



Robert J. Christman

# The Dynamics of the Early Reformation in their Reformed Augustinian Context

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University  
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Cover illustration: Image of two Augustinian monks being burned. Taken from the pamphlet *Dye histori, so zwen Augustiner Ordens gemartert seyn tzu Bruxel in Probant, von wegen des Eua[n]gelij. Dye Artickel darumb sie verbrent seyn mit yrer auflegung vnd verklerung* (Erfurt: Stürmer, 1523). This work is Martin Reckenhofer's translation of the anonymous pamphlet *Historia de Dvobvs Avgvstinensibus, ob Evangelij doctrinam exustis Bruxellae, die trigesima Iunij. Anno domini M.D.XXIII* (n.p.: n.p). Ghent University Library BHSL.RES.1007/2

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To the memory of Anna Christman Horvath (1968–2017)

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# 1. Introduction: The Reformed Augustinians of Lower Germany

## Abstract

The burnings of the Reformed Augustinian friars Hendrik Vos and Johann van den Esschen in Brussels on 1 July 1523 were the first executions of the Protestant Reformation. This chapter challenges the notion that they were peripheral to the key events of the early Reformation. Personal connections and frequent interactions existed between the Reformed Augustinians in the Low Countries (=Lower Germany) and those in Wittenberg, where Martin Luther was a member; the individuals responsible for the executions were intimates of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, and Popes Leo X and Adrian VI. An awareness of these connections raises questions about the importance of this event in the early Reformation and about how that movement functioned in its earliest stages.

**Keywords:** Martin Luther, Hendrik Vos (Voes), Johann van den Esschen, Emperor Charles V, Pope Adrian VI, Congregation of German Reformed Augustinians, martyrdom

On 1 July 1523, in front of a crowd of spectators, Hendrik Vos and Johann van den Esschen, were burned alive on the Grand Plaza of Brussels for adhering to “Lutheran” beliefs. The executions of these two young friars from the Augustinian cloister in Antwerp were the first of the Protestant Reformation, and the event was publicized throughout Europe, particularly in the German-speaking lands. Well-known in scholarly circles, historians have investigated the executions from a variety of angles and perspectives;<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> With regard to their local significance see, for example, Duke, ‘The Netherlands’; Kalkoff, *Die Anfänge der Gegenreformation*; and Clemen, ‘Die Ersten Märtyrer’. Kalkoff has done a tremendous amount of spade work on the situation of the Antwerp Augustinians, particularly in Chapter Six. But because his focus is really on the Counter-Reformation in the context of the Low Countries, and because aspects of the story are scattered throughout his text, his work

despite this, very little is known about origins of the event and the details of its development, and a comprehensive understanding of its overall implications for the early Reformation therefore still eludes us. Most modern scholars seem to have the following vague impressions about the case: first, that the executions were an isolated incident without any noteworthy pre-history; second, that little concrete connection existed between what was happening in Antwerp and Brussels and what was happening in Wittenberg and in the early Reformation more broadly;<sup>2</sup> and third, that the event's impact, particularly within the empire, was limited to what we might call its potential for propaganda. For these reasons, the case is virtually ignored in general histories of the Reformation.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the execution of these men is merely the most well-known event in a cohesive narrative, a storyline that revolves around not only the episode in Brussels but also the seven cloisters of the Province of Lower Germany. Located in cities across modern Germany (Cologne), Belgium (Antwerp, Ghent, and Enghien), and the Netherlands (Haarlem, Enkhuizen, and Dordrecht), these houses comprised one district or province of a broader association within the late medieval Augustinian Eremite Order, known as the Congregation of 'German' or 'Saxon' Reformed Augustinians, whose members were often referred to as the 'Observants' or occasionally the

fails to provide a cohesive view of the role played by the Antwerp Augustinians in the early Reformation more broadly. In light of Martin Luther's response to the deaths, see Akerboom and Gielis, "A New Song"; Oettinger, *Music as Propaganda*, pp. 61–69; Kolb, 'God's Gift of Martyrdom'; Casey, "Start Spreading the News"; and Rössler, 'Ein neues Lied wir heben'. For the content of the pamphlets composed about the executions, their influence on notions of martyrdom, and the creation of martyr literature of the period, see Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*; Moeller, 'Inquisition und Martyrium'; and Hebenstreit-Wilfert, 'Märtyrerflugschriften der Reformationszeit'. For the theological issues separating Luther (and by association, the Antwerp Augustinians) from the theologians responsible for prosecuting these friars, see Gielis, 'Augustijnergeloof en Predikherengeloof'.

