
Pro Rege

Volume 33 | Number 3

Article 2

March 2005

Theodore Beza--The Man Next to John Calvin: A Review Essay

Keith C. Sewell

Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sewell, Keith C. (2005) "Theodore Beza--The Man Next to John Calvin: A Review Essay," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 33: No. 3, 15 - 19.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol33/iss3/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Theodore Beza— The Man Next to John Calvin: A Review Essay



by Keith C. Sewell

Scott M. Manetsch, *Theodore Beza and the Quest for Peace in France, 1572-1598*. (Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought # 79), Leiden: Brill, 2000, ISBN: 90 04 11101 8, xii + 380 pp. Also, Jeffrey Mallinson, *Faith, Reason, and Revelation in Theodore Beza, 1519-1605*. (Oxford Theological Monographs), London: Oxford University Press, 2003, ISBN: 0 19 925959 3, 267 pp. Both works include a bibliography.

Dr. Keith C. Sewell is Professor of History and Chair of the History Department at Dordt College.

Beside the great man, perhaps to his right, or one pace behind, and probably somewhat in his shadow, there is often to be found a significant co-worker and successor. From the Bible we know of Elijah and Elisha, and Paul and Barnabas. In sharp contrast, modern European

history requires that we confront Hindenberg and Ludendorf as well as Lenin and Trotsky. More positively, in the history of the Reformation we encounter Luther and Melancthon in Wittenberg, Zwingli and Bullinger in Zürich, and Calvin and Beza in Geneva. Of course, the second man in each duo is never a true *Doppelgänger*. He has his own place, task, and calling; his own struggles and aspirations; yet his historical reputation has often been overshadowed by the more prominent figure. Manetsch's and Mallinson's books pay welcome attention to one such man: Theodore Beza (1519-1605). Without denying Calvin's immense importance, one finds it hard not to conclude that Beza has been seriously neglected when one considers the vast literature on Calvin.

Born in 1519 at Vézelay, France, Theodore Dieudonne Beza outlived the first and second generation of reformers. He embraced the Reformation, was obliged to flee his homeland, and first arrived in Geneva in 1548. After a difficult period in Lausanne from 1549 to 1558, he returned to Geneva to become the rector of the newly established Academy. He was soon regarded as Calvin's right-hand man and designated successor. Upon Calvin's death in 1564, Beza took up the mantle of leadership. Scott Manetsch's work focuses on the role played by Beza in the search for peace between Catholics and Huguenots (Calvinists) in France in the period 1572-1598.

In many ways, the 1560s stand as a pivotal decade in the history of Calvinism. The decade witnessed crucial developments in Scotland, France, and the Netherlands. In France, in the months leading up to the Colloquy of Poissy in 1562, it was possible to believe that the kingdom

was on the brink of Protestantism (338). Yet Protestantism was not to be. The subsequent Edict of St. Germain (January 1562) represents the high point of Huguenot power. From the massacre of Huguenots at Vassy (March 1562) onward, France descended into a period of fearful disorder lasting until 1598. Within this period, historians distinguish no less than eight civil wars, excluding the Spanish military intervention of 1596-97. The issue between Catholics and Huguenots was always at stake—but often not the sole point of contention, as dynastic considerations were also in play. In retrospect, it is hard not to see the appalling atrocities of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacres of August 24, 1572, as breaking the back of the Huguenot movement. Too many actual and potential leaders were lost in this fearful episode (31-5).

Thereafter, while Beza continued to call for the reformation of the church, a new note is definitely sounded. Concern for exposed and persecuted Huguenots—and never let it be forgotten that they were compatriots—drove Beza to entertain and advance views that Calvin had opposed (5). Faced with extermination, Calvinists now produced a literature that justified and articulated resistance (55). This resistance created the context for some very important reformed contributions to the literature of political theory, particularly François Hotman's *Francogallica* (1573), Beza's own *Du droit des magistrats* (1574), and *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* (1579), now generally attributed to Philippe Duplessis-Mornay (64f., 111). Manetsch's study of Beza in these years of harrowing stress and strain is a very fine achievement. With great skill and scholarship, he takes us into the life of a man who at one point might have thought that he was on the brink of leading France to a national Calvinistic reformation but who had instead to taste the bitter waters of disappointment, betrayal, and uncertainty. The supreme tragedy of 1572 was not effaced by the false dawn of 1575-6, following the Edict of Beaulieu (90-2). Thereafter, it seems as if all was decline—and a sense of this decline only heightened the ensuing search for peace and security (113). In the decade that followed, there were trials on all sides: the mounting Jesuit challenge (123); the stridency of the "Gnesio-Lutherans," who in the complexities of German affairs were ready to side with

Catholics against the Reformed (134); and the revival of the Catholic League within France itself (145). Beza experienced growing isolation under these conditions and took to writing the history of Reformed Christianity for a reformed posterity—if there was to be one (138-9).

