



STs. JOHANN, HENDRIK, AND HENRY, THE FIRST MARTYRS OF THE REFORMATION

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The story of the first evangelical martyrs is closely related to the story of the Observant Augustinian Monastery at Antwerp. The brief existence of the Antwerp monastery roughly overlaps the first decade of Luther's tenure at Wittenberg. Established in 1512, the Antwerp monastery was dissolved ten years later, thanks in part to the fact that the brethren there would not stop preaching Luther's ideas. In 1522, the monastery was vacated and closed for good. In 1528, the monastery's chapel was reestablished as a Roman Catholic parish church.

Today, that church still stands on Antwerp's Augustijnestraat. If you visit the church, you will find, tucked in a far corner, a small exhibit outlining the reasons for the demise of the old Augustinian monastery and for the execution of two of its members.¹ For Luther, on the other hand, the deaths of those who were killed for propagating evangelical teaching were nothing to hide in a corner: their deaths were to be proclaimed far and wide.

Luther's connection with his monastic brothers in the Low Countries began in earnest with the 1519 arrival of a new prior in Antwerp.² The prior, a Netherlander named Jacob Probst, had studied at Wittenberg since before Luther's arrival and was likely a Wittenberg resident when the Ninety-Five Theses were posted. A unique piece of epistolary evidence suggests Luther's connection with and influence on Probst. In a 1519 letter to Luther, Erasmus wrote: "There is a prior in your monastery in Antwerp, a pure Christian man, who holds you in high regard. He has been your student [*discipulus*] for a long time, as he himself proclaims. Of nearly all the clergy, he alone proclaims Christ."³ Probst also appears to have had a hand in the translation of Luther's writings, which began appearing in and around Antwerp around this time.⁴

The spread of Luther's teaching in the Low Countries did not go uncontested, of course. Among the principal players combating the *Lutherei* were Girolamo Aleandro (also known as "Aleander," the famous papal legate), Margaret of Savoy (Charles v's aunt and governor of Charles's territories in northwestern Europe), and Franz van der Hulst (who would become the chief inquisitor in the Low Countries), as well as Jacob Latomus and Nicholas van Egmond

(colleagues of Erasmus on the university faculty at Louvain). From the autumn of 1519, when the Louvain faculty published an official condemnation of Luther, through the summer of 1521, when the Edict of Worms was published in cities and towns, these five principals turned up the heat on Luther's adherents in the Low Countries.

Receiving particular attention was the activity of the monks belonging to the Observant Augustinian Monastery in Antwerp. In a letter from September 1521, Aleandro singled out the Antwerp prior, Probst, as a major contributor to the "Lutheran problem" in the Low Countries.⁵ In the end, Probst earned himself a visit from the authorities. On December 6, 1521, Probst was escorted to Brussels, where he was imprisoned. There he was investigated by various inquisitors (including Latomus and Edmond) and threatened with execution. Probst relented a few months later, agreeing to recant publicly thirty articles deemed heretical. On February 9, 1522, Probst renounced Luther from the pulpit of the Brussels cathedral. The text of Probst's renunciation was soon published.⁶

The publication of the Antwerp prior's recantation and his reassignment to another monastery in Flanders did not, however, fully quiet evangelical impulses back in Antwerp. In May, Luther's chapter of Observant Augustinians convened in Jena. There it was determined that another Netherlander, Henry van Zutphen, would be sent to lead the brethren at Antwerp. Zutphen took up where Probst left off, defying the ban on evangelical preaching. On September 29, 1522, Zutphen was arrested under the orders of Governor Margaret. However, a mob uprising (made up mostly of women, apparently) made possible the new prior's escape. After a few days hiding in Antwerp, Zutphen fled northward, ending up in Bremen.⁷

One week after the failed attempt to snatch Zutphen, the brothers of the Antwerp Augustinian monastery were arrested en masse. Each was interrogated; most were released. However, eight of the brothers were detained. Like Probst before them, the eight Augustinians were prosecuted under the terms of the Worms edict: brought to Brussels, thrown in jail, investigated by various inquisitors, and threatened with execution. Under this process, five of

the eight brothers were released after properly repudiating Luther and his teachings. However, the remaining three friars—Lambert Thorn, Hendrik Voes, and Johann van Esschen—refused to recant. Their inquisitors prepared a document detailing sixty-two articles of heterodox faith, sufficient evidence to condemn the three Augustinians as heretics.⁸

As for the Antwerp monastery, the buildings were barricaded and all of the belongings were sold. The eucharistic host was taken from the monastery's chapel and brought in a great procession to Antwerp's Our Lady Cathedral, where, with Governor Margaret in attendance, the sacrament was reconsecrated. Three months later, on January 16, 1523, the buildings of the Augustinian monastery—erected only ten years earlier—were leveled to the ground. Only the chapel was spared.

