

## Morality After Calvin: Theodore Beza's Christian Censor and Reformed Ethics

**Kirk M. Summers**

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While philosophical ethics as an independent discipline is an ancient project, theological ethics started to take some independent shape in the twelfth century. It was Peter Abelard who first wrote an ethical treatise in that spirit, thereby fostering centuries of Christian reflection about the specification of human actions. During and after the Reformation, this impulse was continued in various ways. Melancthon's ethical treatises, as well as his commentaries on the ethical works of Aristotle and Cicero, are the best example of the early Lutheran development of this field. Among the Reformed, a substantive contribution to moral reflection has been identified as a typical mark of the second and third generation after the Reformation. A few studies have been published on that general phenomenon, but until now only one major monograph—Christoph Strohm's work on Danaeus—offered an in-depth study of one of the early Reformed moralists. Kirk M. Summers's study of Beza is thus a welcome contribution to a developing field.

The book starts with a useful overview of the state of studies on Beza. Summers then uses Amandus Polanus to show how these early Reformed thinkers developed a distinct notion of ethics as a relatively independent field of study within theology. It is clear that *reformatio doctrinae* and *reformatio vitae* were not conceived as successive stages (as if only movements of further reformation carried with them moral reform). Both sides of the coin were the object of practical concern and intellectual consideration from the beginning of the Protestant movement.

Summers's work does not attempt to cover the totality of Beza's moral thought, but rather focuses on a series of poems published in 1591 under the title of *Cato Censorius Christianus*. Both for its subject and its Latin, it was a work for advanced students. And if that was the case for its sixteenth-century readers, it is almost inaccessible for contemporary students. But Summers is as generous as he is learned. Indeed, the book is not only an introduction and detailed exposition of this extraordinary collection of moralizing poems. Summers explores the relationship between the *Cato Censorius* and the rest of Beza's writing on ethics, and he shows how Beza stands *vis-à-vis* contemporary Reformed ethicists like Polanus, Danaeus, and Vermigli. He also takes great care in discussing the way in which Beza's work is rooted in the practice of the Reformed community: each chapter includes discussion of the way in which the moral topic of each poem was treated by Geneva's company of pastors as they strove to reform discipline in the city. Summers does an exemplary job in exploring the parallels between the parade of sinners dealt with in the *Cato* and the kinds of cases discussed by the Genevan consistory.

Occasionally Summers carves out the more distinctively Protestant aspects of Beza's position. Where the medieval tradition had identified heresy as a fundamental sin, for instance, Beza is a good example of a Protestant approach for which blasphemy instead becomes the main concept when dealing with wrong descriptions of divinity. As Summers

argues, this emphasis reveals a conception for which the ground of moral life is living in the truth of God. But this is a work for everybody interested in the Protestant and Catholic traditions of moral reflection in early modernity. Beza's *Cato* is part of a series of attempts at Christianizing the wisdom of Cato, and that tendency was present among both Catholic and Protestant authors. The *disticha Catonis* were extremely popular in the Renaissance, and Summers identifies at least three authors besides Beza whose discussions of Cato made him a *christianus* in the title of their works. But what does such a Christianization mean? The totality of Beza's arguments in the collection of poems are based solely on the natural law, and for this reason Summers's work is also a contribution to the recent discussion about natural law in the Reformed tradition. But as he well shows, this understanding of natural law put a strong emphasis on the blindness of corrupted nature and on the need of discipline and union with Christ if we are to be conformed to his image.

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