

Early Reformation

Book Burning and Persuasion

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In June 1520 Pope Leo X issued the bull *Exsurge Domine* in which 41 errors attributed to Martin Luther were condemned. The pope instructed that Luther's writings be sought out and publicly and solemnly burnt in the presence of the clergy and the people immediately after the publication of the bull. Roughly a year later, in the edict of Worms, issued by Emperor Charles V as the concluding document of the Diet of Worms in May 1521, Luther was condemned, and the judiciary was ordered to publicly burn all his books. The bull and the edict resulted in a series of public burnings in Italy, Germany, the Low Countries, England and Spain. Some of these burnings were great spectacles; others barely caused a stir.

The burning of Luther's books during the very first years of the Reformation is perhaps the best known international campaign against books in early modern Europe. The campaign was initiated and orchestrated for the most part by the papacy and received support from princes, bishops and magistrates. It is by now an established part of the narrative of the early Reformation – as is Luther's reaction. Luther orchestrated his own little spectacle: a burning of canon law books and a copy of the papal bull in Wittenberg in December 1520.

Many books were destroyed during the campaign against Luther, yet the burnings were not necessarily an attempt to systematically eliminate *all* his books. Most of the books that were burnt had probably been voluntarily handed over to the authorities. Likewise, the number of burnt books was probably negligible compared to the number of books that emanated from the presses with apparent ease and efficiency. Clearly, those who ordered and planned the burnings had a further purpose apart from exercising direct control over the availability of Luther's books to potential readers. So what was the reason for the burning?

For a long time the phenomenon of book burning was understood as a form of oppression and persecution exerted by intolerant authorities. The burning of unwanted books was seen as censorship, i.e. the attempt to shape reading habits through prohibition, control and sanctions. In the last decades, however, scholars have established the view that book burning had a function apart from (direct) censorship. The spectacle of burning books is now understood as a demonstrative act, an act that conveys, signifies and forms meanings through its special way of communicating to an audience. Historians have noticed the rich fabric of meanings that infused book burnings in antiquity, the Middle Ages and early modern Europe. For antiquity, it was Wolfgang Speyer who in 1981 explored the cultural code of the destruction of books by Christians, Jews and pagans.¹ For early modern time, it was Hermann Rafetseder who in 1988 did a thorough study of the theory and praxis of book burning from the sixteenth century onward, focusing on what he called »the age of book burning«, namely the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.² In 2007 Thomas Werner closed the gap between these works and published a comprehensive study of book burning in the Middle Ages.³ Combined with other works on Nazi book burning and general works on the theme of attacks on books and libraries through the ages, the subject of book burning is by now well studied.⁴

Book burning as it emerged from the new research, especially thanks to Rafetseder's comprehensive analysis, was an aspect of criminal law and a form of censorship, as well as a demonstrative act and a ritual, anchored in power relations and riddled with irrational and contradicting motives. It was an act that was meant to re-establish an offended honour, to deter similar offences, to erase the content of books from people's memory, to purify the community. In book burning one could find magical and cultic notions associated with the power of the written word and the power of fire. Likewise, book burning was an unconscious attempt to address the unstable situation that followed the authorities' failure to effectively control the production of books. In a sense, book

1 Wolfgang Speyer, *Büchervernichtung und Zensur des Geistes bei Heiden, Juden und Christen* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1981).

2 Hermann Rafetseder, *Bücherverbrennungen: Die öffentliche Hinrichtung von Schriften im historischen Wandel* (Wien: Böhlau, 1988).

3 Thomas Werner, *Den Irrtum liquidieren: Bücherverbrennungen im Mittelalter* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

4 For instance, Theodor Verwey, *Bücherverbrennungen: Eine Vorlesung aus Anlass des 65. Jahrestages der »Aktion wider den undeutschen Geist«* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2000); David Cressy, »Book Burning in Tudor and Stuart England«, *Sixteenth Century Journal* 36, no. 2 (2005), 359-74; Haig Bosmajian, *Burning Books* (London: McFarland, 2006).

burning was a form of collective psychotherapy with the intention of – in one way or another – healing the community.

This is naturally merely a general picture of a large and growing historiography. However, what is most interesting and still not fully explored is how the demonstrative act of book burning functioned: what contemporaries actually intended to achieve by publicly burning unwanted books, what actually constituted the demonstrative act of book burning and whether it worked.

Like the general historiography on book burning, the research on book burning in the early Reformation is extensive. Not surprisingly, the burning of Luther's books has been closely studied. A few scholars have published studies on single burnings in specific localities. R. Brohm, for instance, related how the burning of Luther's books in Thorn met with popular opposition (1869).⁵ W. Rotscheidt-Lehe explored in detail the semi-public burning in Cologne (1907).⁶ In his history of Louvain's faculty of theology Henri de Jongh wrote about the burnings in Louvain (1911).⁷ Carl Meyer (1958) and Richard Rex (1989) described and analysed the campaign against Luther in England.⁸ The most important research on the theme, however, is the work of Paul Kalkoff from the early twentieth century. In his writings about the efforts to combat Luther's Reformation Kalkoff meticulously explored the circumstances of the burning of Luther's books in the Low Countries and the Rhine area. Kalkoff's work showed not only the extent to which the authorities went in their pursuit of combating Luther, but also how these efforts met with difficulties and partial failure.⁹ These studies, however, mostly focused on the institutional, procedural and legal aspects of the burning and paid less attention to the questions raised above, namely, what contemporaries meant to achieve by burning Luther's books, what constituted the demonstrative act and whether it actually had the intended effect.

5 Rudolph Brohm, »Die kirchliche Zustände in Thorn (1520-1557)«, *Zeitschrift für die historische Theologie* xxxix (1869): 606.

6 W. Rotscheidt-Lehe, »Reformationsgeschichtliche Vorgänge in Köln im Jahre 1520«, *Monatshefte für rheinische Kirchengeschichte* 1(4) (1907): 145-71.