About half a year after the destruction of the monastery in Antwerp, the fates of the three holdouts were realized. Lambert Thorn apparently asked for additional time and was returned to prison, kept there until his death by natural causes in 1528. Hendrik Voes and Johann van Esschen, on the other hand, received the complete treatment. On July 1, 1523, the two were arrayed in the full ecclesiastical regalia of their order and led in a procession that included Aleandro, Latomus, and Egmond. The procession terminated at the square in front of the Brussels cathedral, St. Gudala, where pyres stood prepared. The friars were then ceremonially degraded, their monastic garb replaced with plain robes. Both were given one last chance to recant. Refusing the offers of last-minute reprieve, Voes and Esschen were fastened to stakes. Torches applied fire to the wood. According to reports, the two young friars sang *Te Deum laudamus* before succumbing to the smoke and flames.⁹

The reports themselves are interesting. The aftermath of the *auto-da-fé* of Voes and Esschen indicates the growing power of the then-relatively

new technology, the printing press. Within days, pamphlets detailing the deaths of the two Antwerp brothers were printed and distributed throughout the Low Countries and beyond. In one of the pamphlets, entitled *The Events and Circumstances concerning the Degradation and Burning of Three Christians Nobles and Martyrs of the Augustinian Order in Brussels*, the anonymous author clearly sympathizes with the victims, painting the authorities as villains and their executions as a gross miscarriage of justice.¹⁰ The tract became a best-seller of sorts: editions were printed by various printers, one as far away as Augsburg.

As for Luther, he did not receive word of the July 1 executions until the end of the month. Upon learning that two of his fellow friars had been burned at the stake, Luther began to weep and said: "I thought I would be the first one to be martyred by the holy gospel, but I am not worthy."¹¹ Otherwise little is known of Luther's immediate reaction to the news. What is clear is that the tragedy in Brussels supplied Luther with the inspiration to try his hand at martyrology. The result took two forms: a letter of consolation and a hymn of praise.

In August, Luther was moved to write to "the Christians in the Low Countries." During the same month, Luther penned his first published hymn—a ballad of sorts to the two young men burned in Brussels—called "Ein neues Lied wir heben an."¹² The initial stanza of Luther's hymn makes clear his understanding that what happened to Voes and Esschen was part of the divine plan.

A new song here shall be begun—
The Lord God help our singing!—
Of what our God himself hath
done,
Praise, honour to him bringing:
At Brussels in the Netherlands,
By two young boys, He gracious
Displays the wonders of his hands,
Giving them gifts right precious,
And richly them adorning.¹³

The hymn goes on to highlight the

courage and steadfastness of the martyrs as well as the guilt and perfidy of the prosecutors. Summarizing the sixty-two "heretical" articles into one, Luther's hymn explains that Voes and Esschen were executed for contending that "[i]n God we should trust solely." Luther then exposed the "sophists" for their attempt to spread the rumor that the two Augustinians were less than constant: "They still go on belying; They say that with their latest breath The boys, in act of dying, Repented and recanted! Let them lie on for evermore." For Luther, the death of his two brothers in Brussels simply confirmed that the preaching of the true gospel had returned to the church: "His word is yet remaining! E'en at the door is summer nigh, The winter hard is ended."¹⁴

Luther's musical memorial to Voes and Esschen accomplished two characteristic aims of martyr literature. Traditionally, the martyrologist's task was to tell the story and fit it into the context of the divine plan. That Luther managed to accomplish this task in the form of a humable tune—similar in sound and structure to "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"—is noteworthy in itself.