Certainly those who persevered did so in order to maintain their confessional integrity. There were other prospects also. There was Henry of Navarre, the Bourbon heir to the throne of France during the reign of Henry III (1574-1589). Henry of Navarre professed the Huguenot creed. Yet there were always doubts concerning this man (176), who could seem overly *politique* (103). Beza, too, who seems to have been skeptical initially (92), eventually came to trust and support him (174-6). It is especially in aspects of the relationship between Beza and Henry of Navarre (93f.) and in the complexity of the 1589-93 period (194f.) that Manetsch breaks new ground, in the latter case supplementing the well-thumbed pages of Nicola Mary Sutherland's *The Huguenot Struggle for Recognition* (1980).

When Henry of Navarre signed the Treaty of Trêve with (Catholic) Henry III in 1589 (both men standing in opposition to Henry of Guise and the Catholic League), Beza was delighted (190). When an assassin felled Henry III, and Henry of Navarre acceded to the throne, Beza was beside himself in hopeful expectation. A Protestant monarch at last! Might not the tribulations of the previous decade yet prove to be the prelude to a glorious future? Nevertheless, doubts persisted as to Henry of Navarre's confessional sincerity. Beza preferred to see Henry of Navarre as another David: a man with defects but nevertheless the Lord's anointed (210).

These remained dangerous times. In the early 1590s both Paris and Geneva were under siege. Paris, now controlled by the Catholic "Holy League," was besieged by Henry of Navarre, and Protestant Geneva by the forces of Catholic Savoy (194), so that the Catholic counter-reformation now reached almost to the city gates (321). And while Geneva suffered, Zürich prospered (217). The passing of many friends pained a weary Beza (309). Eventually, his circumstances were so reduced that he was obliged to sell his library (215). Having already endured the apostasy of many (40f., 162f.), Beza lived to see

Henry of Navarre's renunciation of his Huguenot commitment and conversion to Catholicism in July 1593. This provoked even more desertions from the Reformed ranks (272 f.). This betrayal was a "terrible shock" (257) to Beza, already deeply concerned at proposals for Catholic-Huguenot comprehension that would result in immediate compromise and eventual surrender, such as the project floated by Jean Hotman (224).

Manetsch suggests that Beza seriously misunderstood Henry of Navarre's (now Henry IV's) estimation of their relationship (257). Perhaps Manetsch has yet to come to a fully satisfactory resolution of this question. We may not doubt the poignancy of Beza's final meeting with Henry IV (337), but granted that Beza was not politically naïve, how may we adequately account for the manner in which Henry IV regained and retained Beza's trust (263)? Or was that trust in some sense both *pro forma* and pragmatic—a stance adopted for want of any practical alternative?

Other hard questions remain. Did Beza preserve Calvin's true doctrine? There is not too much room to doubt that such was his intention, but did he unintentionally distort that doctrine in the manner in which he chose to articulate and present Calvin's teaching? Manetsch concurs with those who say that while Beza "modified and clarified aspects of Calvin's thought through the use of Aristotelian categories and logic," he "did not alter the religious and biblical center of his mentor's theology" (2).

The big question here has to do with whether or not the use of such Aristotelian *scholastic* categories (however educationally motivated) is compatible with the actual starting point of the Calvinistic reformation. Such questions are much closer to the focus of Jeffrey Mallinson's *Faith, Reason, and Revelation in Theodore Beza*. Mallinson does not ignore Beza's context. He confronts us with a Beza struggling on all fronts. Beza's contribution to reformed historiography was not born out of wild optimism but out of beleaguered and perplexing circumstances (195-99). Amid many trials, he advocated a broad and generous view of the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* (143-206).