7 Henri de Jongh, *L'ancienne faculté de théologie de Louvain* (Louvain: Bureaux de la Revue d'Histoire Ecclesiastique, 1911), 229-235.

8 Carl Meyer, »Henry VIII Burns Luther's Books, 12 May 1521«, *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* IX, no. 2 (1958): 173-87; Richard Rex, »The English Campaign against Luther«, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 39 (1989): 85-106.

9 Paul Kalkoff, *Die Anfänge der Gegenreformation in den Niederlanden*, 2 vols., Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte (Halle, 1903-1904); *Aleander gegen Luther* (Leipzig: Rudolf Haupt, 1908). See also *Die Depeschen des Nuntius Aleander vom Wormser Reichstag 1521*, 2nd ed. (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1897).

As with the burning of Luther's books, Luther's burning of the canon law and the papal bull has also attracted attention. Ever since the nineteenth century historians have attributed a special significance to this book burning. The burning, they have argued, constituted a final break with what Heinrich Böhmer called »the old order of things«. The idea of a break has its origins in nineteenth century liberal historiography, where, as Böhmer showed, the burning was perceived as a liberating act of immense importance; »a dawn of a new day in the development of the religious life of the Christian humanity«, as one historian put it. Böhmer accepted the idea that the burning signified a break, but further qualified the point. He argued that what had *real* significance was the burning of the canon law books and not the burning of the papal bull. With the burning of the canon law, Luther definitively broke with »the old order of things«. By burning the canon law Luther deliberately condemned »all forms of religious thinking and religious practice« that found their characteristic expression in the canon law.¹⁰

Later historians followed in Böhmer's footsteps. Martin Brecht, the author of the formidable biography of Luther from the 1980s, saw the burning as »the demonstrative completion« of Luther's break with Rome. After Luther learned of the bull, he »inwardly« confirmed his break with Rome.¹¹ Holger Flachman suggested that Luther acted in accordance with »socio-psychological rationality«. The burning was a demonstrative act that was supposed to make Luther's views visible to the public. Luther needed to outwardly show that he was committed to the cause, and the situation demanded an act that would force everyone to choose sides.¹² Theodor Verweyen presented Luther's burning as the demonstrative completion of his break with Rome, though he understood it more as a political act and less as a psychological-cognitive event in Luther's life. The break was of a religious nature, but since the canon law was not only the foundation of official religion, but also of the complete body of civil law, and by extension of the social order, there was a risk of the burning being perceived of as a challenge against the existing order, even if Luther's intention had been to dispute only religion.¹³

10 Heinrich Böhmer, »Luther und der 10. Dezember 1520«, *Luther Jahrbuch* II/III (1920/21), 7-53. Quotations: »old order of things« p. 39, »dawn of a new day« p. 9, »all forms of religious thinking!« p. 48.

11 Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: sein Weg zur Reformation 1483-1521* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1983), 403.

12 Holger Flachman, *Martin Luther und das Buch* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1996), 202-11.

13 Verweyen, *Bücherverbrennungen*, 89-92.

One aspect of the burning has, however, never been treated: how Luther's burning demonstrated or, in other words, how it forwarded the break with Rome and the existing social order.

By now the purpose of this article should be clear. It is to look at early Reformation book burning as a demonstrative act designed to communicate, impress and indeed persuade. A few years ago Andrew Pettegree suggested that in their attempt to persuade people to adopt and commit to the new faith the Protestant reformers used every medium of discourse and communication familiar to pre-industrial society: books and pamphlets, singing and drama, images and, naturally, preaching. The first »explosive impact« of the challenge to traditional religion was felt in public places: in the market place, in the taverns and in the churches, where the spoken word was predominant.¹⁴ Pettegree suggested an approach to the problem of persuasion during the Reformation that stressed both the plurality of media employed by the reformers and the significance of the public sphere as a location in which the act of persuasion took place. Following this suggestion, this article attempts to expand our understanding of persuasion during the early Reformation by treating public ceremonies of book burning as a medium through which Luther's opponents, Luther's supporters and Luther himself tried to persuade early modern publics.

Public and Solemn Book Burning

In *Exsurge Domine*, Pope Leo X declared that Luther's books were »utterly condemned, reprobated and rejected«. The faithful were forbidden to read, assert, preach, praise, print, publish or defend them. The Pope instructed that Luther's works be sought out carefully and be »publicly and solemnly« burnt in the presence of the clerics and the people.¹⁵ In the edict of Worms, Emperor Charles V, after prohibiting the buying, selling, owning and reading of Luther's books, instructed the judiciary in the Empire to publicly burn and eradicate Luther's books.¹⁶ In both bull and edict book burning seems to be a customary

14 Andrew Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7-9.

15 See the print version of the original Latin text (Rome, 1520) in Peter Fabisch and Erwin Iserloh, eds., *Dokumente zur Causa Lutheri (1517-1521)* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1988-91), 2: 394. See also Georg Spalatin's German translation in print (Cologne, 1520), p. 395.

16 There were a few versions of the edict in both Latin and German and both in manuscript and print. These versions vary slightly. See a comparative edition in *Ibid.*, 536-

response to the publication of offending and heretical writings and as such did not need to be justified or explained. It was a result of the condemnation of Luther's theses and was supplementary to the prohibition of possessing and reading his writings. Indeed, the papal bull was practically devoid of any justification or explanation except from the plain instruction to burn the books, publicly and solemnly.

