

A Plea for Religious Toleration from the Remonstrants to Prince Maurice, 1618

Introduction: In December 1618, a petition, known as an Apology, was written at the Theological Faculty at the University of Leiden, on behalf of the Remonstrants. It was addressed to Prince Maurice but was also made public. It puts forth the ideas of the Remonstrants and petitions the Prince to prevent their persecution by the Contra-Remonstrants. The document is a powerful appeal for religious tolerance for Christians, especially for the Remonstrants or Arminians, who did not conform to the views of the majority Calvinists, known as the Contra-Remonstrants, who controlled the synod of the Reformed Church in the Republic and had exclusive access to the Republic's public church buildings. The text of the *Apology of the Remonstrants* is from G. Brandt, *History of the Reformation*, (London, 1720-23, reprinted, 1990), Vol. II, pp. 576-579.

Illustrious and High-born Prince,

Many thousands of the Inhabitants of these United Provinces, all of them; friends and professors of the Christian Reformed Religion, both of high and low condition, both learned and unlearned, both men and women, cast themselves at your Excellency's feet with this Petition, begging and conjuring your princely grace in the deepest humility, and with great emotion of heart, kindly to receive it from your faithful and submissive servants; and postponing for about an hour's time your great and various affairs, to hear these their complaints, which their sorrow and deplorable condition extort from them, with patience and compassion.

Most Gracious Prince,

'Tis well known to your Excellency, that throughout the whole Country, sometimes in one place and sometimes in another, divers Ministers, men of probity, and very dear to their respective flocks, have been ill treated, from one severity to another, their doctrines being calumniated and condemned, their persons deposed from their Ministry, and forbidden the exercise of it either in publick or private, even on pain of corporal punishment. From hence it proceeds, that not only the Ministers themselves, but their Hearers too are exposed to the utmost hatred and contempt of their Fellow Christians, and are in a manner become what the Apostle Paul says of the Christians in his time, "an off-scouring of the earth." It is of this we bitterly complain; and complain to him who only can change our sorrow into joy, our reproach into honour, our sighs and tears into a cheerful countenance; that is to say, to your Excellency, to that high-born Prince, whom God has set at the head of these Provinces for the protection of good men, and for the defence of the

rights of the innocent. Look down, Great Prince, on the deplorable condition, and hearken to the groans of so many innocent and devout persons of this country, occasioned by the rigorous proceedings against their Pastors, and consequently against themselves. Regard the floods of tears which are daily poured forth in the churches by innumerable Members, when they hear the sad farewell sermons of their Teachers. Be persuaded, most illustrious Prince, that such sighs, issuing from the bosoms of those who seek neither temporal honours nor worldly goods, being extorted from them only by their affection to the doctrine of Christ, which they have espoused and owned to be true, cannot but be very efficacious and powerful when they mount up to the throne of God. Alas! how have we moved the anger of your Excellency (pardon us, most illustrious Prince, for speaking thus, being as it were overwhelmed with grief) to the turning of your wonted goodness towards us and our Pastors into such an aversion, as causes you daily to employ your Princely authority to our prejudice; insomuch that our adversaries shamefully abuse your most noble name to our reproach and contempt in every ballad, print, and picture?

We speak out plainly, most gracious Lord, and take the liberty to say, that neither our Teachers nor we have deserved such treatment. Are the *Contraremonstrants* lovers of their Country? so are we; nor are we in the least behind hand with them in our inclinations of giving the utmost evidence of this, when necessary, both by offering up our prayers to God, by sacrificing our estates, and pouring out our blood for it. Are they friends to the person of your Excellency? wherein have we shown our selves otherwise? Are they lovers of the Protestant religion, and haters of Popery, of its idolatry, errors, and tyranny? So are we. Do we not daily hear our Ministers offering up their prayers, and calling down the blessings of Almighty God upon the present Government, and on the head of your Excellency? Do we not hear them as heartily refute the errors of that Religion as any others whatever? If any object that they teach, that man may be saved by his own strength, and without the grace of God, they do them great injustice, and the eye of the Lord, which watches over the righteous, sees that it is a slander, and a mere fiction raised against them. Is it said of them, that they place salvation out of *Christ* and his knowledge, or even seek it in their own merits? This is doing them great wrong, for they teach us the contrary. Are we reproached with betraying our Country? We appeal, Great Sir, to your own conscience, and beg to be informed, wherein, when, and to whom the conduct of the

Remonstrants has made this appear. Do they say (as we are sure it is given out) that our Pastors have received money from the enemy, why don't they give some proof of it? Infamous are they, and deserve to be exposed to the world whoever they be, whether *Remonstrants* or *Contraremonstrants*, who are capable of such practices. But if there have been any transactions in the State that are disagreeable to your Princely Grace, must we suffer for it who have had no share in the guilt? Must we therefore be torn from the arms of our Ministers, and our Ministers from our arms?

