

Oliver K. Olson

**Matthias Flacius and the Survival of Luther's Reform**

Zagreb, Bogoslovni institut, 2010, pg. 528

In February, on the occasion of the 490<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the great Croatian Reformer, Matthias Flacius Illyricus, a Croatian translation of the book, *Matthias Flacius and the Survival of Luther's Reform* of one of the most prominent live experts on Flacius, the American writer, Oliver K. Olson saw the light. Thus, it contributed on its own way to the preparation of the Croatian intellectual and religious public for marking and celebrating the far more greater anniversary in ten years. Originally the book was printed in English language in 2002. by the German printing house Harrassowitz Verlag from Wiesbaden, while for the editing of the Croatian translation we may give gratitude to the spouses Ljubinka (for translating) and Stanko (for the historical-theological redaction) Jambrek and the Bogoslovni institut from Zagreb as the publisher, as well as the Flacius' home town Labin (impersonated by its mayor Tulio Demetlika), as the co-publisher.

Contemporary researchers of Flacius' live and work, are very familiar with the name of the author. It can be said that Oliver K. Olson has devoted almost his entire scientific career to studying Flacius. Now retired as eighty three years old man, he began his academic formation by studying theology at St. Olaf College and Luther Seminary in America. Then he studied German language at the University of Minnesota in America and at Goethe institute in Germany, as well as Croatian language at Yale Summer Language School in America. He obtained his doctoral degree in 1966., at the University in Hamburg with the dissertation about Flacius (published on English language in Hamburg the same year under the title *The 'Missa Illyrica' and the liturgical thought of Flacius Illyricus*. This was followed by a successful academic career; he lectured at Luther Seminary, St. Olaf College, Lutheran Theological Faculty in Philadelphia, and Marquette University in Milwaukee. In several occasions he did concise researches at Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel, Germany of the books and manuscripts of the early new era, especially Flacius' works, in which the said library is abundant. In 1986. Olson has started new edition of the scientific journal *Lutheran Quarterly*, which had been edited from 1949. to 1977. He was a general and executive editor for ten years, and after that a president (of the editorial council) of the journal. It is obvious from the said that we are speaking of a serious scholar whose work and opinion should be given high attention.

Concerning the reception of Olson's publications in Croatia, the most

important thing to say is that till now only two of his works are published on Croatian language: the brochure *Baldo Lupetina* (the City of Labin and the Peoples Museum of Labin, 2003) and the article “Mattias Flacius and the ‘Bible Institute’ in Urach” (*Kairos*, 2/2008). There are two of his articles published in Croatia on English language: “Matthias Flacius Faces the Netherland’s Revolt” in *Matija Vlačić Ilirik*, the collection of papers from the international symposium “Matija Vlačić Ilirik” held in Labin, 2001. [published in Labin, 2004.], and “Otfred: The Most Important Publication” in “Matija Vlačić Ilirik [II], the collection of papers from the Second international symposium “Matija Vlačić Ilirik”, held in Labin, 2006. [published in Labin 2008.]

The book “Matthias Flacius and the Survival of Luther’s Reform” actually is the first of two planned volumes of the broad biography of Flacius. The first part comprises the period from his birth in 1520. to the placement as the professor of New Testament at the University in Jena, 1557. The other is assumed as a continuance of that biography and it will comprise the period until Flacius’ death in Frankfurt on Main, 1575. Its title will be *Matthias Flacius and the Struggle for Freedom of the Church*, on which the author rapidly works.

As the title itself implies, Flacius had a significant role in the context of the survival of Luther’s reform. The thesis of the book is that, he not only plaid a significant, but rather, a crucial role in the survival of the Reformation in Germany after Luther’s death in 1546. By stirring discontentment and protest among the theologians, various intellectuals, political rulers (dukes) and among the wide population because of the imposed compromised solutions that would bring the Lutherans back in the wing of the Roman-catholic church, he influenced the Elector Maurice from Saxony who provided by the means of his political authority for the Reformation in Germany to be saved. Meanwhile, as the product of his own endeavor to present the Reformation teaching argumentatively (and prove it) as a legitimate continuator of the Christian Church, presented and attested as in the new testament writings, as well as (by the “witnesses of the truth”) through his entire fifteen-centuries-long history, Flacius wrote, edited and published so many significant publications (altogether more than two hundred), that he can rightfully be considered as the father of church history and theological and philosophical hermeneutics.