The edict of Worms offered a bit more information in the way of justifying book burning. It was asserted to be the custom of the Church Fathers. The edict cited early Christian precedents for book burning to justify the attack on Luther's works. Furthermore, book burning was envisaged as the way to achieve the ultimate destruction of the books in two dimensions: the material books – all of them – were to be entirely destroyed through the burning, while at the same time the books, figuratively speaking, would be eradicated from people's memory.¹⁷

The burnings that followed the issuing of the papal bull allow us to see how the notion of solemn and public burning unfolded in reality. After the issuing of *Exurge Domine*, papal nuncios disseminated the bull – Johann Eck brought it to eastern Germany, Hieronymus Aleander to western Germany and the Low Countries. Aleander, carrying the official bull and an authorisation to execute it, travelled from Rome to Antwerp where he caught up with Charles V, the newly elected emperor, and convinced him to issue a mandate to execute the bull in the Emperor's hereditary lands, i.e. the Low Countries, Burgundy and the Habsburg's lands (though not the German Reich). The Emperor and his court were on a coronation tour and Aleander travelled along with the court in an attempt to burn the books in the presence of the Emperor and other dignitaries. He first followed the court to Antwerp where legal formalities prevented the burning.¹⁸ Then Aleander made the journey to Louvain.

On October 23, 1520, Aleander reported to Pope Leo X on the execution of the bull in Louvain. More than eighty Lutheran books and many libellous booklets were burnt in the market on a podium. The local magistrates were present in their official attire, the condemnation was pronounced by the herald while the executioner took care of the

39. Interestingly, the word »publicly« was missing in the German print version. »Publicly« (alone without solemnly) conventionally meant »publicly and solemnly«, i.e. a ceremony in front of an audience, yet depending on the context, it could also mean in the presence of witnesses alone, see Werner, *Den Irrtum liquidieren*, 110-117.

17 On the apparent contradiction in attempting to erase a book from people's memory by making a memorable spectacle, see Rafetseder, *Bücherverbrennungen*, 45-47.

18 On Antwerp, see Kalkoff, *Die Anfänge*, vol. I: 18.

fire. The audience included the inhabitants of Louvain and »all the nations of the world that assembled in the court [of the Emperor]«. ¹⁹

In his dispatches to Pope Leo X, Aleander also reported of a book burning in Liège conducted with the active cooperation of the local bishop. ²⁰ Later Aleander followed the Emperor to Cologne, where he arranged, with the participation of the faculty of theology, a semi-public book burning. ²¹ Later yet Aleander burnt books in Trier. ²² By the end of November he reached Mainz.

In mid-December Aleander sent a dispatch to Cardinal Julius de Medici, the Vice-Chancellor in Rome, in which he reported of both an unsuccessful (November 28) and a successful (November 29) attempt at organising book burnings. He explained to the Vice-Chancellor that the first attempt had failed because the Emperor had only been in town for a short while, because the archbishop had been busy, because of the »perversity« of those appointed to assist him and because of the »maliciousness« of the town. On the following day, however, the condemnation of Luther's books was announced by trumpets and the inhabitants were invited to a public burning. And despite the opposition of some inhabitants, the book burning was carried out successfully. ²³

In his dispatch Aleander explained his insistence on burning the books in Mainz despite widespread resistance. He suggested four reasons why book burning was useful and beneficial. First, because news of the condemnation of the books would be more successfully circulated in Germany and other countries through the burning of the books than through the dissemination of the bull to the bishops and other clerics. Second, such an execution of the condemnation made by the papal and imperial power would make a strong impression on the laity who were »infected« by the sermons and pamphlets of Luther, convincing them of the wickedness of the books and resulting in them

¹⁹ Aleander to Leo X, October 23, 1520, in Adolf Wrede, ed. *Deutsche Reichstagsakten unter Kaiser Karl V. (Jüngere Reihe)*, vol. 2 (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1896), 455. See also Kalkoff, *Die Depeschen*, 20.. See also Aleander to Johann Copis, October 24, 1520, in Wrede, ed. *Deutsche Reichstagsakten*, 456, n. 1. For the circumstances of the burning, see Kalkoff, *Die Anfänge*, vol. I, 21-25. And Jongh, *L'ancienne faculté de théologie de Louvain*, 229-35.

²⁰ Kalkoff, *Die Depeschen*, 21.

²¹ Rotscheidt-Lehe, »Reformationsgeschichtliche Vorgänge in Köln im Jahre 1520«, 145-71.

²² Theodor Brieger, *Aleander und Luther 1521: die vervollständigten Aleander-Depeschen nebst Untersuchungen über den Wormser Reichstag* (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1884), 18.

²³ Aleander to Cardinal de Medici, December 14, 1520, in *Ibid.*, 17-18. Kalkoff, *Die Depeschen*, 29-30.

voluntarily consigning the books to the flames. Third, all those who opposed the burning were Lutherans. Fourth, there were no better, indeed no other, measures available as long as Luther was not willing to retract his views.²⁴

What Aleander was saying was that public burning was more effective in enforcing the condemnation of Luther's theses than the mere conveyance of the papal bull to local religious authorities. Sending the bull to all the local clerics and then promulgating it according to local custom was time consuming, whereas the rumours about the burnings spread faster than the bull itself. Furthermore, Aleander believed that such a demonstration of the Pope's and the Emperor's authority would impress the laity to such a degree that they would be convinced. Book burning – if public and spectacular – could be effective in communicating to and persuading the laity.

Hoping to repeat the success of the book burning in Mainz, Aleander sought to arrange further spectacular burnings and report of them to Rome. The day after the edict of Worms was issued (May 25, 1521) Aleander reported triumphantly to Rome about a forthcoming burning. He hoped for it to be a public sermon during which the books would be burnt according to the appropriate and customary practice; a sermon that would lessen the people's devotion to Luther.²⁵

From Worms Aleander followed the Emperor to the Low Countries to supervise the execution of the edict. In mid-July he reported a book burning in Antwerp, describing a spectacle that probably would have pleased Rome. On Saturday, a market day, the edict was read word by word in the presence of the magistrates, the mayor, the inhabitants of Antwerp as well as peasants from the area and other visitors to the market. The whole square and the adjacent streets and houses were brimming with people listening with rapt attention. After the edict was read out, the mayor gave a sign to the hangman, and 400 books of Luther were burnt on a high platform. Of these, 300 books were confiscated from booksellers, while the rest were brought to the fire voluntarily.²⁶

24 See Aleander to Cardinal de Medici, December 14, 1520, in Brieger, *Aleander und Luther*, 18. Kalkoff, *Die Depeschen*, 30.

