Jan Konijnenburg

In its series Bibliotheca Dissidentium Neerlandicorum, Verloren publishers present two little known and highly interesting and relevant texts by Jan Konijnenburg (1738–1831), thanks to the elegant transcription by Simon Vuyk. In this review, my focus is on the second text, a Dutch pamphlet against the slave trade. The first text in the volume is about freedom of religion and consciousness based on Scripture and natural law. Konijnenburg published this work in Paris in 1790 for the Société de la Morale Chrétienne; the French original is available online.1

Jan Konijnenburg, an enlightened Protestant minister and Dutchman, was professor at the Remonstrants Seminarium in Amsterdam. Considered a freethinker, he was active as Unitarian politician, radical democrat, and theologian. During the period of French rule in the Netherlands, he was briefly but intensely involved in writing the country’s first constitution. Within the complicated landscape of Dutch Protestantism, Konijnenburg belongs on the liberal end of the spectrum. He was friends with the Dutch writers Agatha Deken and Elisabeth Wolff, for whom he wrote a laudatory obituary in 1805.

The text concerning the slave trade was a reaction to the speech of an Amsterdam merchant, Abraham Barrau, earlier that year on Nieuwendijk, in the city center, defending the slave trade against abolitionists. Barrau argued that enslavement of Africans was “often” not a crime, but even “a welcome service,” and that without enslaved labor the colonies would be “ruined within a couple of years.”2 Konijnenburg’s reply should be understood as an attempt to formulate arguments against the slave trade during the years of the French Revolution. His aim is to declare the slave trade illegal on the basis of arguments in natural law: black Africans have “natural rights,” and one of these is the right of “personal freedom.” He considers the slave trade to be a cruel and inhuman system and gives many fundamental arguments to stop it as soon as possible.

1 Published online in the collection BnF Digital Libraries Gallica. The text opposing the slave trade was first published in the journal Bijdragen tot het Menschelijk Geluk (1789–1794) (Contributions to Human Happiness) in 1790.
The context in which he writes is that of Amsterdam’s merchant circles, which invested heavily in Surinamese plantations during the eighteenth century. Hundreds of Amsterdam families had become shareholders in plantations, which made them co-owners of the enslaved Africans who worked and lived on the plantations. Until 1828, the enslaved were not considered human beings in their own right, but goods, part of the plantation property. This context did not lead to direct interaction between Amsterdam residents and the enslaved or free Africans in Amsterdam: they were generally excluded and the black presence in the city remained quite small. Konijnenburg acknowledges this fact when he writes that, “I am happy to be able to say that I have hardly ever seen a miserable being who one called a slave, have not visited the areas of slavery myself, and neither have I ever been near the unpleasant living quarters of trembling servitude” (p. 129). A meeting with enslaved Africans or a visit to enslavement in practice could have influenced his “feeling of humanity”—he wants to make it clear to his readers that this “danger” (i.e. bias) of sentimentalism was absent.

Konijnenburg concludes his argument with two recommendations to improve the situation for the enslaved: the plantations should be transformed into “kweekscholen,” schools where behavior in a free society could be taught, and he recommends missionary activity to Christianize the enslaved to prepare them for a life as free Christians. It is in these recommendations that we recognize how paternalistic Konijnenburg, however radical and outspoken in his time and place, continued to be. White, European rule, its teaching and leadership, remain for him self-evident and unquestioned. The adjectives he uses for the enslaved suggest compassion but not the possibility of equal humanity: blacks are “weaker co-natural creatures,” “poor Negroes,” “unhappy Blacks,” “dumb and uncivilized,” “more or less civilized,” and “unknowing and uncivilized”; throughout he also uses the word “our” to mention the enslaved, as if they were the property of an unmentioned “we” among his readers. Konijnenburg attempts to formulate more equality in his terminology and gives arguments for the recognition of the common humanity of the enslaved as men, women, and children, equal to “us.” To reach that stage of equality, however, there is still a “staircase to freedom” with several steps to take. Those enslaved who show that they are making progress in learning “enlightenment and civilization” on the plantations, would be ready for a next step towards the “freedom and privileges of the Dutch citizen” (p. 139). It was thinkable for Konijnenburg that a last step on this staircase would lead to self-rule.

In this text, the references to Christianity and the church are secondary. The churches were deeply ambivalent regarding the notion of equality. As Jonathan Israel remarks, the first and foremost division the churches recog-