Beyond the particulars of the Brussels executions, the significance of Luther's hymn lies in its effort to place the deaths in theological context. For Luther, the executions were a symptom of the battle between God and devil—a battle brought about by the return of the true gospel. In Luther's view, the constancy of the martyrs (as he deems them in his hymn) was proof of the devil's defeat; the youths' martyrdom was a "new thing" that God was "revealing." As the hymn explains, the ashes of the two friars would be scattered into all lands, and their blood would become a permanent, Cain-like mark upon the heads of Luther's opponents.

The theological sentiments voiced in Luther's ballad were amplified in a pastoral letter addressed "to the Christians in the Low Countries" and released around the same time as the

publication of the hymn. In this letter, Luther understood the event in Brussels as the heralding of a new day. He congratulated the Netherlands for being “the first to suffer shame and injury, anxiety and distress, imprisonment and death, for Christ’s sake.” In this vein, Luther lauded Voes and Esschen as “those two precious jewels” who considered “their lives of no account... in order that Christ and his word might be glorified.”¹⁵

The letter is upbeat throughout: “How welcome must that fire have been which hurried them from this sinful life to eternal life yonder. God be praised... that we who have... worshipped so many false saints have lived to see and hear real saints and true martyrs.” In fact, as Luther saw it, the only downside in the whole business was that “we up here in Germany have not yet been sufficiently deserving to become so precious and worthy an offering to Christ,” an observation reminiscent of his remark upon first hearing of the executions.¹⁶

With the hymn and the letter taken together, Luther’s attempt to tell the story of the Brussels’ martyrs demonstrates at least two points worthy of note. Luther first of all possessed a keen awareness of Christianity’s martyrological tradition, a certain know-how in writing about martyrs and martyrdom, and second, he was ready to adjust the received tradition to suit evangelical principals. The concept that fidelity unto death was divinely inspired and—to borrow from Tertullian—the notion that martyrs were “seed” planted to bring growth to the church were wholly assumed by Luther. And by contrasting past “false” worship of martyrs past with the recognition of “true martyrs” present, Luther implied that the appearance of new victims would not be the occasion for the establishment of an evangelical version of the cult of the saints.

The burning of Luther’s fellow Observant Augustinians in Brussels inspired the reformer’s initial contribution to the corpus of martyrological literature. Luther’s hymn and letter in

honor of the Brussels martyrs would not be his last contributions, however. In fact, it would be the death of Henry van Zutphen—the Antwerp escapee who wound up in Bremen—that would provide Luther with the opportunity to craft his most developed account of a martyr’s life and death.¹⁷

After fleeing the crackdown in Antwerp, Zutphen headed for Wittenberg northward along the Netherlands’ inner coast. When he arrived in Bremen, some locals prevailed upon him to preach. Bremen church historians mark November 9, 1522, as the occasion of the first evangelical sermon in



Burning of Esschen and Voes

Bremen, preached by Zutphen. He was eventually called to be pastor of Bremen’s St. Ansgar church. In the late fall of 1524, Brother Henry was called to preach in the city of Meldorf, northeast of Bremen. Shortly after arriving in Meldorf, the law—albeit of the vigilante sort—finally caught up with Zutphen. On December 9, a posse of citizens came with torches in the dead of night and kidnapped Zutphen from the parsonage. According to Luther’s written account of these events, the mob had been organized by a group of local Dominicans, aided by some local Franciscans. To help stoke the proper frenzy, the organizers reportedly plied the mob with “Ham-burg beer.”

Zutphen was dragged naked from his bed and marched barefoot (or perhaps was dragged behind a horse) to the nearby city of Heide, the regional seat. He was imprisoned in a cellar overnight; early the next morning, his fate was decided. A pyre was prepared for Brother Henry, but when they could not get the fire to light, they beat him to death instead. Luther’s report of the details of Zutphen’s final hours, including the beating which ultimately killed him, is remarkably detailed. The graphic representation of Zutphen’s death is but one of many features which put *The Burning of Brother Henry* in league with traditional stories of the lives and deaths of martyrs.¹⁸

Jacob Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* or Golden Legend was to medieval Europeans in the West what Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* was to early modern Protestants.¹⁹ The *Golden Legend* contains detailed accounts of the lives and deaths of saints and martyrs of biblical times and beyond. Luther was, on the one hand, impressed by the type of literature represented by the *Legend*, frequently citing the stories of saints and martyrs in his lectures. But he was critical as well: “I am quite annoyed with the nonsense and lies to be found in the *Catalogue [of Saints]* and the *Golden Legend*,” he wrote to Spalatin already in 1516.²⁰ It should not come as a surprise, then, that although Luther followed in the tradition of recording the lives and deaths of martyrs, at the same time he was not above amending the tradition in order to suit his evangelical commitments.