25 Aleander to Cardinal de Medici, May 26, 1521, in Brieger, *Aleander und Luther*, 225-26. Kalkoff, *Die Depeschen*, 252.

26 Aleander to the Vice-Chancellor, July 16, 1521, in Pietro Balan, ed. *Monumenta reformationis Lutheranae ex tabulariis secretioribus S. Sedis 1521-1525* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1884), 271. About the burning in Antwerp, see Kalkoff, *Die Anfänge*, vol. II, 9-14.

A couple of weeks later Aleander finally managed to get Emperor Charles V to attend a burning of Luther's books in Ghent. Aleander described a massive spectacle that must have made the impression he so longed for it to have. The sermon took place in front of 50,000 people, the Emperor and many other dignitaries. A herald summoned the people by trumpet. The papal bull and the imperial edict were read aloud. By the end of the sermon more than 350 books of Luther were burnt »to make an example to the people«.²⁷

In his dispatches to Rome Aleander expressed the intention of and sometimes success in burning Luther's books in public and solemn spectacles that would persuade and impress the laity. He described official and legalistic spectacles to which the public was officially summoned, local magistrates read aloud the condemnation and the hangman was in charge of the burning. These spectacles were attended by the local authorities and at times also higher authorities and different dignitaries, and apparently they did (in some cases) attract great crowds. In the ceremonies that Aleander arranged, speech acts, such as the condemnation of Luther and refutation of his views, were supplemented by the burning of books. Thus Luther's views were shown to be erroneous, heretical and dangerous both by reference to high authority (pope and emperor) and by destruction of the physical manifestation of the views, i.e. the books.²⁸

Matter-of-fact Book Burning

Martin Luther reacted in kind to the first wave of public burnings of his books: on the morning of December 10, 1520, outside the walls of Wittenberg, in the presence of Luther, other scholars and some students, books of the canon law, books of scholastic theology and books of Luther's adversaries, 12 volumes in total, and a copy of the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* were thrown into a fire. Luther's way of demonstrating/persuading through book burning was nevertheless different from Aleander's.

²⁷ Aleander to Cardinal de Medici, July 27, 1521, in Balan, ed. *Monumenta reformationis Lutheranae*, 276. See also a city chronicle in P. Fredericq, ed. *Corpus documentorum inquisitionis haereticae pravitatis neerlandicae* (Gent, 1889-1902), vol. 5: 77.

²⁸ See also the burning in London in May 12, 1521, which was a spectacular ceremony combining speech acts and symbolic book burning, *I Diarii di Marino Sanuto* (Venice, 1879-1903, reprint Bologna: Forni 1969-70), vol. 30: 314-15, 341-43. English translation in Rawdon Brown, ed. *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts Relating to English Affairs Existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice and in Other Libraries of Northern Italy* (London, 1864-), vol. 3: 122-24.

A week before the burning Georg Spalatin wrote to Friedrich Elector of Saxony that Luther was planning to burn the canon law by the pulpit (during a sermon) if his own books were burnt in Leipzig.²⁹ Apparently, Luther had intended for the burning to be a small symbolic reaction to the burnings of his books which were becoming widespread by the end of 1520. On the morning of December 10, however, the students at the University of Wittenberg were met by an appeal written by Luther's aide Philipp Melanchthon attached to the door of the church. The appeal invited all »who adhere to evangelical truth« to meet by a chapel outside the walls of the town at 9 o'clock:

At that time the godless papal constitutions and writings of the scholastics will be burned according to an ancient, indeed apostolic custom. This is done because the enemies of the gospel have stated their intention to burn Luther's pious and evangelical books. Hurry, pious students, and witness this holy and God-pleasing spectacle! Perhaps this is the time when the Antichrist will be revealed.³⁰

This was an invitation to a public book burning. The justification was that book burning was an ancient, apostolic custom. As Luther later wrote (see below), the biblical burning of books in Ephesus was the paradigm for future burnings.³¹

Immediately after the burning Luther informed Spalatin that he had burnt the canon law and other books and added that perhaps »the papal incendiaries« will become aware that it is no great achievement to burn books (namely Luther's own books) that could not be refuted by arguments. Luther used his letter to Spalatin as a kind of protocol for the burning: he informed Spalatin of the date, time and place of the burning and reported that the »*Decretum*, *Decretals*, the *Sextus*, the *Clementines*, the *Extravagantes*, the latest bull of Leo X, *Summa Angelica*, the *Chrysopassus* by Johann Eck« as well as other books were thrown into the fire.³²

29 Spalatin to Friedrich, December 3, 1520, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Briefwechsel* (Weimar: Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1930-), vol. 2: 235, n. 1.

30 In *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Schriften* (Weimar: Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883-), vol. 7: 183. English translation in Hans J. Hillebrand, *The Reformation in Its Own Words* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 84-85.

31 On the significance of the Ephesus book burning in Christian tradition, see Werner, *Den Irrtum Liquidieren*, 144ff.

32 Luther to Spalatin, December 10, 1520, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Briefwechsel*, vol. 2: 234.

