

*Question 10. Whether those who suffer persecution for the sake of their religion can defend themselves against tyrants without hurt to their consciences.*

It finally remains for me to solve a question of the greatest moment, namely, whether it is allowable, in accordance with the condition and distinctions laid down above, to offer resistance by armed force to tyranny assailing the true religion and even stamping it out as far as may be, and to contend against persecution. The following may be the principal reasons for entertaining doubts (*on this score*): firstly, since religion touches the consciences (*of people*) which can in no way be subjected to violence, it would appear that it should not be rendered secure or be defended by means of any armed force; for that reason we perceive that it has thus far been propagated by the preaching of the Word of God, by prayers and by patience. There are besides many passages to be found in the Scriptures from which the difference between the kingdoms of this world and the spiritual kingdom of Christ appears. To these may finally be added the example of the holy Prophets and in the last instance that of Christ Himself, our Lord, for although all authority, power and virtue dwelt in Him, yet He Himself never adopted this method of defense, just as the Apostles themselves and all the martyrs after them refrained from doing so; so much so that not even entire legions of the faithful of Christ, abundantly furnished with arms, declined to meet death rather than defend themselves by drawing the sword and assailing the very enemies of truth<sup>2</sup> .

I answer first that it is an absurd, nay even a false opinion that the means by which the objects and affairs of this world are defended, such as both courts of law and armed force, not merely differ from the means by which things spiritual can be defended, but are as it were diametrically opposed to them and are so incompatible with them that they neither can nor ought to find any application in a matter of religion. But on the contrary I declare that it is the principal duty of a most excellent and pious ruler that there should apply whatever means, authority and power

has been granted him by God to this end entirely that God may truly be recognized among his subjects and may, being recognized, be worshipped and adored as the supreme king of all kings. Therefore the man of that description will not merely put forth all the power of his jurisdiction and the authority of the laws against the despisers or disturbers of the true religion who have shown themselves not the least amenable to ecclesiastical words of rebuke and admonition, but will even punish with armed force those who cannot otherwise be restrained from impiety.

In support of this view the Scriptures themselves furnish us with innumerable reasons and examples. The reasons are of the following kind:

a) Since the purpose of all well-ordered polities is not simply peace and quiet in this life, as some heathen philosophers have imagined, but the glory of God, towards which the whole present life of men should be directed, it therefore follows that those who are set over nations, ought to bring to bear all their zeal and all the faculties they have received from God to this end that the pure worship of God upon which His glory depends should in the highest degree be maintained and increased among the people over whom they hold sway.

b) Finally, even if we were to concede that the ultimate purpose of polities was the undisturbed preservation of this life, yet we should have to admit that this was the sole reason for obtaining and preserving it, (namely) if God, both the author and the director of our life, be piously and rightly worshipped.

Proofs or example (*of this*) are quite innumerable in the Scriptures:

a) For it is particularly clear that those patriarchs of old were simultaneously the highest priests and the supreme rulers among their people; this is expressly recorded concerning Melchizedek<sup>2</sup> and Eli<sup>3</sup> and

although these two offices were afterward separated by the Lord, this did not happen because they were incompatible with each other but because one man could scarcely be equal to the performance of both.

b) Furthermore, when the king is bidden to have with him a book of law<sup>4</sup> that he may practice himself in the reading of it day and night, that is demanded of him not as of a private citizen but as of a king and a public magistrate.

c) And among the laws of which the execution is entrusted to the rulers, those<sup>5</sup> are deemed the principal which condemn to death the despisers of the true religion. The application of these laws we remark in the case of David<sup>6</sup> who by means of fixed laws rendered inviolable the entire worship of God, and in the case of Solomon who supplemented the decree of his father against transgressors<sup>7</sup> ; likewise in the edicts of the Kings Asa, Jesohaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah<sup>8</sup>, nay even of Nebuchadnezzar and Darius<sup>9</sup> when they were persuaded by the prophet Daniel to worship God.

d) Lastly, when the Apostle<sup>10</sup> declares that kings and princes have been appointed by God to this end not merely that we may pass life honorably, but also piously, that is, not merely that we may live as it befits honest and respectable men, and in accordance with piety towards God, it admits of no doubt but that he has stated this whole question most succinctly. Hence we observe that the earliest Councils against heretics were summoned not upon the authority of the Roman Pontiffs who had not yet appeared in the character in which they came to light much later but by the decree of the emperors, (*in order that*) by means of this remedy they might hear the case in accordance with the persuasive arguments of the pious bishops. There are also extant innumerable constitutions (i.e. laws) and canons of the Church enacted by the Emperor Justinian as well as by his successors and even by Charlemagne and others approving of the same course. But to what end are monarchs even today being so furiously incited by that whore of Rome to

persecute with fire and sword and to banish those whom they themselves style heretics, unless it holds that this duty falls within their province? And in this matter it does indeed rest upon the best and surest foundation, but abuses it no less than innumerable other testimonies of truth to support forsooth and to defend its own impieties and blasphemies. But, you will say, why such a longwinded digression? For the question is not whether kings or rulers ought to defend and promote piety, but whether subjects can defend themselves by force or arms against persecutors. I therefore reply to the earlier of the two questions proposed above: It is one thing now for the first time to introduce religion into some part and another to preserve it when it has already been received somewhere or to wish to restore it when it has gone to ruin and has been buried as a result of the connivance or ignorance or malice of men. For I grant that initially it should be introduced and spread by the influence of the Spirit of God alone, and that by the Word of God (which is) suited to teaching, conviction and exhortation. For this is the particular task of the Holy Spirit which employs spiritual instruments.