Mallinson provides us with an extended discussion of the scope and cast of Beza's doctrinal writings. In a succession of carefully formulated

chapters, he considers such topics as revelation, reason, nature, and faith. All of these inevitably raise the question of the author's outlook on such issues. He distinguishes between three contemporary schools: (1) Barth and Neo-Orthodoxy; (2) "Presuppositionalism," which he associates with Kuyper as well as Cornelius Van Til; and (3) the "Reformed Epistemology" of Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (6-7). For Mallinson, writers of the neo-orthodox school have proved themselves un-historical in their polemical use of the sources (8-9). By contrast, the "presuppositionalists" and "reformed epistemologists" have erred more by what they have been disposed to omit (9-10). Basically, at least, I think that he is right on all three accounts. We are not entitled to sweep aside the scholastic tendencies in Calvin himself. Mallinson is rightly wary of anachronism (207). Mallinson says that he wishes "simply to contribute to a reappraisal of the history of religious epistemology in the Reformed tradition" (10).

Nevertheless, Mallinson is very much of the school of Richard A. Muller when it comes to interpreting both Calvin and his reformed successors (14 f., 113, 209 f.). Muller has virtually come to dominate the field, with works such as *Christ and the Decree* (1986), *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 volumes (1987-2003), *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (2000), and *After Calvin* (2003). Muller's prime thesis has been that the earlier historiography, such as John S. Bray's *Theodore Beza's Doctrine of Predestination* (1975), both overstated and misrepresented the differences between Calvin and his scholastic successors. Following Muller, Mallinson insists that the "differences between Calvin and the Calvinists are often exaggerated," there being "little in the orthodox Reformed writers that was not already licit or implicit in Calvin" (14-15).

That there was a development from Calvin to later reformed writers is hardly disputable. It is the character, import, and significance of the development that is at issue. And when reflecting on the historical process, one is foolish to infer intentions from outcomes. Certainly Beza did not *intend* to betray the Calvinian legacy, but did the way in which he articulated that legacy have that *effect*, at least to some degree? Arguably, he conceded more than he actually intended. Living at a

time when it had become apparent that both Catholic and Protestant had failed to convince each other, Beza confronted the accompanying rising tide of skepticism (81-98). This skepticism helps to explain his turn towards objectivism and his tendency to emphasize the “rationality of belief,” even as he sought to insert various safeguards in respect of “natural revelation” (101). Within such a context, we find Beza defending Aristotle in correspondence with Peter Ramus (58), utilizing a general scholasticism when he thought it elucidated right doctrine and opposing scholasticism when it was seen to obscure the truth (63-9).

Mallinson’s reflections bring him to the following conclusions:

... (1) the progression from rhetoric to academic formalization encouraged a concern for the objective aspect of religious belief; (2) in Beza’s attempt to defend the teaching of his predecessor, he often found subjective approaches to the knowledge of God ineffectual in politics and academic *disputatio*; (3) his appreciation for academic disciplines in general encouraged the incorporation of epistemic considerations in the treatment of theology; (4) through his belief in the pedagogical value of dialectic, Beza sought to incorporate a logical approach to the formalization of dogma without resorting to rationalism; (5) affirming the theological use of reason within its own boundaries...Beza affirmed the occasional value of providing evidential arguments for Christian belief. (80)

Beza accepted philosophy but repudiated *pagan* philosophy. However, he seems to have found the means of acquiring features of the latter by adopting his own version of the *great tradition*. (124-32).

Where Mallinson’s reflections suggest the influences of Muller, we need to be very alert. Muller’s prodigious researches are based on a requirement not merely that we distinguish between doctrinal content and a [scholastic] mode of presentation but that we separate the two. The scholastic method of doctrinal formulation, with its use of Aristotelian categories and

distinctions, is seen as being in some sense a neutral vehicle of expression. The method is said not to distort the doctrine that the method is used to articulate. Clearly, some problems attach to this viewpoint.

We should grant that many of the reformers – even of the first generation – were steeped in the scholastic method. And here we are wise to see the *via antiqua* and *via moderna* as interacting strands within a single broad tradition. But having made this point, we should not use it as a basis for foreclosing discussion about the relationship—and I would venture to say, antithetical relationship—between scholasticism and the best insights of the Protestant reformers. Like the rest of us, the reformers were not paragons of complete consistency. When we are confronted with the reformers’ scholastic manner, we should not fixate on that to the extent that we ignore the deeper tendency of their thought that led *away* from scholasticism. This, it may be argued, is what Muller and his followers are somewhat inclined to neglect.