2 The one exception to this view is Vercauysse, 'Was Haben die Sachsen'.

3 Some recent surveys of the Reformation omit any reference to it. None afford it more than a paragraph or, in a few cases, a page. Allusions to Antwerp in the early Reformation are equally scarce. For example, the following monographs make no mention of the executions: Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion*; Rublack, *Reformation Europe*; Wallace, *The Long European Reformation*; and Tracy, *Europe's Reformations 1450–1650*. Short references may be found in Hillerbrand, *The Division of Christianity*, p. 376; Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, pp. 283–284; MacCulloch, *Reformation. Europe's House Divided*, pp. 134–135; and Cameron, *The European Reformation*, p. 357. Even works specifically devoted to the early Reformation make little or no reference to the executions or to Antwerp in this period. For example, no mention is made in the following texts: Scott, *The Early Reformation*; Kaufmann, *Der Anfang der Reformation*; Moeller and Buckwalter, eds., *Die frühe Reformation in Deutschland*; and Chadwick, *The Early Reformation on the Continent*.

'Vicarines'.<sup>4</sup> These seven cloisters represented less than one-third of the group's total houses, which numbered just over two dozen. Most were located in the German heartlands of Saxony and Thuringia, among them the Erfurt house, where Martin Luther joined the Augustinian Order in 1505, and the Wittenberg cloister, where he lived most of his life. The remainder lay scattered throughout the German-speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire. At the height of its expansion, the membership of the modestly-sized German Reformed Congregation could not have numbered above about 500 friars, of whom less than 125 resided in the cloisters of the Province of Lower Germany.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as a corporate entity within the German Reformed Congregation, the Province of Lower Germany existed for eight brief years, from 1514–1522. For all these reasons, it should come as no surprise that, although general studies of the Observant movement in Germany and of the Congregation of German Reformed Augustinians have been undertaken, the Province of Lower Germany as its own entity has thus far eluded scholarly attention.<sup>6</sup>

Simply stated, this little group of cloisters on the geographical periphery of the Congregation's heartlands played a disproportionately large role in the early Reformation. Structural ties and friendships bound the Congregation's cloisters directly to Wittenberg, and it did not take long for them to become conduits for Luther's ideas. Two factors, however, make these seven houses exceptional. First, four of the seven houses of the Province of Lower Germany were added to the Congregation in the decade immediately preceding the executions of Vos and van den Esschen. In other words, Lower Germany was a growth area for the Congregation, which had recently developed strategies to expand into that region. And second, these houses were located by and large in the patrimonial lands of the newly elected Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, a committed opponent of the Reformation.<sup>7</sup>

4 Local studies on some of the individual cloisters have proved indispensable for this monograph. For the Antwerp cloister see Vercruyse, 'De Antwerpse augustijnen'; Clemen, 'Das Antwerper Augustiner-Kloster'; for the Cologne cloister see Rotscheidt-Mörs, 'Die Kölner Augustiner'; and for the Enkhuizen cloister see Voets, 'Hebben de Augustijnen van Enkhuizen'.

5 For the year 1500 Michael Wernicke estimates c. 2,000 friars in the Empire's 112 cloisters of Augustinian Eremites, for an average of just under eighteen brothers per house. If that number is multiplied by the 27 cloisters of the Reformed Augustinians, the total comes to 482 members. Wernicke, 'Die Augustiner Eremiten', p. 52.

6 Indispensable for this study has been Wolfgang Günter's overview of the history of the German Reformed Congregation, *Reform und Reformation*, which is a considerable expansion and improvement on Theodor Kolde's, *Die deutsche Augustiner-Congregation*; also helpful is the seven volume monument by Kunzelmann, *Geschichte der deutschen Augustiner-Eremiten*.

