

An engraving depicting a personification of Truth. A muscular, nude male figure stands on a fallen, reclining figure. He holds a long spear in his right hand and a banner in his left. The banner has the words 'Operans Veritatem' written on it. In the background, another figure is visible, holding a banner with the word 'Veritas'. The scene is set against a backdrop of clouds and a distant cityscape. The engraving is signed 'DC' at the bottom left and 'Amor coeui' at the bottom right.

RUBEN BUYS

Visions of Virtue

Prose, Poetry,
and Printmaking by
Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert
(1522-1590)
An anthology

Visions of Virtue

Aen Vre(deryck) de Vroom.

*Ick wensche u, vrome vrundt, alle schepselen uuijt, waer
maer den schepper alleen in u herte. Aen hem alleen heb-
dy genoech, al waerdy anders heel ongenoechlyck. Niet
en hadde ick te schrijven dan dat ic noch leve, naerder en
bereyder aen ende tot myn sterfven dan oijt, Godt danck.
Om wel te sterfven dient wel leven; die konst is zo geheel
ende seltsaem by den menschen, als 't leven gemeen is.
Dese konste zendt ende wenscht u als sich selve u oudt
bekende vrundt.*

To Vre(derik) de Vroom,

For you, my pious friend, I wish that only the Creator
may be allowed to reside in your heart, and all creatures
outside of it. With Him you have enough, even if you
were to be dissatisfied with everything else. Other than
that, I have nothing to share except that I am still alive,
closer to my death and more willing to die than ever,
thank God. To die well, one has to live well. As obvious
as life is to people, so utterly rare is this art. I'm hereby
sending you this art, and I wish it upon you and myself,
your old, declared friend.

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Hilversum
Verloren
2025

Publications appearing in the Bibliotheca Dissidentium Neerlandicorum (BDN) focus on the history of religious, philosophical and artistic nonconformism in the Netherlands from around 1350 to the present. The *BDN* comprises new editions of non-conformist primary sources as well as a series of monographs on important non-conformist authors. Books in the *BDN* appear at Verloren Publishers (Hilversum, the Netherlands) under the aegis of the Coornhert Foundation, and under the editorial responsibility of the Coornhert Center.

For more information, please visit
www.coornhertstichting.nl.

Cover image:

Whoever kills desire and lies is praised by truth. D.V. Coornhert
after a design by Adriaan de Weerdt, etching and engraving
c. 1566, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

ISBN 9789464551754

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Uitgeverij Verloren
Torenlaan 25, 1211 JA Hilversum
www.verloren.nl

Cover design: Aperta, Jan Johan ter Poorten, Hilversum
Layout: Rombus/Patricia Harsevoort, Hilversum

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Introduction

For most of us, Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert is not a name that will likely spring to mind when asked to name one of the most famous Dutch people of all time. However, in the second half of the sixteenth century, Coornhert was a highly influential and productive figure. He wrote about philosophy, theology, religion and religious strife, politics, love, the Dutch language, and reform of the prison system. His work includes plays, poems, moral treatises, dialogues, theological treatises, songs, and political essays. And he wrote nearly all of this in Dutch. This was unusual at the time, but for Coornhert it was a conscious choice: he felt that knowledge should be available to everyone, regardless of education, position, or social status. With those same values in mind, Coornhert produced Dutch translations of important classical and contemporary authors, among which Homer, Plato, Cicero, Boccaccio, Sebastian Castellio, and Colijn van Rijssele.

But Coornhert was more than just a writer. He was a public figure; a key figure, who often found himself at the centre of public debates regarding the main issues and conflicts of his century. In a time of great political, social, and religious polarisation, he was a fundamental, and notorious, supporter of tolerance, humanity, and sober rationality. In a time when the Netherlands slowly developed into a kind of unitary state, he was a well-known advocate of linguistic purism, the development of Dutch as a full-fledged language, and “the Netherlands” as an independent cultural and political whole.

Coornhert also enjoyed special fame as a visual artist. At a time when visual art entered into a new and unruly phase, the effects of which were felt throughout Europe and which is now globally considered to be among humanity’s most eminent art traditions, Coornhert played a leading role as a designer, engraver, and publisher of didactic, moralistic, and historical prints for a broad audience. For many years, he collaborated with world famous painter Maarten van Heemskerck (1498-1574), and he was a teacher to internationally renowned etcher Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617).