The list of books in Luther's letter was the same (but for a few exceptions) as that which appeared in a kind of protocol that was written after the burning (probably the same day), presumably by Luther's collaborator Johannes Agricola.³³ In the protocol, after listing the burnt books, Agricola recorded Luther's words when throwing the papal bull into the fire. His words are not easily translated, and historians have struggled to decipher the meaning of them. What Luther said was approximately this: since you perverted the holy truth of God, the Lord perverts you today; into this fire.³⁴

In the aftermath of the burning of the canon law in Wittenberg, Luther published a booklet in both Latin and German in which he put forward the reasons for the burning of the canon law books. In *Warumb des Bapsts und seyner Jungernn bucher von Doct. Martino Luther vorbrant seyenn* Luther presented his arguments for the burning in five points. First, Luther asserted that it was »an ancient traditional practice« to burn evil books, as the story of the people of Ephesus who burnt their books of magic proved (*Acts* 19:19). Second, it was his duty on account of his name and office to destroy false and unchristian doctrine. Third, Luther claimed that the pope and his followers did not want to be guided nor taught. Rather, »with closed ears and eyes« they blindly condemned and burnt evangelical teaching, i.e. Luther's own books. Fourth, Luther questioned the integrity of those who burnt his books. Fifth, since the burning of his books might have resulted in false delusions among the »plain common people«, Luther burnt his adversaries' books in order to strengthen and preserve the souls of the common people.³⁵ The general justification of book burning seems to rest on three assumptions: it was of ancient usage; it was a last resort after all arguments had failed; it had the ability to influence the common people.

The descriptions of the burning that have survived (Luther's and the protocol) suggest a brief matter-of-fact event that was neither particularly spectacular nor solemn. A few books were thrown into the fire, a

33 The original protocol did not survive, but historians have found two manuscripts that apparently were copies of the protocol. One was in German – see M. Perlbach and J. Luther, »Ein neuer Bericht über Luthers Verbrennung der Bannbulle«, *Sitzungsberichte der Kgl. Preuss. Akademie der Wissenschaften* 5 (1907): 100. The other was in Latin – see Otto Clemen, »Reformationsgeschichtliches aus drei Sammelbänden der Königsberger Stadtbibliothek«, *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* XII(1) (1930): 168-69.

34 Perlbach and Luther, »Ein neuer Bericht«, 100; Clemen, »Reformationsgeschichtliches« 169. On the meaning of Luther's words, see Johannes Luther, »Noch einmal Luthers Worte bei der Verbrennung der Bannbulle«, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 45 (1/2) (1965): 260-65.

35 *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Schriften*, vol. 7: 162-163. English translation in Harold J. Grimm, ed. *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-89), vol. 31: 383-84.

few words were declared. A protocol was composed and immediately after the event reported, first to Spalatin (the same day), then to the reading public (the *Warum* was published four days later). Luther apparently made no serious attempt to attract attention to the event beforehand but rather made it public immediately after.

Carnavalesque Book Burning

The book burning in Wittenberg did not end with Luther pronouncing his verdict on the papal bull and throwing it into the fire. After Luther and the other doctors and professors had left, the students carried on the ceremony. Furthermore, the students created a new spectacle later the same day, involving a carnivalesque burning of many books of scholastic theology. An eyewitness account of what happened on December 10 outside Wittenberg described in detail what happened after Luther's departure. An anonymous author, most probably a student, published a newsletter in Leipzig about the burning – *Exustionis antichristianorum decretalium acta* – that was later also translated into German and published in a seemingly clandestine print in Hagenau.³⁶

After Luther left, some students remained by the fire. Some of them sang, some simulated funeral rites for the canon law. But clearly the first burning had neither been spectacular nor public enough to satisfy the students, so they arranged for another burning after lunch. It began with a procession. A wagon loaded with students dressed as charioteers, trumpeters, and musicians was sent to collect books. In the front sat four students reciting Hebrew sentences. Beside them a flag bearer held a long pole with a four feet long »papal bull«. The trumpeter held a sword that had twice pierced a »bull of indulgences«. Another carried »a bull« on a stick. Another carried a banner with the inscription »in honour of the preaching [Dominican] order«. The wagon was taken to the University where a huge crowd had been drawn in by the sound of the trumpet. Books of »the papists« and of »the sophists« were being brought to the scene from all directions. Many people followed the wagon to the place where the morning's book burning had been carried out. The trumpeter gave a signal and everyone marched around the fire carrying small flags. They sang *Te Deum Laudamus* and other hymns as if they were singing a requiem for the canon law. Then one of

36 Latin and German texts in Otto Clemen, »Die Acta exustionis antichristianorum Decretalium in deutscher Übersetzung«, *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 55 I/II (1936): 313-21. See also partial English translation in Hillebrand, *The Reformation in Its Own Words*, 85-86. About the author, see Böhmer, »Luther und der 10. Dezember 1520,« 13.

them ascended a lectern and recited the papal bull together with »annotations« and read from books by Eck and others, which generated much laughter among the crowd. Finally, money was collected for a mass for »those evildoers« about to be burnt. At this point the bulls, the books and the flags were thrown into the fire.³⁷

What is most noticeable about the second book burning in Wittenberg is the students' attempt to stage a mock burning. In clear contrast to the severity of the burning earlier that day, the students' spectacle was meant to generate laughter. The burnt bulls were not real bulls but fake ones, the preaching by the fire was an imitation of a sermon being read aloud from an imitation of a bull, and the funeral rites were given to »deceased« books. The students ridiculed the whole spectacle by substituting real objects (texts), processes (inviting, preaching, burning) and agents (scholars, preacher) with fake ones. Certainly real books were thrown into the flames, possibly many books. But in the narrative of the *Acta* the purpose of the students' spectacle was to mock the papal bull as well as papal and scholastic writings, rather than to destroy them.