7 The exception among the seven cloisters of the Province of Lower Germany was the Reformed Augustinian cloister in Cologne. However, the economic welfare of that city was so closely tied

What is more, particularly during the Pontificate of Adrian VI (1522–1523), a native of the Low Countries and erstwhile tutor to Charles, the papacy worked closely with the imperial authorities to stamp out heretical Lutheran ideas. The combined forces of the emperor and his administration and the papacy and its supporters were thus able to exert considerable direct pressure on these seven cloisters, something that would be impossible in many of the Reformed Augustinian cloisters elsewhere in the empire. As a result, the cloisters of the Province of Lower Germany quickly became a fiercely contested battleground during the early Reformation. On the one side, the emperor, in conjunction with the pope, realized the danger the Observants posed and executed a strategy to silence them. On the other side, the leadership of the Reformation in Wittenberg attempted to promote its ideas and further its cause through these cloisters. Between 1519 and 1523, this struggle was the first engagement in which the Reformation left the world of literary debates and, in the case of the Antwerp cloister, became a bloody confrontation.

Only when seen from this broader perspective can the deaths of the two Antwerp Augustinians be understood for what they really were: namely, the culmination of one of the sharpest and most important engagements of the early Reformation, one that signalled to all involved the positions each side would take and the lengths to which they would go, sometimes in direct contradiction to the declarations they articulated publicly. In Lower Germany, actions spoke louder than words. Thus, far from being the inconsequential demise of two essentially unknown friars, to be exploited for polemical purposes, the deaths of Vos and van den Esschen were the fallout from a deliberate proxy battle pitting pope and emperor against Luther and his Augustinian comrades in Wittenberg.

Within this broader narrative, this study addresses five key questions. The first is: what role did these seven cloisters play in the dissemination of Reformation ideas and doctrines, and how did that role come about? The downfall of the two Antwerp Augustinians certainly indicates that this cloister was involved in the diffusion of such ideas. But although the Antwerp cloister's ties to Wittenberg and Luther have been acknowledged, the depth and significance of these connections has generally been underestimated. And although it is well known that, from its foundation in 1513

to Antwerp and other cities in the Low Countries that the emperor was able to exert significant, if indirect, authority over it. But despite this fact, the Cologne Augustinian cloister remained a stronghold of Lutheran ideas for a decade after most support for the Reformation had been eradicated from the cloisters located directly in Charles V's patrimonial lands. See Scribner, 'Why was there no Reformation in Cologne', pp. 218–225.

until its destruction in 1523, key leaders within the Antwerp cloister spent considerable time in Wittenberg and developed friendships with Luther, little work has been done on the other cloisters of the Province of Lower Germany at this crucial moment, and historians seem to have assumed that the connections between Wittenberg and Antwerp were a historical anomaly. The first aim of the study is therefore to determine the degree to which the other cloisters of the Congregation's Province of Lower Germany were connected to the Wittenberg Reformation.

Clearly such connections existed, for it did not take long for the most powerful authorities in Europe, Popes Leo X and Adrian VI and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, to recognize these cloisters as threats. The second question this study seeks to answer is therefore, how did these authorities respond? Again, the Antwerp cloister serves as the most high-profile illustration. Having witnessed widespread support for Luther at the Diet of Worms (1521), the newly crowned emperor returned to the Low Countries, determined to confront the burgeoning Lutheran heresy there. Meanwhile, the papal nuncio, Jerome Aleander, who had been charged with publishing the bull threatening Luther and his followers with excommunication (*Exsurge Domine* 15 June 1520), and who had authored the Edict of Worms (25 May 1521), made common cause with Charles. By the time their campaign against the Reformed Augustinians of Lower Germany was over, the Antwerp cloister had been razed to the ground and the Province's remaining houses had been administratively severed from their ties to the German Reformed Congregation. As a result of these and other steps taken by pope and emperor against the Reformed Augustinians of Lower Germany, this group must be seen as one of the earliest targets of anti-Reformation forces, and the actions against it considered foundational to the dynamics of the early Reformation. The second objective of this study is to elucidate this campaign against the Augustinians.

The forces opposing the Reformation were not alone in attempting to influence what was happening among the cloisters of the Province of Lower Germany. Martin Luther and much of the hierarchy of the Congregation of German Reformed Augustinians were actively involved in these events, and it is here that this study breaks the most new ground. As will become clear, Luther and his Augustinian colleagues adopted the strategic methods developed by the Congregation in the 1510s (and earlier) to expand its influence in Lower Germany, which they now deployed in the service of the Reformation. In short, they used the knowledge and skills they had acquired as members of the Congregation – not to mention the assets of

that group – to further the cause of the Reformation in concrete ways.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the rather public moves of the pope and emperor, the influence of Luther and his colleagues was more subtle, but of its existence there can be no doubt. The third question addressed in this investigation concerns the origins, parameters, and nature of this understudied aspect of the Augustinian context of the early Reformation.