Through his work and actions, Coornhert has had a profound impact on the Dutch sixteenth century and the development of the Netherlands as a cultural and political unity. This book can be seen as a sampler for the wide array of literary, intellectual, and artistic instruments Coornhert employed to achieve



Portrait of Dirck Volkertsz Coornhert. Engraving after a design by Hendrik Goltzius, c. 1600, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

his deepest purpose: enlightening and emancipating all (Dutch) citizens and, in doing so, creating a peaceful and (more) honest society.

Life

Coornhert was born in 1522 in Amsterdam as the son of a rich textile merchant. His mother hailed from a respectable Amsterdam family. Coornhert's extraordinary talent was soon recognised by those around him. He enjoyed a broad education, even though, for reasons unknown, he never visited the Latin school. Against the will of his family, aged only seventeen, he married Neeltje Simonsdochter, a lower-class woman twelve years his senior, and was (partly) disinherited as a result. This was no trifling matter, as the Coornherts were counted among the wealthiest families of Amsterdam (Coornhert's eldest brother Clement is mentioned in 1543 as one of the city's five richest merchants). When he was twenty, Coornhert became steward to Reinoud III of Brederode. There, he gained access to the well-stocked library of castle Batestein in Vianen (Utrecht), where he came into contact with unorthodox and "heretical" ideas. There, he read Luther, Calvin and Menno Simons. And this was also where he familiarised himself with spiritualism, particularly the work of Sebastian Franck, and the anonymous mystical text *Theologia Deutsch*, which would become an important guideline throughout his life.

Coornhert was politically active for most of his life. He served as secretary for the Haarlem city council and, later on, the States General. He was also an advisor to, and friend of, stadtholder William of Orange, leader of the Dutch Revolt against Habsburg Spain, with whom he discussed his ideas about tolerance, and freedom of religion and conscience. His role in the Revolt came at a high cost. In 1567, he was arrested and brought to trial by the Council of Strokes (the "Blood Council"), which Alba had implemented to eliminate all enemies of Philip II. Coornhert defended his revolutionary activities with panache; he had done nothing that was not in the interest of peace, rationality, and the Dutch people. When he realises it is a lost cause, he manages to escape. He flees to Germany, where he spends several years in exile. During this time, he assists William of Orange in funding the war against Spain, while earning a living as an engraver.

Coornhert was the fiercest and most prominent opponent of the Dutch Calvinists. In his eyes, the Reformed Protestants tried to establish a "new tyranny over the conscience," now that the Catholics had lost their influence in the Netherlands. He single-handedly took on several leading Calvinists in a number of notorious public debates, during which he fought for freedom of thought, and the intellectual and moral formation of all Dutch citizens. Because of these ideas, and his critical attitude towards the Reformed Church, Coornhert was forced to flee the Netherlands yet again.

After his return, he moved from Haarlem, via Delft, to the tolerant Gouda. There he died on October 29th, 1590, and was buried in the Church of Saint John (Sint-Janskerk).

After his death, and particularly during the seventeenth century, Coornhert's rationalist approach to man and morals would become one of the native inspiration sources for the radical rationalism practiced by the Collegiants and, later, Spinozists such as Jarig Jelles (c. 1620-1683), and the Mennonite Pieter Balling (died before 1664).

Philosophy

Coornhert is best described as a vernacular humanist or vernacular rationalist. His philosophical and theological ideas are based on principal goodness, rationality, and the improbability of humankind. All people are created good; through reason, our inborn *voncxken des Godlijcken Lichts* (spark of Divine Light), we have direct and unmediated access to truth and goodness. In other words: we are already connected to God and do not require any special intervention from consecrated people or holy rituals. We therefore have everything we need to become good people. However, as long as we do not use these means, we remain stuck in our unreason and do the wrong things. Evil is therefore not the consequence of our depraved will or of what the Reformed Protestants call original sin, but of our own *ignorance*, which Coornhert sees as the root of all sins (*wortele alder zonden*). If you would even want to use the misleading word “original sin,” Coornhert, who really disliked that word, believed it had to be understood in terms of ignorance: you simply “inherit” the wrong convictions and habits from your parents (and in a wider sense: your social environment), which makes you unwittingly copy bad behaviour and learn to mistake the wrong things for the truth.

