saracens, and other enemies of religion. For be it from us to approve those methods by which many until now have tried to force them to our faith, when they deny to them all offices of humanity, when they pursue

93 Bohnstedt, 'The Infidel Scourge of God', p. 47.
95 Williams, 'Erasmus and Reformers on Non-Christian Religions', p. 361.
ly by their deeds of aggression, to this Mahometan empire of the world. Since combat them as duty-bound to avoid rotation of the fourth 493–1555), Professor is in his commentary rings of the Turk. By portrayed Mohammed about Muslims, as did those commentators of casting the Turks ther opinion seems to rest's Kingdom is here demonstrates clemency Turks and Saracens and is to say, to deal with the intimate contact ever means we can, our own prayers to y and unity of the and other enemies until now have tried; when they pursue them with sword and arms.97 There has been considerable scholarly debate about this passage because Calvin deleted the reference to the Turks and Saracens in subsequent revisions of the Institutes.98 Bainton, for example, has dismissed it as a 'little irrelevancy' and drawn smiles with his quip that, ‘If Calvin ever wrote anything in favour of religious liberty it was a typographical error’,99 but there is little doubt that these sentences express a certain tolerance on Calvin's behalf towards Muslims, or at least an incipient support for the freedom of Islam and the rejection of force when it comes to dealing with people of other faiths. Some scholars beginning with Calvin's staunch critic Sebastian Castellio (1515–1563) have argued that Calvin in later life moved away from this 'tolerant' attitude towards Muslims, or, indeed, that there never was any room for religious tolerance at any stage of his life, but the evidence supports Robert White’s contention that Calvin consistently rejected forced conversion and never repudiated the ideas expressed in the 1536 text.100 While Calvin did set himself firmly against the toleration of heresy within the Christian community, regarding it as an offence against divine and civil law, he was careful to draw a distinction between the apostate within and the unbeliever without.101 While strictness still prevailed towards outsiders, Calvin was more open to outsiders. Muslims were to be tolerated and not forced to convert to Christianity.102 For Calvin, Christians were to demonstrate tolerance towards Muslims because the alternative, intolerance, might very well lead to greater evils, such as warfare and the failure to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

98 See White, 'Castellio against Calvin', pp. 575–583.
99 Concerning Heresies whether they are to be persecuted and how they are to be treated: A collection of the opinions of learned men both ancient and modern. An anonymous work attributed to Sebastian Castellio now first done into English, together with excerpts from other works of Sebastian Castellio and David Josip on Religious Liberty by Roland H. Bainton, New York, Columbia University Press, 1935, pp. 1047, 75.
101 White, 'Castellio against Calvin', p. 563.
102 White, 'Castellio against Calvin', p. 565.