At the very beginning of the book the author gives a broad “Introduction” (about ten pages), in which he offers a concise reflection on the recent researches about Flacius’ importance in the context of the Reformation, as well as in the history of science in general. Furthermore, he explains how insufficiently this great man of the reformation thought was studied and is studied in his homeland Croatia, listing some of the rear Croatian scholars (forgetting for example, I. Kordić) that have studied Flacius more seriously (or still do). He also asserts that,

considering the historical importance of Flacius, the contemporary editions of his great works are a “delayed debt” of the science toward him. At the end of the “Introduction” the author lists a whole range of different experts, librarians, individuals and institutions that had helped him in the research and the completing of the book. Olson has divided the main part of the book into four major parts, concerning the places or the areas where Flacius lived and worked (Venice, Wittenberg, Magdeburg and Jena), following the chronological order. In the first part of the book he explains Flacius’ ancestry and childhood in Labin, education in Venice (since his 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> years), then the departure to Basel, and at the end to Tübingen, where he continued his education. In the second part of the book the author has presented Flacius’ life in Wittenberg, first of all as a student, and then as the professor of Hebrew language; his relationship with Luther and Melanchthon, the beginnings of his scientific work, but as well as the struggle against the compromised Interim, which Charles the V. tried to impose upon the Lutherans in 1548. The third part of the book discusses the period when after abandoning his professorship on the university in Wittenberg (because of his disagreement with Melanchthon’s compromise with the religious politics), he moved to Magdeburg and together with his followers organized a religious, ideological, but also a military resistance against the Interim. At the same time, this was his most productive period (as an author), when the *Magdeburg Centuries* and the *Catalog of the Witnesses of the Truth* were written. The fourth part of the book is very short (as the first one – about the Venetian period) and it discusses Flacius’ moving and his family to Jena, where he acquired a job at the university as a professor of the New Testament, became general superintendent and continued his uncompromising struggle for the survival of Luther’s reform. At the end of the book Olson offers a list of (189) Flacius’ works, than publications published in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (connected to the theme of this book), as well as a list of publications connected to Flacius that were published since 1600 on onward, ending with the list of the used manuscripts. The book is also equipped with an index of the names, while the editor of the Croatian edition has enriched this translation with a short bibliographical note about the author of this book, approximating him thereby to the Croatian audience.

The international reviews has reflected itself mostly positively on this book. One can find a few dominantly negative reviews of Olson’s book. Such one is the review of Irene Backus, who raises objections toward the author’s work describing it as illegible, unscientific, unoriginal (repeats already known facts), incompleteness (especially concerning the list of Flacius’ published works), one sidedness (Nathan Montover affirms the same, only on a more forbearing way) and selectiveness that displays favoritism toward Flacius. However, most reviews agree upon the fact that the book has more positive sides, than negative. Thus,

everyone commends the rich documentary evidence of the book (concerning both the primary and the secondary sources), stating that it is written in a nice “elegant stile” (Nathan Rein), that “the complex subject he deals with is skillfully elaborated [...] along with abundance of fascinating details” (Scott Dixon), and that, it actually represents an “obligatory reading for all future scholars that will engage with the period of the second generation of reformers” (Luka Ilić).

Certainly one can state a few of the objections critics lay against the author. However, it should not be overlooked the enormous effort that the author has invested in collecting and processing scientifically the vast number of primary, as well as relevant secondary sources in order to produce the first exhaustive biography of Flacius on English language. Although his text is sometimes difficult to understand and follow (therefore, commendation to the Croatian translator for the excellent job!), and it contains incomplete notes (in terms of not knowing the origin of a certain source) or they are missing, it must be acknowledged that Olson has written a very interesting, richly illustrated and excellently documented biography that meet the conditions of the academic (and the aesthetic) criteria. Since the main hero of the book is very controversial historic figure, crucial for the survival of the Lutheranism, a certain proportion of subjectivity and sympathy toward the author (a Lutheran himself) must be justified, given the fact that it is the very reason why this book attained an additional religiously inspiring dimension for the Christian readers as successors of the Reformation.

Although this book is not a first biography of Flacius (available) on Croatian language, it has filled a tremendous gap in the contemporary biographic presentation of his life and work. In the anticipation of its second volume, we congratulate the author on the accomplished success, and we heartily recommend this engaging and stimulating work to the audience.

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Translated by Ljubinka Jambreč

Martin Luther

### **The Large and Small Catechisms**

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Martin Luther's The Small Catechism is closely connected with Croatian Protestant publishing since the first edition printed by Urach Publishers in 1561 was *Catechism: One little book in which very necessary and prudent lessons and articles about the true Christian faith can be found, with short explanations written for young people and common folk. Also a sermon on the virtues and fruits of the Christian faith / by Stipan Istrianiin with the help of good Croats, interpreted for*