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Constraint on Trial
DIRCK VOLCKERTSZ COORNHERT AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
GERRIT VOOGT

SIXTEENTH CENTURY ESSAYS & STUDIES
VOLUME LII

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Portrait of Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert, Hendrick Goltzius, 1592 (Prentenkabinet, University of Leiden).
Dirck Volkertsz Coornhert (1522–90) was a Dutch notary, artist, poet, playwright, translator, and controversialist who defended the freedom of conscience and toleration. This study examines Coornhert’s contribution to the sixteenth-century debate on toleration through an exploration of his words and deeds.

The first two chapters of this biography discuss Coornhert’s life in public service and exile, a period which ended in 1577, when he returned to Haarlem. By that time, Coornhert was well into his fifties and no longer served in an official capacity, but spent his time pursuing his literary and intellectual work and, above all, his polemics and disputations, which he regarded as an integral part of his struggle for religious freedom. I regard this period (1577–90) as the time when Coornhert truly came into his own. Since this is also when he produced some of his finest works on toleration, I chose to interrupt the chronological narrative of his life here, and set forth, in the following five chapters, an examination of the position taken by Coornhert on the issue of toleration. The final chapter picks up the remaining threads of Coornhert’s life in relation to toleration, through the final dénouement of his clash with Justus Lipsius.

For convenience, the appendix provides a survey of the main events in Coornhert’s life. Readers who want to assess Coornhert’s essential contribution to the debate on toleration in the sixteenth century without the distractions of disputes and controversies in which his life abounded, will do well to go straight to chapters 5, 6, and 7.

•••
Introduction

Next it is helpful to have an understanding of the concepts and terms used in this study. The verb “to tolerate” was used in the sixteenth century in the sense of “to endure” or of religious concessions made by the stronger to the weaker. It was already used in this way during the Middle Ages by Thomas Aquinas.¹

When the authorities of the province of Holland decided to put an end to a debate between Coornhert and some Delft ministers (February 1578), they explained their action by stating that they “could not tolerate (from the verb tolereren) such public disputations without prior consent.”² This use of the Latin-derived verb “to tolerate” is exceptional in sixteenth-century Dutch and belongs in the realm of bureaucratic jargon.

The noun “toleration” (verdraagzaamheid) rarely was used—it does not occur in Coornhert’s writings. Instead, words such as “love” and “forbearance” are found.³ More common is the usage of the verb “to suffer” (lijden), as in the exclamation by Gamaliel in the **Synod on the Freedom of Conscience**: “Oh, if only we could suffer one another.”⁴

Toleration is an attitude evinced by an individual or a government or other institution. Based on such an attitude, religious freedom or freedom of conscience can be established, although we should realize that when we use the words “freedom of conscience,” they are understood to imply the freedom to give expression to that conscience in word or deed. In a state that allows such freedom, religious pluralism will ensue.⁵

To be tolerant always seems to imply a hierarchical relationship and a condescending attitude: one “puts up” with something disagreeable.⁶ But a more positive definition is possible. Johannes Kühn gave the brief description of toleration

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³Hans R. Guggisberg, “The Defence of Religious Toleration and Religious Liberty in Early Modern Europe: Arguments, Pressures, and Some Consequences,” *History of European Ideas* 4, no. 1 (1993): 36, notes that in Latin also, mostly terms such as _caritas_ or _mansuetudo_ are employed.


⁵This sequence of toleration, religious liberty, and religious pluralism is based on Guggisberg, “The Defence,” 36; on freedom of conscience as the freedom to express such freedom: see Henk Bonger, *De motivering van de godsdiensvrijheid bij Dirck Völckertszoon Coornhert* (Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1954), xiv–xv.

as a positive attitude towards the “other,” in which the “other” represents the deviant, alien, dissident, exotic—elements that, it is feared, threaten a core of beliefs that a person, group, or society holds. Besides “suffering” the presence of the deviant, toleration is, in Kühn’s words, “das Geltenlassen des Andern” (allowing the “other” the space to be and express himself). This does not necessarily imply that, in the case of religious toleration, one accepts or judges the content of the other person’s beliefs. One simply accepts that the other person holds and manifests such beliefs, within certain bounds set by the demands of social interaction—the Golden Rule. Defined in such a manner, toleration is a virtue when it finds the right mean between the extremes of not accepting any deviance from a norm, and accepting all forms of deviance. This virtue then opens the way for religious freedom and the freedom of conscience. Aristotle made the point against indiscriminate toleration by stating that “to endure the greatest indignities for no noble end or for a trifling end is the mark of an inferior person.”