In a sense, then, these seven cloisters were pawns in a larger struggle. But to see the conflict only in these terms disregards the autonomy and agency of the friars in the Province of Lower Germany. Thus the fourth question this examination will ask is whether they were merely mouth-pieces for Wittenberg's Reformation ideas, or whether the milieu of Lower Germany shaped their ideas about reform in particular ways? If so, were their ideas in harmony with Luther's? The evidence indicates that some of the Augustinians of the Province of Lower Germany were, in fact, more radical than Luther and many of his fellow Saxon Augustinians. Reform thus emanated not only from Wittenberg but, in the Low Countries, took on a local character, and it seems that such regional variations did at times influence the speed and content of what was happening in Wittenberg. This study will document such phenomena.

Having developed a deeper understanding of the significance of these events, this examination will turn to the question of how this conflict over the cloisters of Lower Germany impacted the early Reformation. Again, the high-profile executions of Vos and van den Esschen provide one means to address this question, and in fact considerable scholarly attention has been paid to it. The pro-Reformation pamphlets and eyewitness accounts of their burnings have been analysed for their content, number of editions, and geographical distribution, thereby providing some insight into the ways in which the executions were framed and presented to the public.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the reactions of specific individuals, such as Martin Luther and Erasmus of Rotterdam have also been examined.<sup>10</sup> But in the former case, we learn only what people heard or read about the events, not whether or

8 Recently, Andrew Pettegree has demonstrated conclusively that in the early years of the Reformation, Martin Luther created new genres of literature and employed the media of print in new and unique ways and with great intentionality in the service of the Reformation cause. This investigation complements Pettegree's discoveries by demonstrating that Luther and his colleagues likewise employed the resources at their disposal as longstanding members and leaders within the Congregation of German Reformed Augustinians in the service of the Reformation. Pettegree, *Brand Luther*.

9 See note 1.

10 See note 1.

how they actually influenced belief and behaviour. And in the latter case, the impact of the executions on these intellectual elites takes on a different complexion when considered in light of the broader events of the conflict. This study will offer a deeper understanding of the variety of ways and the degree to which these events shaped the early Reformation.

By integrating the story of the German Reformed Augustinians of the Province of Lower Germany into the broader history of the early Reformation, this book transcends modern national boundaries that have artificially influenced our thinking about the past. In doing so, it helps restore one key component, a true watershed event, to the history of that movement. It further shows how, in this Augustinian context, the early Reformation was not a struggle between groups and individuals unknown to one another, but rather a battle between acquaintances and associates. Perhaps most importantly, however, it demonstrates that even in the earliest phases of the Reformation each side developed and employed strategies to promote its cause in concrete ways. Finally, it illustrates how, within this context at least, the Reformation grew naturally out of late medieval Augustinian efforts at reform – not with regard to the content of that reform, but with regard to its personnel and its strategies for diffusion.<sup>11</sup> These discoveries bring us closer to the experience of the early Reformation while at the same time enabling us to acquire deeper insight into the dynamics and workings of that broad movement in its earliest phase.

The final question this study will address is what this deeper understanding of these events reveals about the broader dynamics of the early Reformation. By “dynamics of the early Reformation” I mean how the Reformation functioned as both an elite and popular mass movement, an issue that includes such questions as: Who was disseminating Reformation ideas and how was such information transmitted? If we think in terms of the Reformation movement as having a centre and a periphery, how did the events in Lower Germany impact Luther’s thinking and that of his colleagues in Wittenberg? Were those individuals who were “on the periphery”, in this case the Augustinians of Lower Germany, pushing and shaping Luther’s thought, or were they merely mouthpieces for his ideas – and in light of the answer to this question, is it even legitimate to think in terms of a centre

11 As such, this study complements Eric Saak’s recent monograph, *Luther and the Reformation*. Saak specifically undertakes an investigation of Luther’s intellectual, theological, and personal development within the context of the Augustinian Order. This study addresses the development of the early Reformation, particularly with regards to its administration and diffusion, within the context of the Augustinian Order.



and a periphery, or does some other model need to replace it? What does this case reveal about Martin Luther as a strategic leader of a movement? In short, this study will demonstrate that the experiences of the Reformed Augustinians of Lower Germany, properly understood, open a new window into the workings of the early Reformation.

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