The Burning of Brother Henry, first published in March of 1525 (four months after Zutphen’s death), is divided into three sections. First there is a consolation letter addressed to the “Elect of God” at Bremen; second, a brief Psalm commentary entitled “An Exposition of the Ninth Psalm Concerning Christ’s Martyrs”; and last, a lengthy section entitled, “The History of Brother Henry of Zutphen.” There is not much distinctive to set this work apart from many of the classic Christian martyrologies. It is of a piece with

the Martyrdoms of Polycarp and of Perpetua and Felicity. But there are certain predictable differences. For instance, where John Chrysostom once hailed the miraculous powers of the remains of St. Ignatius, Luther makes no similar claim for what was left of St. Henry.²¹

The first section of Luther's ode to Henry van Zutphen, namely the letter personally addressed to the Bremeners, had three main concerns: to establish clearly the status of Zutphen as a true martyr, to place the killing of Zutphen in theological as well as biblical context, and to offer consolation and encouragement to Zutphen's parishioners in Bremen. In addition, Luther gave time to a fourth concern: the eternal wellbeing of Zutphen's killers. "There is really far more reason to weep and lament for them than for the sainted Henry," Luther advised, "and to pray that not only they, but the whole land... may be converted and come to the knowledge of the truth. It is to be expected confidently that this will indeed be the fruit of Henry's martyrdom."²² The passage demonstrates two characteristics common to the genre: the notion that the perpetrators rather than the victims are most in need of pity and the hope that the martyr's death would result in new converts.

The second section of the Zutphen memorial, the Psalm commentary, is the most unique of the three sections. Although many martyr narratives are interlaced with Scripture quotations and allusions, Luther exegetes Psalm 9 verse-by-verse to demonstrate that the persecution of the faithful is part of the divine plan. As Luther puts it, "Here you see how this psalm comforts us and bids us hope."²³

The final and lengthiest section, Luther's rendition of the life and death of Zutphen himself, is characterized by painstaking attention to detail, which includes the names of many individuals involved in Henry's demise. Luther's sources for the narrative were "personal experience" (he had become acquainted with Zut-

phen years earlier) and "the trustworthy reports of godly people."²⁴ The result is a fairly sophisticated piece of journalism, with no small amount of opinion mixed in. Luther's narrative is successful in eliciting sympathy for the humble Henry, pity for the ignorant (and drunk) peasants that were incited against him, and loathing for the religious and secular officials who had conspired to bring about the preacher's death. Prominent among the traditional features that make up this martyrology is Luther's care to present Henry's death in "the pattern of Christ," to borrow a term from the early church. "Thy will be done, O Lord!" Henry was reported to have said upon being sentenced to the stake. Then, according to Luther, Henry, "lifting his eyes to heaven," said, "Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do."²⁵

A close reading of Luther's earliest martyrological compositions leaves the strong impression that the reformer implemented traditional literary means to serve non-traditional—that is, evangelical—ends. In other words, in adhering closely to the features typical of the church's martyrological literature, Luther adapted a centuries-old genre to nurture and promote his novel movement. Because he did, later Christians can properly recognize and honor the earliest evangelical martyrs.

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Notes

1. The subject of the Antwerp Augustinian monastery and the inquisitorial prosecution of its members has received updated treatment among Dutch and Flemish scholars in recent years. See, for instance, Gert Gielis, *Verdoelde schaepekens, Bytenden Wolven: Inquistie in de Lage Landen* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2009); Jos Vercruyse, "De Antwerpse Augustijnen en de Lutherse Reformatie, 1513–1523" in *Trajecta* 16 (2007): 193–216; and Johan Decavele, *De Eerste Protestanten in de Lage Landen: Geloof en Heldenmoed* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2004).
2. The term "Low Countries" corresponds

to the German term *Niederländen*. In his 1523 letter to "Die Christen im Nederland," Luther addressed the faithful "ynn Holland, Braband, und Flandern." The sixteenth-century Low Countries included what are today the nations of Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. *Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 57 vols., eds. J. E. K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff) 12:77–80 [hereafter cited as WA].