Heinrich Böhmer in his otherwise outstanding work on the book burning of December 10 thought that the students' playful »autodafé« was of no interest to the historian, since neither Luther, Melancthon nor Carlstadt attended it.³⁸ Nevertheless, what followed after Luther and the other scholars left is a fascinating example of how book burning, rather than being used by the authorities, could be employed to defy the authorities. And it was not an isolated event. In March 1518 Luther reported that students from the University of Wittenberg burnt the theses of the Dominican friar, inquisitor and seller of indulgences Johann Tetzel, theses that Tetzel published to answer Luther's attack on indulgences in his 95 theses. The students approached the man who sold the tract, bought some copies and snatched the rest, and after making an appeal to anyone interested to come to the »burning and funeral« of Tetzel's theses at the marketplace, they burnt 800 copies of the tract.³⁹ In October 1520 Luther reported of another attack on printed material. He described how printed copies of the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* that had been put up for sale in Erfurt were ripped apart by students and thrown into the river while the students called out: »it

37 Clemen, »Die Acta exustionis«, 315-16. Hillebrand, *The Reformation in Its Own Words*, 85-86.

38 Böhmer, »Luther und der 10. Dezember 1520«, 15.

39 Luther to Johann Lang, March 21, 1520, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Briefwechsel*, vol. 1: 155. See also Luther to Jodokus Trutfetter, May 9, 1518, p. 170.

is a bubble [Latin: *bulla*], in water it should float«. ⁴⁰

Like Aleander and Luther, students and youth turned to physical destruction of books in order to demonstrate their views regarding Luther and his reform ideas. Yet, they used mockery and ridicule rather than formal and solemn ceremony.

Reporting Book Burning

Aleander's reports might have given the impression that the burnings of Luther's books were solemn and formal ceremonies that impressed upon the people the authority of the Church and the futility of Luther's views. There were, however, other reports which sought to undermine this impression. For instance according to *Judicium de Doctore M. Luthero* – a short pamphlet in Latin and German attributed to the reformer Johannes Oecolompadius – the book burning in Louvain (October 1520) was anything but solemn and far from convincing. Oecolompadius described the spectacle as a tumultuous event and related how students brought along many works on scholastic philosophy and theology to the fire so that more works of scholastic writers were burnt than works of Luther. ⁴¹

The *Judicium* avoided attributing any markers of authority, legitimacy or solemnity in its description of the burning. Oecolompadius attributed the burning to the local branch of the Dominicans, not to the universal authority of the pope or the emperor. Also, the local authorities – the magistrates, the herald and the executioner – were absent in his account. Oecolompadius construed the book burning in Louvain as a burning that was insidiously planned by the Dominicans, sullied by the misdeed of one Carmelite who urinated on the ashes and »hijacked« by the shrewd students. Could such a spectacle demonstrate to the people the errors of Luther? ⁴²

40 »Bulla est, in aqua natet«, Luther to Johann von Gräfenhof, October 30, 1520, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Briefwechsel*, vol. 2 (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1931), 206. A few days later Luther reported to Spalatin that the youth of Erfurt threw the copies of the bull into the water one copy after another, while saying: »now it is really a bubble« (»nunc vere est Bulla«), Luther to Spalatin, November 4, 1520, *Ibid*, 211.

41 See in Ernst Ludwig Enders, ed. *Martin Luther's Briefwechsel* (Stuttgart, 1884-1932), vol. 2: 534, n. 6. See also Kalkoff, *Die Depeschen*, 22.

42 Erasmus wrote that the effect of the burning in Louvain (where he was staying at the time) was that »everyone stood laughing.« See in *Acta Academiae Lovaniensis contra Lutherum* in Wallace K. Ferguson, ed. *Erasmii Opuscula* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1933), 328. J. K. Sowards, ed. *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974-), vol. 71: 105.

Similarly, reports about the burning in Mainz (November 1520) emphasized the resistance to the burning rather than its final success. Three weeks after the burning the later reformer Kaspar Hedio, court preacher in Mainz at the time, wrote to the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli that the books were burnt »with ridicule« and that anyone that had been present at the burning would swear that it was not books by Luther but rather scholastic books and books by Luther's adversaries that were burnt. But whichever books had been burnt, Hedio wrote, it was an insult to Luther, and it came close to Aleander being »thrown in excrement«. ⁴³ In January the following year the humanist Beatus Rhenanus related the events of the burning in Mainz to the Swiss jurist Bonifaz Amerbach. According to Rhenanus, the hangman, standing on a platform, had asked whether the books were lawfully condemned, and when the people replied that they had not yet been condemned, the hangman declined burning any books until they had been condemned according to the law. The attempt to commence the book burning was met with laughter. Aleander was on the verge of being »buried with stones. They called him Jew, traitor, scoundrel and what not.« The following day, according to Rhenanus, some books were burnt at the market, not by the public executioner, but by the gravedigger/skin flayer. No one was watching except for a few women who were selling vegetables. ⁴⁴ The hangman's refusal to burn the books rendered the whole undertaking illegitimate, while the laughter and the attack on Aleander rendered it ridiculous.

Also the spectacle in Worms (May 1521) was sought undermined by derogatory descriptions. The book burning was portrayed in the satirical work *Doctor Martin Luthers Passion* by the humanist Herman von dem Busche. Von dem Busche developed his satire around the proceedings in the Diet in Worms. It is difficult to determine the degree to which the story is meant to depict the actual events, that is, whether it should be considered an authentic report or a satirical representation of the events in Worms. When all the princes left Worms – so von dem Busche's story went – a great pile of wood was arranged where the books were to have been burnt. A painting of Luther with the inscription »this is Martin Luther a teacher of the Gospel« was burnt and with it also

⁴³ Kaspar Hedio to Ulrich Zwingli, December 21, 1520, in Emil Egli and Georg Finsler, eds., *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger, 1905-), vol. 7: 376-77.

