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Faith, Reason, and Revelation in Theodore Beza (1519–1605)

By Jeffrey Mallinson

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[1] Historical theologians have commonly held that no close connection exists between the two major intellectual movements in the Protestant world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the Reformation and Protestant scholasticism. The writings of the Protestant scholastics were condemned as an unfortunate survival of medieval traditions that may be safely disregarded, whereas the true spirit of Protestantism was found in the literature of the Reformers. Protestant scholastics were condemned without a hearing and labeled as empty ‘quibblers’ and followers of a dead past who failed to understand the problems of their new times. Characterized as the return of medieval dialectic and Aristotelian logic to the Protestant classroom, it was, therefore, considered a distortion or perversion of Reformation theology. The common notion that scholasticism was a relapse into ‘earlier concept-splitting school philosophy’ is still repeated in many recent works on the history of Protestant theology, giving some of the charges made against scholasticism by the Reformers a much more extreme meaning than they were originally intended to have. The scornful way in which Luther and Calvin treated some forms of late medieval scholasticism is thus taken as an overall hermeneutical principle to read scholasticism. As a result, too many historians have read the whole period of post-Reformation theology exclusively in the light of a modern aversion to scholasticism, and not on its own terms or in light of its own concerns and context.

[2] Jeffrey Mallinson has given us a careful study of the significant Genevan theologian Theodore Beza (1519–1605). In this book, which is derived from his Oxford PhD dissertation, Mallinson shows that Beza’s thinking led the Reformed tradition in a manner that was complementary rather than antithetical to that of Calvin. Applying recent reappraisals of Reformed scholasticism, he clarifies Beza’s role within the development of Protestant scholasticism. As the chief pedagogue at the Genevan *Académie*, involved in the academic task of training the clergy, he directed Reformed theology to a form of scholasticism that Mallinson defines as an academic articulation of theology, aimed at rebutting unbelief and antithetical philosophies (235). At the same time, the author clearly shows, on the basis of the notes taken down by Beza’s students, that alongside a modest appropriation of scholastic distinctions, Beza extensively used humanistic methods and biblical

study for developing the Reformed tradition. In this way, Beza conserved and disseminated Calvin's ideas at an international level. In the introduction to his book he presents an overview of Beza research in which he criticizes anachronistic historiographies and misconceptions of previous Beza research (Kickel, Armstrong, Bray), in which it is argued that Beza's theology is dominated by a severe form of rationalism. At the same time, Mallinson rebuts the project of Barthian Neo-Orthodoxy and that of current Reformed Epistemology (Alvin Plantinga, N. Wolterstorff), which anachronistically read current concerns back into early modern history by claiming that the use of natural revelation were incompatible with Reformed thought.

^[3] In the next chapters Mallinson presents a carefully contextualized and well documented conceptual analysis of Beza's ideas on the uses and abuses of natural revelation (chapter 4), the nature and mode of special revelation (chapter 5), his view of Scripture (chapter 6) and, finally, Beza's doctrine of faith (chapter 7). The main argument of this book is that Beza's thought must be clearly distinguished from any form of rationalistic epistemology. The author points out that Beza rejects explicitly any conception of natural revelation that would give it a superior or equal status to Scripture. Moreover, previous scholarship has failed to come to grips with the basic quality of Beza as an accomplished New Testament scholar (150). We cannot separate the scholastic and humanistic-biblical approaches in Beza and arbitrarily designate one side or other as the 'real Beza'. The divergent approaches in Beza, Mallinson argues, are not the result of self-contradiction, but of a thoughtful synthesis (13).

^[4] In all this the author presents Beza's thought as a fascinating part of the history of ideas. But if we are looking for technical formulations and solutions to contemporary conundrums, Beza is probably unable to help. Beza's key contribution to religious epistemology today is an integration of volitional and intellectual aspects of faith that includes both its objective and subjective elements (237–238). Mallinson summarizes his stimulating and impressive analysis with a pithy statement that should give all scholars to pause: 'we ought to avoid treating any one piece of the Bezan corpus with more weight than it deserves.' !(155).