It goes without saying that during the period with which we will be concerned in this study, the virtue of toleration was not practiced widely. Indeed, most people did not regard it as a virtue at all, and most states operated from the notion that the polity represented the seamless robe of Christ, which led to an automatic predisposition to regard religious deviance as political disobedience.

In a historiographical survey, E. O. G. Haitsma Mulier makes the general remark that Coornhert’s actual historical person and circumstances are less important than historical evaluation of and reflections on his place in sixteenth-century society. Often such reflections do not obey Tacitus’s call

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Introduction

for a reconstruction *sine ira et studio*, for Coornhert continues to stir up controversy long after his passing.

Specific consideration of Coornhert’s activities and ideas in connection with freedom of conscience came relatively late. Today one sees an upsurge of interest in the topic of toleration, which coincides with growing deconsecutionalization as well as with concern about the thought control exercised in certain twentieth-century totalitarian states.\(^{11}\) In the early eighteenth century, men like Gottfried Arnold, Pierre Bayle, and later Wilhelm Dilthey, pointed out Coornhert’s significance for the promotion of freedom of conscience, but their examination of the topic was brief or peripheral to their main concerns (such as placing him in the framework of the history of ideas).\(^{12}\)

The first thorough investigation of Coornhert’s position on toleration did not appear until after World War II, in the form of a thesis by Henk Bonger whose title and content reveal the influence of Johannes Kühn’s important study, *Toleranz und Offenbarung* (1923).\(^{13}\) After a general introduction about the notion of tolerance and its defenders in the sixteenth century, Bonger separates the different strands that can be detected in Coornhert’s position. He distinguishes three main clusters of motives that support his idea of toleration: rationalist, spiritualist, and mystical.

In more recent years we have seen an increased awareness of the important place that Coornhert’s polemics and debates take in the early history of the Dutch Republic. Gerhard Güldner contributed a well-researched and perspicacious analysis of the problem of toleration in the Netherlands of the late sixteenth century, which includes an excellent account of the confrontation

\(^{11}\)See e.g. the wide-ranging, well-documented study of the progress of toleration during the Reformation by Joseph Lecler, *Toleration and the Reformation*, 2 vols.; Coornhert is discussed in 2: 5, 271–86.


\(^{13}\)Johannes Kühn, *Toleranz und Offenbarung: Eine Untersuchung der Motive und Motivformen der Toleranz im offenbarunggläubigen Protestantismus: Zugleich ein Versuch zur neueren Religion- und Geistesgeschichte* (Leipzig: Meiner, 1923): Kühn only mentions Coornhert in passing; Bonger, *Motivering*, states specifically, in his preface, vii, that he aims to fill the gap left by Kühn, who stated in *Toleranz und Offenbarung*, 141 n. 3, that he had omitted a chapter on Coornhert because of “lack of space.”
between Coornhert and Lipsius. Martin van Gelderen, in his book on the political theories of the Dutch Revolt, also examines, in a chapter on “politics and religion,” how the debates of Coornhert functioned in this context.

In this study, I opt for frequent, and at times substantial, quotations from and paraphrases of Coornhert’s writings as well as those of some of his opponents. This serves two purposes. First, it does not muffle the sixteenth-century voice. Secondly, it makes these primary sources available in English for the first time. This better understanding of Coornhert outside the confines of the restricted Dutch-speaking world helps shed light on the conditions in the early Dutch Republic and on the backgrounds of the Arminian-Gomarist religious disputes that took place in the Republic in the early 1600s. The knowledge of Coornhert and his writings outside the Netherlands has been limited, mainly because Coornhert was a promoter of the vernacular and a defender of a pure Dutch language, and therefore consistently wrote in Dutch.

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16 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are my own translations.
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