ETHICS IN REFORMED ORTHODOXY

Luca Baschera

One merit of recent scholarship on Reformed Orthodoxy has been to reject the old bias according to which the gradual development of a consistent body of Reformed divinity between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries amounted to the formation of a speculative, rigid, even dead theology, as much detached from practice as from the biblical and dynamic spirit that had animated the Reformation movement.\(^1\) Rather, analyses of the sources reveals a tendency among Reformed orthodox divines to view theology as a goal-directed discipline, the goal being human salvation.\(^2\) The knowledge of God’s truth obtained through sound theology did not to remain confined to the realm of *theoria*, but had practical consequences, directing the life of the church as well as of the individual believer. It is not a coincidence, then, that among Reformed orthodox divines theology was defined as either a mixed speculative and practical discipline or a purely practical one. The first view was held by such authors as Peter Martyr Vermigli, Francis Turretin, and Johannes Maccovius; the second by Bartholomäus Keckermann, Amandus Polanus, William Ames, and Johannes Hoornbeeck.\(^3\) Although these two views led to some shifts in the presentation of Christian doctrine, all Reformed orthodox theologians acknowledged and defended the practical relevance of theology. For them, theory and practice stood in organic relationship to each other: neither can Christian practice but ground in sound doctrine, nor can any doctrine be sound unless it contributes to mold the character according to biblical standards.

Against this background it can be no surprise that from the last decades of the sixteenth century onwards ethics-related literature proliferated in the Reformed world. Rather amazing is, however, that no modern scholar has yet attempted to give a comprehensive presentation of the history

---

of Reformed ethics in the era of Orthodoxy. The last decades have seen insightful studies on single authors—above all, Lambert Daneau and Bartholomäus Keckermann⁴—but the only comprehensive historical sketch of Reformed ethics remains Alexander Schweizer’s *Die Entwicklung des Moralsystems in der reformirten Kirche* (Zurich, 1849). Although Schweizer shows in this work—as in all his historical writings—an excellent knowledge of the relevant sources, it is understandable that so old a piece of scholarship would necessitate several integrations and revisions. This brief chapter cannot answer such expectations; instead, some hints are presented in order to facilitate future explorations of this rather virgin territory.

First, it needs to be shown how Reformed authors presented their ethics; that is to recognize the genres of Reformed ethical literature. These seem to have been basically three: dogmatic works containing a section devoted to ethics, manuals of Christian ethics, and works on casuistry.⁵ Second, some eminent examples of each of these groups is examined, looking for similarities in structure and content among authors in order to gain a first insight into the contents of Reformed orthodox ethics.

This chapter examines only works dealing with theological ethics, without, by contrast, considering works on ethics which, although written by Reformed authors, present this discipline as a merely philosophical one.⁶

**The Treatment of Ethics within Major Dogmatic Works**

Reformed theological systems in the era of Orthodoxy were often organized according to a series of topics (*loci*), which usually began with a doctrine of Scripture and ended with a treatment of the Last Things. Such presentations of Christian doctrine contained, of course, a *locus de lege* in

---


⁵ Because of the introductory character of this chapter, only a general overview will be presented on manuals of Christian ethics. A host of smaller moral treatises on single themes was published in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries; unfortunately, little scholarly attention has been paid to them. See Strohm, *Ethik im frühen Calvinismus*, 3–4.

⁶ To this group of Reformed philosophical works on ethics belong, among others, Bartholomäus Keckermann, *Systema ethicæ tribus libris adornatum* (Hanau, 1607) and Franco Burgersdijk, *Idea philosophiae moralis* (Leiden, 1623).