Because humans have reason as their defining characteristic, they are also obliged to live according to reason – and those who truly live according to reason automatically do the right thing. Conversely: when we do not practice virtue, we do not use our reason and consequently do not rise above the level of animals. Each person has an *individual* duty to break the power of sin and ignorance and, through trial and error, build a good and truthful life for themselves: the art of living well (*wellevenskunste*) as Coornhert calls it. And this art of living well begins with an awareness of our own ignorance. Only then can we start to become a different, better kind of person. For this process, Coornhert borrows the spiritualist concepts of *rebirth* and *deification*, but he puts a rationalist spin on them. Unlike traditional spiritualism, Coornhert does not see the divine spark as something mystical, but as the reason or *ratio*, which is present in each human being and forms the basis for moral improvement.

In this respect, Coornhert has been deeply influenced by Platonic philosophy and the Stoa.

The Bible (the “literal Law of the Lord”) is not essential when it comes to becoming a good human being and is described by Coornhert in various texts as an additional source of examples, stories, and descriptions, which makes it even easier to see our own ignorance and God’s goodness.

True (self) knowledge leads to good behaviour and enables us to already become perfect during our earthly life (“perfectism”). The idea that each person can already become perfect in this life (that is: can become what God intended them to be) is central to Coornhert’s philosophy. And it is attainable for each human being; remarkably, Coornhert makes it clear in several texts that this does not solely apply to Christians, but equally to Jews, Muslims, and “heathens.”

Based on these ideas, Coornhert was also a fundamental supporter of complete tolerance and liberty of conscience. Because each human being has the duty (and the opportunity) to shape their life based on their direct, individual bond with God and the Truth, it is completely pointless to try and force people to assume a certain religion. Coercion even works counterproductively; it is better to *enter into discussion* with dissidents and so together arrive at higher knowledge and truth. In texts such as *Proces vant Ketterdoden* (*Trial About the Killing of Heretics*, 1590 (see p. 146)) he therefore declares war on all forms of religious persecution and imposed religion.

Coornhert also had progressive ideas about the prison system and the treatment of criminals and “idlers.” In his eyes, people generally do not turn to crime because of any kind of inherent personality flaw. They are often driven to it by poverty or misfortune. He was among the first in Europe to draw the link between criminality and socioeconomic circumstances. For that reason, he believed the penal system should not be exclusively aimed at punishment and compensation, but also on the re-education of criminals and their successful return to society.

These views were at the basis of the famous *Rasphouses* (for men) and *Spin-houses* (for women) which were established in the Republic from the end of the sixteenth century onwards.

Work

This anthology expressly does not take an academic approach. Solid academic studies about Coornhert and text-critical publications of his work are widely available by now – albeit still mainly in Dutch. With his work, Coornhert specifically also wanted to address the “common people.” In this vein, this anthology aims to offer an accessible overview of Coornhert’s oeuvre rather than providing yet another academic reflection.

Visions of Virtue has been divided into four parts:

Part I: Man and morals

Part II: Church, faith, and freedom of religion

Part III: State, freedom, and living together

Part IV: Language, poetry, theatre, and printmaking

Accessibility has always taken priority. This means most texts selected for this anthology are on the shorter side. Of some essential, longer texts, representative fragments have been included. Most texts are self-explanatory. They are only introduced (briefly) when this is necessary for a proper understanding of the text in question.

For a couple of texts, I was grateful to be able to use existing English translations. I have, for instance, copied fragments from *Synod on the Freedom of Conscience* (Voogt, 2008) and *Ethics, the Art of Living Well* (Voogt, 2015). In addition, I have used a number of modern Dutch translations. This applies primarily to the letters, published in a modern translation by Jaap Gruppelaar (*Nieuw brievenboek*, 2022), and dialogues from the so-called *Kruidhofjes* (Buys 2023).

In addition, a few texts have been translated from *Weet of rust* (Bonger & Gelderblom, 1985) and *Coornhert in het klein. Korte teksten over deugd, onwetendheid en volmaakbaarheid* (Buys, 2010). These sources are always mentioned underneath the text in question. I have chosen to leave out annotations and footnotes when these were not interesting for the non-academic reader or when they detract too much from the text itself. I have also removed text-critical indications, unless they are necessary to understand the text. The same goes for the explanations, references, or signs in the margins (*marginalia*), which Coornhert occasionally made rather enthusiastic use of.