And admitting that our Teachers differ from others in certain dark and perplexed controversies, must they for that reason be immediately condemned as unfit to preach Christ to us, or to be esteemed Christian Ministers? To what did the Apostolical men oblige all Christians, both Teachers and Hearers? Was it to the doctrine of Predestination? We trust not. To what then? To the Twelve Articles of the Apostolical Creed: Those we believe, those our Teachers entirely and unfeignedly profess. Has the Church made some further explanations of the doctrines of salvations in her General Councils, since the Apostles times, in order to restrain the Clergy? These are likewise embraced and professed by our Teachers. Do the Articles and Confessions of several churches agree in all points? By no means. Do therefore the Teachers of such Articles cease to be true Ministers of the Church of *Christ*? Surely, no. They that place the whole of Religion in Controversial Points, take the certain way of losing it. Would they have us be nothing but Philosophers, and teach us the art of wrangling about scholastick questions? That will render us worse than we are. We shall indeed be more learned, but not more good; if that may be called learning which does not improve the heart as well as the head. We esteem them good Teachers who explain to us the Articles of our Faith in such a manner as to refer us to one God and *Christ*, and to them only, in whom alone we are to seek salvation: Those who teach us we are sinners, and cannot be saved without the mercies of God in Christ; and that we cannot partake of those mercies otherwise than by faith, which worketh by love: Teachers who preach such doctrines in the main, and at the same time lead an inoffensive and edifying life, we judge to be orthodox and sound enough to guide us in the way of salvation. These are the doctrines which the holy Scriptures press upon us; to these they join salvation, and these are such as may be understood by the meanest Christians; this is the food we all are able to digest. And O, that we knew no more! O,

that all the preaching among us would turn upon these points! We should be wiser, better, and more agreeable to God.

Most illustrious Prince, believe your own senses, but take no man's word besides. God has endowed your Excellency with an understanding sufficient to enable you to distinguish between good and evil, beyond many other Princes. Your Excellency is not ignorant that those who complain against us are our most inveterate enemies, and that there are daily brought to your Excellency many stories in prejudice of us, which you in your great wisdom know to be false and without any foundation. Lend us then one ear, Sir, and believe not every thing they seem to insinuate to your Excellency. Consider, most gracious Prince, that the happiness of this Country consists chiefly in the free exercise of Religion according to every man's conscience; a privilege bought with the blood of the House of *Nassau*, and of so many brave men. This liberty consists in this: *That 'we may serve, honor, and believe in God after our own way.* But how can we believe without hearing, and how can we hear without Preachers; or when we are deprived of those who have planted and watered us, that is to say, brought us up in the Christian Religion, whose voice we have been accustomed to, who have comforted us when sick, admonished us when fallen into sin, yea, who are even our spiritual Fathers, who have regenerated us through *Christ*? Their doctrine is edifying, their lives inoffensive. Why then are such shepherds smitten and their sheep scattered? Is it for the benefit of our Country, that multitudes of people are kept out of the churches, and that one man goes over to one sect, another to another, or else stays at home without worshipping God in either Church or Conventicle? Is this the way to make Christians, or to propagate the Reformation? Is this the way to seek the honour of God, and edification of the Community? Is this the peace which the *Contraremonstrants* follow? Is this a service to our Country, that willing Subjects who with joy would follow their respective trades and occupations under their Governours, are thus harassed, and almost compelled to quit their dwellings?

It is always better for Sovereigns to be loved than feared by their Subjects. Is it for the service of our Country, that we are necessitated to hold our Assemblies out of the publick churches, in order to serve our God, and to offer up our prayers together; or that the boats on Sundays are seen laden with Burghers, who are forced to go five or six miles from their own

homes to hear a sermon? If they don't care we should frequent the publick churches, let us be allowed the free exercise of our Religion in private places. What is there to be feared from us who are true to the Government, who freely contribute to its support and defence as well as others; who pray for our Sovereigns, and take the Oath of Allegiance to them?

The Priests and Monks were used to insinuate to the Council of the King of *Spain*, *That the Reform'd must be expelled; that the land could not bear two Religions; that the Geuses* [the first rebels against Spain were called *Gueses*, 'Beggars'] *must be so effectually extirpated, as that the very remembrance of them might perish*. But how have they been extirpated? For one that was cut off are there not ten new ones sprung up? Is this preserving a Country, to render it a mere wilderness? Our adversaries are walking in the same path. They cry, the *Remonstrants* must be suppressed, so as their name may no more be heard, and boast they will do it so effectually, that a reward shall be given to any who can show an *Arminian* as they are pleased to call us. The land cannot bear both parties, say they, *ergo*, the weakest must be trampled under foot. But they will find quite the contrary. The more truth is suppressed, the more strongly it breaks forth and diffuses itself. Nay, some scarce esteem truth to be such, unless it be persecuted.