⁴⁴ Beatus Rhenanus to Bonifaz Amerbach, January 7, 1521, in Adalbert Horawitz and Karl Hartfelder, eds., *Briefwechsel des Beatus Rhenanus* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1886), 226.

images of Ulrich von Hutten and Andreas Carlstadt. Von dem Busche also described how all the people who were present went home and »beat their chests«. ⁴⁵ According to Von dem Busche Luther (his image) was burnt as teacher of Scripture, as the inscription read, instead of as a heretic, which was more likely what was written on the image. ⁴⁶

Furthermore, the burning in Antwerp (July 1521) was declared no less than an evangelical victory. Gerhard Geldenhauer, a student of Erasmus and later a supporter of the Reformation, took notes on Aleander's efforts to combat Luther and among other things he reported of the book burnings in the Low Countries after the Diet of Worms. Geldenhauer saw the burning in Antwerp as a triumph for the evangelical cause. He began his account with the exclamation: »Lord Martin Luther's victory and triumph, Aleander and the theologians' [...] powerlessness.« Geldenhauer reported the participation of the mayor and the hangman, the reading of the edict, and the setting fire to the books. Then he introduced some spectators to the story. One of them asked the other why the hangman used a torch while usually he would just feed the books into the fire. The other replied that it was in honour of the words of God that were being burnt there. Another spectator shouted out that it would have been better to sell the books and send the money to Rome for them to buy firewood to burn the sodomites of Rome (the Dominicans/Roman prelates). Many exclamations could be heard and almost all expressed outrage that such a serious affair was dealt with in such a ridiculous manner. ⁴⁷

It was perhaps difficult to deny that some of the book burnings were actually impressive spectacles that presented the pomp and authority of the Church, the Papacy, the Empire and local authorities. Derogatory descriptions, however, emphasized popular resistance. In evangelical accounts of the burning of Luther's books the spectators seem less than impressed by Aleander's efforts to demonstrate to them the faults of Luther and his books.

45 See Oskar Schade, ed. *Satiren und Pasquille aus der Reformationszeit* (Hannover: Rümpler, 1856-58), 1: 112-13.

46 In Rome (1521) an image of Luther in a monk's habit with the inscription »the heretic doctrine of the archheretic Martin Luther is declared condemned« (»Martini Lutheri haeresiarchae doctrina haeretica declarata et reprobata«) was burnt - Heinrich Reusch, *Der index der Verbotenen Bücher*, vol. 1 (Bonn: Max Cohen & Sohn, 1883), 69-70, n. 5. In Thorn (1522) a portrait of Luther with an insignia of the devil was burnt with his books - Brohm, »Die kirchliche Zustände in Thorn (1520-1557)«, 607.

47 *Collectanea van Gerardus Geldenhauer Novismagus*, ed. J. Prinsen (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1901), 12. See also his exclamation regarding the burning in Ghent (July 1521), *Ibid.*, 11.

Book Burning: Persuasion and Efficacy

Evangelical and humanist descriptions of the burning of Luther's books indicate that the burning of books was not universally supported and sometimes raised opposition. That does not mean that the burnings were not effective. According to Heinrich Böhmer, Aleander claimed in December 1520 that the burnings had noticeable positive influence on the common people. Likewise, Aleander believed that Luther's burning of the canon law had the opposite effect.⁴⁸ Indeed, Luther's burning of the canon law made a strong impression – the reactions, however, were not always positive. According to Böhmer, contemporaries were divided in their reactions. The students in Wittenberg were enthusiastic about the burning; the reaction of Luther's colleagues at the University on the other hand was reserved if not hostile. Generally, Luther's burning of the canon law seems to have made a strong impression both in Germany as well as outside Germany.⁴⁹ In the edict of Worms it was claimed that Luther would have done something much more far-reaching than burning the canon law if he had dared: he would have burnt the imperial law books, which would have made him a rebel.⁵⁰ It is Böhmer's judgement that Luther's modest spectacle was a success. It made the burnings of Luther's books seem ridiculous, and it drew support to Luther and the Reformation.

Though book burnings no doubt caught the attention of the »public« and made for great »news«, it is very difficult to assess its persuasive powers. What is clear, however, is that early sixteenth century book burners *believed* that book burning was effective in persuading and influencing the public. Aleander believed that book burning would make an impression on the laity; Luther believed that it would influence the views of the common people. Book burning was thus intended to function as a tool in shaping the views of the unlearned, of those who could not be expected to understand difficult doctrinal arguments. Book burners, however, employed various means in order to achieve the intended goal. While Aleander orchestrated public and solemn spectacles in which authority was displayed, Luther arranged an unassuming, yet still formal event. The Wittenberg students had their own version of book burning: an imitation of a solemn book burning. The book burners all had one thing in common: they combined the destruction of books with speech acts – preaching, condemning, refuting, declaring and so on.

48 Böhmer, »Luther und der 10. Dezember 1520«, 39.

49 Ibid.: 36-39.

50 See Fabisch and Iserloh, eds., *Dokumente zur Causa Lutheri (1517-1521)*, vol. 2: 520.

Aleander and Luther had similar thoughts on book burning in that both believed that book burning and textual refutation complemented each other, although in different ways. Aleander suggested that book burning would assist in establishing the condemnation of Luther's errors because news of such an event travelled faster than the traditional dissemination of a bull. Luther complemented the burning of the canon law by immediately publishing the *Warum* in which he argued against and condemned the canon law. Aleander believed in the greater efficacy of the burning – he made special efforts to make it spectacular. In a way, Luther believed more in the efficacy of words – their power to disseminate and persuade – than in the efficacy of the actual burning: he made very little efforts to make his book burning spectacular. The burning seems to have been improvised: the event was not properly publicized before it took place; the books for the burning were collected at the very last moment. Likewise, the burning was carried out in a secluded place rather than in a central location. Luther did not declare the purpose of the burning during the actual event, but only mumbled a few words while throwing the papal bull into the fire. It seems as if to Luther the book burning was a mere formality that simply had to be executed.⁵¹