3. WABR 1:413f. My translation.

4. See Casper Visser, *Luthers Geschriften in de Nederlande tot 1546* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1969), 31–39.

5. *Corpus Documentum Inquisitionis Haereticae Pravitatis Neerlandicae*, vol. v, ed. Paul Ferdericq (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1901), 410.

6. Jacob Probst, *Anathematizatio & revocatio Fratris iacobi Praepositi, olim prioris Fratrum Heremitarum Sancti Augustini, opidi Antverpiensis* (Antwerp: Vorsterman, 1522). The title translates as "The Condemnations and Revocations of Brother Jacob Probst, formerly the Prior of the Hermits of St. Augustine at Antwerp." Dutch and German editions were also printed. Probst's own recollection of his arrest, prosecution, and recantation are in Jacob Probst, *Historia utriusque captivitatis propter verbum Dei, Iacobus Praepositus* ["The Story of Jacob Probst and Both of His Imprisonments on account of the Word of God"] (Wittenberg: Rhau-Grunenberg, 1523).

7. Zutphen himself reported these events in a letter to Jacob Probst on November 29, 1522. See *Corpus*, vol. iv, 158f.

8. The sixty-two articles survive in *Der Actus vnnnd hendlung der Degradation vnd verprenung der Christlichen dreyen Ritter vnd Merterer Augustiner ordens geschehen zu Brussel* (Augsburg: Melchior Romminger, 1523).

9. Ibid., iii. A collection of primary sources relating to the prosecution and execution of Voes and Esschen is in *Corpus*, vol. iv, 193–214.

10. The pamphlet, noted above, includes the mistaken report that the third Augustinian, Lambert Thorn, was burned three days later. Such an error suggests that the writer was relying on hearsay, at least in part. Other pamphlets—such as Martinus Heckenhover's *Dye histori so zwen Augustiner ordens gemartert seyn tzu Bruxel jn Probant von wegen des Euangelij* ["The Story of How Two Augustinians Were Martyred at Brussels in Brabant, on account of the Gospel"] from 1523—indicated that only Voes and Esschen were burned.

11. WA 12:74. My translation.

12. Regarding Luther's "Ein Neues Lied," see "Luther's First Hymn" by Sally Messner on p. 24 in this issue, and Dick Akerboom and Marcel Gielis, "'A New Song Shall Begin Here...': The Martyrdom of Luther's Followers among Antwerp's Augustinians on July 1, 1523, and Luther's Response," in *More than a Memory: The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Con-*

struction of Christian Identity in the History of Christianity, *Annua nuntia lovaniensia* 51, ed. Johan Leemans (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 243–70.

13. Translated by George MacDonald in his *Exotics: A Translation of the Spiritual Songs of Novalis, the Hymn-Book of Luther, and Other Poems from the German and Italian* (London: Strahan, 1876). The American edition of Luther's Works, following and slightly correcting the MacDonald translation, has the title (and first line) of the hymn as "A New Song Here Shall Be Begun." However, the German verb *anheben* suggests "lift," "hoist," "raise up." In any case, the start of the hymn clearly has in mind the words of the Psalmist: "Sing a new song unto the Lord."

14. Ibid.

15. WA 12:78. Translation in Martin Luther,

Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel, ed. and trans. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 193.

16. Ibid., 194.

17. An even fuller, albeit dated, account of Henry van Zutphen's life and death is in J. F. Iken, "Heinrich von Zütphen," *Verein für Reformationsgeschichte* 12 (Halle: 1886).

18. See "The Burning of Brother Henry," in Luther's Works, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) [hereafter cited as LW] 32:263–86. For an in-depth exploration of this writing of Luther's, see Hans Wiersma, "The Death of Henry van Zutphen: The Story of a Lowlands Martyr as Chronicled by Jacob Probst and Martin Luther," *Luther Bulletin: Tijdschrift voor Intercon-*

fessioneel Lutheronderzoek 15 (November 2006), 63–79.

19. Jacob DeVoragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings in the Saints*, 2 vols., trans. W. G. Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993), and John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1965).

20. WABR 1:50, LW 48:17.

21. John Chrysostom, "Homily on St. Ignatius," available online at www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf109.vii.iii.html (accessed July 15, 2011).

22. LW 32:267.

23. LW 32:272.

24. LW 32:265.

25. LW 32:285.