However, most of the texts for this anthology first had to be translated into modern Dutch – which I have done with great pleasure. In those cases, I mention the original source; in many cases this is Coornhert's collected works, published in 1630 in three parts under the title *Wercken, waer van eenige noyt voor desen gedruet zyn* (*Works, Some of Which Have Never Been Printed Before*). The Dutch translations then also had to be translated into English. This sometimes difficult task was undertaken by Elizabeth Verwey. I am convinced her efforts have led to a very authentic translation that also offers non-Dutch readers the opportunity to become acquainted with Coornhert's original texts.

Due to their varied origin (existing and new translations), the reader will notice style differences between the texts. I have chosen to leave these in. For example, the reader will find American English in text fragments from *Synod* and *Ethics*, while British English has been used for the other texts.

Acknowledgements

This anthology forms the third and final part of the publications I have written around the Coornhert memorial year 2022. In 2018, I made a plan, in consultation with the board of the Coornhert Foundation, to make an accessible biography, a modern edition of the dialogue collections *Kruidhofjes*, and an accessible anthology of Coornhert's work. The Foundation has always supported and helped me during this process. For this, I would like to thank the board members Prof. Remieg Aerts, Prof. Jos Biemans, Prof. Ton van Kalmthout, Dr. Gerlof Verwey and Jonathan Verwey MA. Especially Gerlof has regularly given me advice and assistance. I also want to thank Dr. Arie-Jan Gelderblom, Dr. Jaap Gruppelaar and Prof. Gerrit Voogt for giving me permission to use their Dutch or English translations in this anthology.

For the (Dutch) translation of the songs/poems in part IV, always a difficult job, I was helped by the poetic insights of Olaf Duits.

I hope I have managed to produce a book that is interesting for a wider audience. Coornhert deserves it. Especially in a time when tolerance, impartiality, and rational common sense seem to be increasingly less of a given. With their focus on a wider audience, these publications are part of a recent change of direction within the Coornhert Foundation. Until recently, the Coornhert Foundation mainly occupied itself with academic publications and conferences. In recent years, however, the foundation has wanted to assert itself in a more concrete, social, and contemporary way. Based on the mission of the foundation, which in turn is based on Coornhert's own philosophy, the focus should be, very widely, on exposing (government) power, lies and untruths, and stimulating diversity and free thought.

By now, the foundation is funding four projects that align with this new objective. Among these are two investigative journalism projects, including the *Persvrijheidsmonitor* (Press Freedom monitor) of the *Persvrijheidsfonds/Nederlandse Vereniging voor Journalistiek* (Press Freedom Fund/Dutch Association for Journalism). In addition, the foundation supports Amnesty International's educational human rights programme BRAVE and the Voices of Tolerance programme for secondary schools (*Museum Ons' Lieve Heer op Solder*, Amsterdam). I wholeheartedly applaud this widening of the foundation's social mission which is very much in the spirit of Coornhert!

Dr. Ruben Buys
May 31, Amersfoort, The Netherlands

Both lyrically and visually, Amsterdam born and bred Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert (1522-1590) was a real pioneer. His extensive oeuvre includes the first ethics in a European vernacular, a groundbreaking treatise about the treatment of prisoners, and a unique language guide aimed at both boys and girls. In addition to a great number of prose texts, he also wrote poems, songs, and plays.



As a visual artist, Coornhert created hundreds of top-quality engravings, enabling him to also reach an illiterate audience with his ideas about tolerance, freedom of expression, and the importance of correct knowledge for the good life.

The anthology *Visions of Virtue* is the first to bring together a rich selection of Coornhert's work, largely translated into English for the first time. The texts and engravings in this book offer an insight into one of the first advocates for tolerance and freedom of conscience in Europe. At the same time, they shed a surprising light on pressing contemporary issues such as truth versus lie, democracy versus autocracy, and rational thought versus gut feeling.

Ruben Buys is a philosopher and historian of ideas. He has worked as a Marie Curie fellow at Utrecht University and the University of California, Los Angeles. His PhD thesis was awarded the Praemium Erasmianum Research Prize. He publishes on late medieval and early modern Dutch philosophy.