Implicit in Aleander's argumentation about book burning was the assertion that book burning was not only a consequence of condemnation but also an *argument* against Luther that might convince those who witnessed it and those who heard about it later. It seems that Luther came to the same conclusion: book burning could persuade. It does not follow, however, that Luther or Aleander (or the pope or the emperor) believed that burning was somehow *proof* of fallacies found in books. Holger Flachman in his analysis of Luther's conception of book burning argued that to Luther the fire itself had no objective significance and therefore no conclusiveness; fire proved nothing.⁵² And Flachman is right in the sense that to Luther throwing a book into the fire was not a test of its validity or truth. Nevertheless, by burning books Luther and Aleander knowingly exploited the fact that in a spectacle such as that it was difficult to separate between making arguments and demonstrating them, between refuting the content of books and what followed the refutation, i.e. the physical destruction of the books. In the efforts to influence the audience, burnt books became a persuasive argument.

51 Böhmer, »Luther und der 10. Dezember 1520«, 17-19.

52 Flachman, *Martin Luther und das Buch*, 210.

Thus there were different ways of perceiving the demonstrative and persuasive power of book burning. Aleander suggested coercive, spectacular and solemn burnings, in which persuasion took the form of impression, that is, impressing on the laity the power and authority of the established Church and secular authority. Luther was not in a position to orchestrate the spectacular events that Aleander designed, and furthermore he was not, it would seem, interested in this kind of book burning. Luther's event was a voluntary, exemplary book burning in which persuasion took the form of informing the reading public about the burning and the reasons behind it. The Wittenberg students staged a spectacular, but by no means formal and solemn, event. They impressed on the audience the pointlessness of Aleander's burnings by ridiculing his way of burning books. Demonstration in this case was sought achieved by mockery.

RESUMÉ

Bogbrænding og kunsten at overbevise under den tidlige Reformation

I 1520 fordømte Pave Leo X 41 fejl, som blev tilskrevet Martin Luther, og beordrede, at Luthers skrifter skulle findes og brændes. Det følgende år blev Luther erklæret for fredløs kætter i Worms-ediktet, udstedt af kejser Karl V, og de retlige myndigheder blev instrueret om at afbrænde hans bøger. Den pavelige bulle og ediktet afstedkom en række offentlige afbrændinger i Italien, Tyskland, Nederlandene, England og Spanien. Som reaktion på disse afbrændinger, brændte Luther nogle kanoniske lovbøger og en kopi af den pavelige bulle uden for Wittenberg. Samme dag iværksatte en gruppe studenter, som støttede Luther, en ceremoni, hvorunder skolastisk litteratur blev brændt.

Mange bøger blev ødelagt under kampagnen mod Luther, men alligevel skal bogbrændingerne ikke nødvendigvis forstås som et forsøg på at tilintetgøre Luthers værker. Antallet af brændte bøger var formentlig ubetydeligt i sammenligning med det antal, som bogtrykkerne producerede. De, der beordrede og planlagde afbrændingerne, havde et andet formål, som rakte videre end blot at afskære interesserede læsere fra at få adgang til Luthers bøger. Nyere forskning om bogbrænding har vist, at bogbrænding ikke blot var en del af strafferetten og en form for censur. Bogbrænding var også en demonstrativ handling, fyldt med rituelle, magiske og irrationelle elementer, som tilsammen udgjorde et budskab, der skulle imponere og overbevise publikum.

Artiklen forklarer, hvordan Luther og hans studenter på den ene side og hans modstandere på den anden side bar sig ad med dette. Hieronymus Aleander, den pavelige nuntius, som stod for afbrændingerne af Luthers værker, arrangerede udstyrsstykker, som skulle imponere og overbevise lægfolk. Disse forestillinger var officielle, retlige begivenheder, hvor myndighedssymboler og -repræsentanter var til stede. Her blev talehandlinger, som fx fordømmelsen

af Luther og gendrivelsen af hans fejl, understøttet af bogbrændingen. Det fejlagtige, kætterske og farlige ved Luthers synspunkter blev altså vist ved både at referere til øvrigheden og ved at ødelægge disse synspunkters fysiske manifestation, bøgerne. Aleander stod bag straffende, højtidelige og spektakulære afbrændinger, hvor overtalelsen bestod i at indskærpe kirkens og verdslige myndigheders autoritet og magt over for lægfolk.

Luther var ikke i stand til at organisere lige så iøjnefaldende begivenheder, og desuden var han ikke særlig interesseret i denne type bogafbrændinger. Luthers afbrænding af den kanoniske ret i Wittenberg var en kortfattet, prosaisk begivenhed og ikke noget tilløbsstykke. Nogle enkelte bøger blev smidt på bålet, nogle få ord blev sagt, og en protokol blev forfattet. Luther forsøgte ikke på forhånd at skabe opmærksomhed om begivenheden. I stedet offentliggjorde han lige efter afbrændingen en lille pamflet, som retfærdiggjorde hans handling. Men Luther troede ligesom Aleander at bogbrænding var virkningsfuld, når det drejede sig om at imponere og overbevise almindelig mennesker, og hvis det ikke kunne ske i forbindelse med selve bålet, så kunne det ske ved, at folk bagefter læste eller hørte om afbrændingerne.

Studenterne, som brændte skolastisk litteratur og bøger forfattet af Luthers modstandere, iværksatte en forestilling, der hverken var formel eller alvorlig. I tydelig modsætning til den alvor, som prægede Luthers afbrænding af den kanoniske ret, var formålet med studenternes forestilling at skabe latter og morskab. De brændte falske buller, de latterliggjorde en prædiken, og de udførte et begravelsesritual for nogle »døde« bøger. De overbeviste deres publikum om, at Aleanders bogafbrændinger var meningsløse ved at gøre grin med hans måde at brænde bøger på. Her blev publikum overbevist via latterliggørelse og spot.