Irrespective of whether or not this neglect is the intention, the work of the Muller school can have the effect of legitimizing (or possibly we should say re-legitimizing) Protestant, and especially reformed, scholasticism. Mallinson’s willingness to follow Muller draws him into Muller’s implied re-legitimation of the very scholasticism that is under investigation. Moreover, the work of the Muller school may have the same effect as scholasticism itself. It can give us a picture that seems to be cut and dried. Everything is neatly accounted for within the conceptual framework. As a result, when the Muller school has done its work, it can have the effect of curtailing our researches and inhibiting further reflection. By following Muller, Mallinson’s approach tends to be congruent with that of the “Reformed Epistemology” standpoint, which has its own manner of drawing upon the “great tradition,” although the latter often seems to presume forms of Platonic realism, rather than call us to be the disciples of Jesus Christ.

Of course, Muller and his followers are certainly not wholly wrong. The best work has been based on massive researches into difficult texts. Certainly, to depict the first reformers as untouched or unshaped by the centuries of

scholastic philosophy that preceded them is to indulge in an a-historical fantasy. But we should not fall into the trap of thinking that the Reformation, even as we recognize its continuities with late medieval thought, was next to nothing—a mere ecclesiastical hiccup. The truth is not only that the thought of the Reformation is incomprehensible apart from late medieval scholasticism but also that both Luther and Calvin at their best exceeded the limitations of their immediate circumstances and historical context. Central to their viewpoint was not only their understanding of the sovereignty of God but also their understanding of the God who is Sovereign. The case can be made for saying that at crucial points both Luther and Calvin broke from the Platonic view of the divine in their understanding of God's person and relationship with his creation, including his revelation of himself to us. (Cf. Mallinson, 112, 155). At their best, Luther and especially Calvin point us away from Augustine and Aquinas towards much earlier understandings.

Nevertheless, the present historiographical tendency is to under appreciate the radicality of both Luther and Calvin in relation to their immediate successors and would-be followers. The truth is that unlike subsequent reformed scholastics, Calvin bowed before certain boundaries. He honored the Creator/creatures distinction. He acknowledged our limitations as creatures. As Heiko Oberman has observed, Calvin "was careful to stay in the vestibule outside of God's council chamber" (See Oberman, *The Two Reformations* [2003], esp. at 139-142, cf. 32-43). In scholasticism, reason sought to enter that chamber. The truth is that scholasticism resulted in a certain formalistic aridity that evoked its own reaction. By the later seventeenth century, it was driving believers into pietism, which in turn prepared the ground for the evangelical revivalism of the eighteenth century, with its strongly anti-intellectual tendencies. A Protestant rationalism eventually provoked a pietistic anti-intellectual reaction, the consequences of which remain with us today.

The two volumes here reviewed have their limitations. Manetsch does not purport to offer us a full biography. It is to be hoped that he is contemplating one. Mallinson does not cross-compare

Calvin and Beza as thoroughly as we might wish. He does not seem sufficiently aware of the criticisms of scholasticism lodged by Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, as also articulated by writers such as Roy A. Clouser in *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (1991). Mallinson's representation of "Amsterdam Neo-Calvinists" as "hostile to secular knowledge" (238) betrays more than one serious misunderstanding of the Kuyparian standpoint, and arguably weakens the impact of his conclusions. This mis-characterization confirms that Mallinson has not broken out of the circle of the kind of thinking that he describes. His affinity to Muller has not helped him here. If by "secular" Mallinson means religiously neutral non-theological knowledge, then certainly Vollenhoven, Dooyeweerd, and Clouser deny the possibility—not of non-theological knowledge but of its religious neutrality. The scholastic mode of discourse was not neutral, as Mallinson's provocative concluding remarks concerning "emerging Enlightenment thinking" serve to confirm (236). If Beza carries us in that direction, he does so because at a foundational level he does depart significantly from the standpoint of Calvin (cf. Clouser, *Myth*, 89-90, 185-87). Nevertheless, both volumes are stimulating and informative, and constitute valuable and welcome additions to the literature on Beza in English. Both should find a place in the libraries of serious students of the Reformation.

The year 2005 marks the four hundredth anniversary of the death of Beza. The April 2005 "Calvin Studies Society Colloquium," to be held at the Meeter Center, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, is to be on "Calvin and Beza." In the fall of 2005 an "International Symposium on Theodore Beza" is to be held in Geneva, Switzerland. We have good reason to expect that Beza will not be neglected in the future as he has been in the past. These volumes make important contributions to this welcome development. We cannot understand what Calvinism became without an appreciation of Theodore Beza.