If the land can bear *Lutherans* and other Christians, who have separated from us, why may not we be tolerated? Are we too strong? The more it will be for the service of the State, that such a number of men should have satisfaction given them in the business of Religion. Judge yourself, Illustrious Prince, if it be not a deplorable and unaccountable manner of proceeding, that the *Jews*, open enemies and blasphemers of our Saviour, are permitted to enjoy the free exercise of their Religion in the most powerful City in *Holland*, whereas we, who are Christians, and of the Reformed Religion too, cannot be tolerated either there or elsewhere? Shall it be accounted for the advantage of our Country, that such may hold religious assemblies, who teach their people that our Lord was a Seducer; and will any one pretend, that it would be prejudicial to the State, that we who acknowledge Christ Jesus for our Redeemer, should enjoy Liberty of Conscience?

If it be objected, that our Ministers do not preach the truth, we answer, that we believe your Excellency is well satisfied and convinced, *that our Ministers teach what is at least sufficient to salvation*; and as for the points in controversy, we think our Pastors in the right, and

theirs in the wrong. If it should be attempted to make us believe otherwise by human authority, and by the power of a Synod, we appeal from thence to the Word of God. Why should not the judgment or opinion of such Christians who fear God, and daily pray for his Spirit, be as worthy of belief as that of a Synod? Do we not pray to God for understanding as well as the Clergy? Have they greater promises of being heard than we? Does not God frequently baffle, and render their speculations vain? We must either take for truth all that the Synod says, or else we must judge for our selves: Are we to believe implicitly every thing they say? Then do we fall again into the old way of Popery. But if our judgments be left us free, and if we judge that our Pastors teach us the Truth, and accordingly receive it as such, why then will they not suffer us to retain those Pastors. The rather, because there is no contest between us and them, about the fundamentals of the *Christian* faith. If it be objected that our doctrines are new, we answer, that novelty is not prejudicial, provided it be truth: And we say further, that what our Pastors teach us, is not *new*, but *old*. . . .

Your Excellency, in your great wisdom, can judge what mischiefs will proceed from our being oppressed. The present state of the Towns of the *Brill, Schoonhoven, Rotterdam, Horn, Utrecht, Nimeguen, Tiel, Bommel, and Woerden*, makes it evident enough. Is it not much better that the Burghers enjoying their liberty of consciences, should cheerfully and unanimously defend their Towns against foreign enemies, than that the Government should be obliged to make use of its Troops, to keep the Burghers themselves in awe? Trade must necessarily decay in a country full of troubles: Where Soldiers enter, the Merchants will retire. All business is at a stand; the rents of houses and lands are fallen; nor will things easily mend, but rather the contrary, if they thus proceed to deprive us of our Pulpits, our Churches, and the worship of God. But if we may be supported in the free exercise of our religion as well as others, then like the grass which raises up its head in the morning, Commerce and Arts will revive and flourish again: the Churches of the *Reformed* will increase, the feuds and animosities of our Citizens wear off, our disturbances will be composed, our unanimity will strike a terror into the hearts of our enemies, and both parties, as well *Contraremonstrants* as *Remonstrants*, will have cause to applaud your Excellency's goodness and clemency.

To conclude, we humbly beseech your Princely Excellency to be persuaded, that we are sincere lovers of our country, and will never be wanting, every one of us personally, to contribute our utmost out of our estates, for the support of the Government, and what we are most cordially affected to, the Reform'd religion. We further beg your Excellency, to give the necessary orders, that those scandalous Books, Ballads, and Cuts, by which we and our Printers are represented as traitors to our country, and persons not fit to live in this Republick, may be suppress; as also that our Ministers may not be deprived on account of the articles of *Predestination*, and their dependencies. Or in case this cannot be obtained, let us at least be permitted to hold our meetings out of the publick churches, under the protection of the State against all force and insolencies, on condition of continuing always like good Burghers and Inhabitants, true and faithful to the higher powers.

May God, the Father of Mercies, who holds the hearts of Kings and Princes in his hand, incline your Excellency's heart and spirit, to the end, that attending to the complaints and prayers of so many thousands, you may please to exert your self in granting them some relief! May the same God preserve the person of your Excellency from all misfortunes, and bless your counsels, for the defence of truth, for the good of our country, and his own glory!