

*About the constraint upon conscience practiced in Holland. A conversation between D.V.C. and
N.V. L., November 7, 1579*

Introduction: Derick Volckertsz Coornhert (1522-90), a notary and Christian humanist in Haarlem, is the best known advocate of religious toleration in the Netherlands during the second half of the sixteenth century. His independence on issues of faith and ethics frequently brought him into conflict with the Reformed Church in Haarlem. He held this conversation with Niclaes van der Laan, the Burgomaster of Haarlem. The text is from E.H. Kossmann and A.F. Mellink, eds., *Texts Concerning the Revolt of The Netherlands*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1974, pp. 192-96..

C.: We have now agreed that Moses never commanded that heretics should be killed and that such a command is not to be found in the Old Testament generally, either in clear and explicit terms or couched in the form of a metaphor or a story. We see too that when Paul expressly mentioned a heretic, he clearly indicated how he should be punished, namely by keeping out of his way and avoiding him after admonishing him once or twice. This is undeniably a law on the punishment of heretics given to us by the apostle inspired by the Holy Ghost. Moses never wrote down a law about this. Nevertheless you do not hesitate to ignore the clear evangelical law about heretics given by Paul and to look for one in Moses, or even to invent one which is not there. This is what the Ebionites [an early Jewish Christian sect, which rejected the authority of Paul] did. It means ignoring and failing to keep God's law, rejecting the Holy Scripture and following one's own pleasure and human reason. Is this what you want to be called following God's commandments? Obeying God and seeking God's honour? What else is this than despising God, repudiating His Word, offending, defaming and humiliating His Name? Don't you worship God in vain in this way with your human commandments? Do you want this to be called seeking God's honour? This is not Christ's opinion. When talking of such people he said explicitly: Those who kill you will imagine that they are doing God a service.⁴

V.: You are mistaken here.

C.: Correct me, if possible, try as hard as you can to quote one single clear sentence from the whole Bible in which it is said that God has ordered the political authority to kill heretics, to protect His church by their sword of steel, or to nourish, guide and preserve the souls of the subjects. You will not be able to do this. By the prophets God charges the prophets and teachers

with this task, saying that he will demand his sheep back from the false prophets, not from the political authority. For it is the prophets and not the magistrates God entrusts with the care of souls, and it is to the apostles and not to the political authority that Christ gave the power to bind and to loose in matters which regard our souls. The political authority has no jurisdiction or power over souls; It is not allowed to kill, wound, ensnare or banish souls. Why then does the political authority have the presumption to lay down rules in matters in which it has no competence? You see, it is impossible for you to prove that you have been ordered by God to rule, order or compel souls and to deal with heretics. I have made it clear that there is no text to be found in which such an order is given to you. Now you see to what conclusion this necessarily leads us.

V.: What?

C.: Quite the opposite of your opinion.

V.: In what respect?

C.: In this respect, that when you take upon yourself to banish or to exterminate the heretics, and to protect the churches of God by means of your power, you do openly what God did not order you to do, and you do it without, nay against His will. You dare honour Him at your own discretion. By thus being disobedient, you openly dishonour Him, despise His commandments and blaspheme His Holy Name .. That is far from honouring God.

v. : May a Christian authority silently and with good conscience allow so many thousands of souls to be tempted and damned?

C.: Maybe the authority is wrong in thinking that those souls are damned and tempted; in reality they may be on the right road and guided well. Under King Philip's reign a few years ago the king was convinced that he was killing heretics, but in fact he killed members of the Christian church and made them into martyrs. But even supposing that the authorities were able to form a correct judgment in this matter, are they allowed to prevent such things?

V.: Why not?

C.: Because doing this the authorities forgo the legal means and employ means found to be wrong.

V.: What do you think to be the legal means?

C.: Just what Calvin said when he was still under, not beyond the power of the authorities: 'there is no other means to exterminate all impious sects and heresies but to give place to the pure truth of God. Only this dispels the dark by its clearness, as experience teaches well enough.'

That is well said by Calvin. For truth, not the sword has the power to chase away and kill lies, error and heresy. Now the States and the preachers too dare forgo the right means. [By a resolution of 23 August 1579 the States of Holland instructed the town of Haarlem to forbid Coornhert to continue his assaults on the reformed ministers in speech or in writing on penalty of being prosecuted as a peace-breaker.] They do not risk trying to justify their doctrine against me by claiming that it corresponds with the truth revealed in the Holy Scripture. But they hope that the authorities may condemn me as a rebel for reproving the preachers for their teaching, and thus will overcome me with the sword of the executioner or by putting me in prison or banishing me. This is the means we have found to be wrong. It was employed by Charles and Philip but it was like oil on the flame as the great increase in sects and sectarians clearly proves. What have they gained by it ? Have not a hundred nay a thousand men replaced one? Do we intend to make the same mistake again and again and (to use the praiseworthy words of the States General) do we still try by force of arms to exterminate what lies hidden in the inmost of the souls and can be reshaped by no one but God? What else can such policies produce but impious or hypocritical people? Impious I call people who forsake God to save their skin, and hypocritical people who pretend to agree with you while firmly sticking to their former opinion. Is that the profit you expect to gain by allowing the political authority to exert compulsion? Compulsory service displeases the free God, who does not admit hypocritics nor impious persons into His kingdom. Is this the way to prevent many thousands of souls from being tempted and damned ? You add to their number those who are made impious or hypocritical by your fault. If you wish to become persecutors yourselves too, you should consider whether you will save your own souls. It is written: blessed are those who are persecuted, but nowhere: blessed are those who persecute others in My name. It is written too that all who wish to live the religious life in Christ Jesus, will be persecuted, but nowhere that they will persecute. The Lord sends sheep, not wolves. He says: beware of men, but not: kill men. He says that His flock will be hated, handed over and killed, but nowhere that His flock will hate, hand over or kill any one. Be careful, friend, which side you