It will therefore be the part of a pious ruler who wishes to entice his people away from idolatry and false superstitions to the true religion, to see to it in the first instance that they are instructed in piety by means of true and reliable argument, just as on the other hand it is in the part of the subjects to give their assent to truth and reason and readily to submit. Finally the ruler will be fully occupied in rendering the true religion secure by means of good and noble decrees against those who assail and resist it out of pure obstinacy, as we have seen done in our times in England, Denmark, Sweden, Scotland, and the greater part of Germany and Switzerland against the Papists, the Anabaptists and other heretics. If the other nations preferred following their example rather than trusting and obeying that bloodstained whore of Rome, could greater tranquillity indeed be seen in the whole world in the sphere of religion as well as of politics?

What therefore will subjects have to do if on the other hand they are compelled by their ruler to worship idols? Assuredly reason does not permit them to force their ruler to a complete change in their condition; nay rather, they will consider it needful patiently to bear with him even to persecution, while they worship God purely in the meantime, or altogether to go into exile and seek new abodes. But if the free exercise of the true religion has once been granted by means of decrees lawfully passed and settled and confirmed by public authority, then I declare that the ruler is so much the more bound to have them observed as a matter of religion is of greater moment compared with all others, so much so that he has no right to repeal them upon his own arbitrary decision, and without having heard the case, but only with the intervention of that same authority by which they were in the first instance enacted. If he acts otherwise I declare that he is practicing manifest tyranny; and with due allowance for the observations made above, (his subjects) will be all the more free to oppose him as we are bound to set greater store and value by the salvation of our souls and the freedom of our conscience than by any other matters however desirable. It should therefore now be no cause of surprise to anyone that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Prophets and the Apostles, too, or the other martyrs, since they were men in private station, confined themselves within the limits of their calling.

And as regards those who held public office or those legions which in the midst of battle suffered martyrdom with their commanders without offering any resistance even though their attackers were acting in violation of the decrees previously passed in favor of Christians, as happened especially under the Emperors Diocletian and Julian, there is, I say, a twofold answer. First, although certain emperors before Diocletian had made the persecution somewhat less severe, as it is certain that Hadrian, Antonius and Alexander did, yet none of them had ever permitted the public exercise of the Christian religion. Next, I also repeat the well-known saying that whatever is lawful, is not always expedient as well. For I should not be inclined to assert that a religion made lawful by public decrees must needs always be defended and held fast by

means of arms against manifest tyranny, but that even so that is the right and lawful course especially for those upon whom this burden rests and to whom God has granted the opportunity, as the example of the people of Libnah against Jehoram and of the people of Jerusalem against Amaziah and the war of Constantine against Maxentius undertaken at the request of the citizens of Rome as described above abundantly prove. Hence I conclude that among the martyrs should be counted not only those who have defeated the tyranny of the enemies of the truth by no other defense than patience, but those also who, duly supported by the authority of laws or of those whose right it is to defend the laws, devoted their strength to God in defense of the true religion.

And these arguments so far I decided to urge in reply to the last objection that I might satisfy those who raise it so as not to violate their consciences because they are genuinely afraid of sinning against God if they attempt anything of that kind. But as regards that class of men who confer no other benefit upon the world but that they fill it with innocent blood while they abuse the authority of rulers that from their ruin they may pursue and advance their own interests and who meantime are characterized by such shamelessness that they dare to attack and assail with these objections those who do not spontaneously present themselves to them for slaughter, thus of course cloaking their cruelty and unbridled license under the false pretext of religion and zeal — this class of men, I say, would merit no other reply than that which would deservedly be given to robbers who summoned merchants and other travelers before the court for not undertaking a journey without girding on the sword for their defense, declaring that they had no right to do so, though they themselves adopted every kind of weapon to murder them.

Nay, they put me in mind of that abominable Roman Fimbria, whose like of hired assassins may be seen in large numbers at the present time; for so insolent was his daring, or rather so shameless his effrontery that when at the time of the Sullan proscription he had had a wound dealt to Scaevola, a man famous among the citizens of Rome for his

extraordinary virtue and honesty, and the latter did not succumb to it as he was wishing, he was bold enough to complain and to threaten Scaevola that he would have him before court as if he had been most outrageously wronged because the other had not unresistingly admitted the dagger to enter his very heart<sup>11</sup> . But because all discussion with men of that kind would be otiose and to no purpose, they should all of them be referred by me not so much to their own personal conscience (in which the majority are entire lacking) as to the tribunal of Him whose supreme authority and judgment — as by unmistakable evidence time and reality at length have proved — they themselves have not been able to escape.

***Read “Theodore Beza Defends the Right to Resist Tyranny” P. 357***

1. When does a ruler go too far, according to Beza?
2. To whom may subjects appeal against a tyrant?
3. Does Beza believe that individuals may take the law into their own hands?