choose. For one is the Christian side, the other the side, way and manner of tyrants and murderers. Do not be drawn to this by false doctrine, interpretation and glosses of people who follow in the well-trodden footsteps of the Catholic murderers, if you won't be brought so far as to forsake the merciful Father in heaven and to say Father to the devil from hell, who is fierce and has been a murderer from the outset. For thus the so-called honour of God sought outside of, nay against His commandments, at your own pleasure and with human commandments, would not only be in vain but damning to yourself, offensive to the Gospel and blasphemous to God. You must consider this in good earnest.

V.: You have spoken a long time and I have listened a long time, now then what is your opinion? That one should allow every one to do as he likes in religious matters and so create a Babylonian confusion?

C.: My long speech was to the point, you were free to interrupt, you have not done so. Therefore I went on talking, thinking you had nothing to say against it. As you ask for my opinion, I will not give you mine, but that of our Lord Christ himself.

V.: How is that?

C.: That the weeds may grow beside the wheat, without being weeded out, lest the wheat is weeded out at the same time: at the Lord's express command both are allowed to grow until harvest time, when the Lord will give His orders to the reapers. Do you wish to hear more? Add to this Paul's advice about which we have spoken to avoid heretics. This is the command of Christ and the apostle Paul. As long as you are true believers, you need not worry about sinning if you do not do what is nowhere ordered but explicitly forbidden in the Holy Scripture. Do not on your own authority accept anything which has not been given to you from Heaven. But render unto God the things which are God's and unto man the things which are man's. God alone is entitled to authority over men's souls and consciences, men are entitled to freedom of conscience. Let the authorities choose a religion they like best, and let them with their civil power and the sword of justice protect the preachers from violence when preaching and exercising it, but let the preachers, outwardly protected in this way, themselves protect their doctrine with the spiritual sword of truth. Then you are doing what you should do and so are the preachers. Then God will not neglect to do what it is His right to do, that is to further His glory

and to protect His church.

V.: You have said many fine things, but I do not expect that people will accept this. I can in no way agree to killing people for the sake of religion. But to permit several religions to be exercised is; in my opinion, not right.

C.: If you did not attach greater value to your own judgment than to that of the States General which made the Pacification of Ghent, you would not consider such a permission wrong.

V.: They have not permitted this.

C.: Not only I myself, but so far everyone has interpreted the Pacification of Ghent in this way: that all the inhabitants of the Netherlands were granted freedom of conscience.

V.: That is correct. They have acquired freedom of conscience. But does this mean that they are permitted to exercise any religion they happen to choose? I cannot interpret it in this way at all.

c. : Yet I do think it is true, unless it is thought that thanks to the Pacification we have acquired freedom only in name but not in reality.

V.: Is not every one now allowed to believe whatever he likes without being punished?

C.: Even before, everyone was allowed to do so. Who could prevent this? Neither emperor nor king, pope, cardinal, inquisition or whoever else. If we have got no more freedom now than we had before, what use has the Pacification of Ghent for us on this point? By their cruel edicts the emperor, Charles, King Philip and the Spanish inquisition did not allow anyone professing another religion than the Roman Catholic to have different preachers, to administer sacraments in a different way, or to reprove or to contradict their doctrine and their preachers. You won't have this done to your preachers either. Does not then constraint upon conscience remain?

V.: Not in the same way. Who is killed now? Whose possessions are confiscated?

C.: What I am going to say is already well-known. You confess (who can deny it?) that compulsion has remained, but you add that punishment has become less severe. That may be so. They don't kill as much as formerly: the time is not yet ripe for this and the people would not yet permit it. But even if the punishment be a fine only, there is nevertheless compulsion and want of freedom. The compulsion remains, although so far the punishment is less severe. Accordingly we have still to do without the freedom of conscience every one was longing for and promised in the Pacification of Ghent; we have only a mitigation of punishment. Well! Did I say mitigation of

punishment? I find that to me punishment is beginning to be measured out, not less but more frequently and more severely and with much less appearance of justice than ever in the times of papistry.