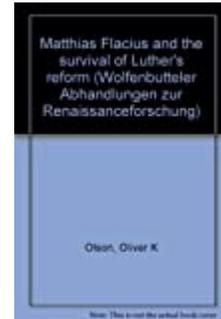




Oliver K. Olson. *Matthias Flacius and the survival of Luther's reform.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2002. 432 S. + 72 Abb. EUR 99.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-447-04404-2.



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Published on H-German (July, 2003)

The German Reformation's South European Hero

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For the past two decades or so, interest in the German Reformation has increasingly focused on the phenomenon known as “confessionalization,” which began anywhere between 1530 and 1555. After the *Wildwuchs* of the 1520s, when the Reformation movement spread rapidly and uncontrollably, confessionalization represents the institutionalization and crystallization of the previous decades’ changes. Against the exuberance and intensity of the early Reform movement, the later developments suggest a different flavor: consolidation of authority, creation of an orthodox consensus, the “settling down” of the Reform.

Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520-1575), born the same year that Martin Luther published his three great Reformation treatises, belongs to this period. Illyricus has always been a troubling figure in the landscape of the late Reformation. As a professor at Wittenberg and Jena as well as a staggeringly prolific religious writer, he loomed over many of the doctrinal controversies that plagued the confessionalization period. Yet he never succeeded in fitting comfortably into a party, institution or

school of thought. He was a Croatian. And according to Olson’s account, the Protestant Germans among whom he worked—and who saw the Reformation as their movement—never let him forget his origins. Moreover, his mastery of German was never perfect, and his manners were Italian. He played a key role in the establishment of Lutheran orthodoxy, but usually seemed an outsider—a thorn in the side of Lutheran divines and princes. He had a knack for antagonizing powerful people. In the last fifteen years of his life, he moved five times. Melancthon, who headed a long list of Flacius’s detractors, almost certainly had the Croat in mind when he lamented the *rabies theologorum*. Though he was a major figure during the period of Lutheran confessionalization, scholars have tended not to know what to do with Flacius.

This is not so for Olson. For him, “Flacius” is confessional history-writing in the grand style, focusing—unabashedly—on the influence of a single Great Man. In Olson’s view, Flacius’ importance for the German Reformation cannot be overstated: he was responsible for the “survival of Luther’s reform.” While the author makes

numerous subtler points along the way, this, his main idea, is unmistakable and uncomplicated. He wants to show that Flacius' stubborn and tireless refusal to compromise on doctrine or practice saved the Reformation, virtually single-handedly. He was a true Reformation hero, second only to Luther. Little has been written in English on Flacius, and Olson's work is the first book-length treatment.[1] He has done a great service in writing it.

The book is intended to be useful to scholars and accessible to pastors, students, and interested non-specialists. Olson writes in an elegant, well-crafted narrative style, with voluminous primary and secondary documentation. He gives his account a straightforward chronological structure, opening with Flacius' "childhood in the sun" in the Venetian territory of Istria and following him as far as the 1557 imperial religious colloquy in Worms. (He plans a second volume to cover the remaining eighteen years of Flacius's life.) The book is divided into four unequal sections, corresponding to the four major stations of Flacius' life up to 1557—Venice, Wittenberg, Magdeburg and Jena; the middle two take up about 80 percent of the text. Understandably in the case of a writer as prolific as Flacius, Olson organizes most of the text around his subject's literary production. Flacius emerged on the public scene at age twenty-six, around the time the Schmalkaldic War began, and thereupon began to churn out tract after tract. Olson's bibliography lists 190 printed works. Among these are the *Catalogus Testium Veritatis* (*Catalogue of Witnesses to the Truth*), an account of the Reformation's spiritual forebears over the course of church history; the *Clavis Scripturae*, a path-breaking investigation of biblical hermeneutics; and the monumental Protestant church history known as the "Magdeburg Centuries" (which Flacius helped edit but did not write), as well as innumerable pamphlets. He was active as a writer and editor both alone and in collaboration, as a collector of manuscripts and prints, and as a project coordinator for the "Centuries." Thus Olson gives us, *inter alia*, chapters organized around Flacius' writings against the Augsburg Interim and its successor documents in Saxony, his role in the propaganda campaign during the siege of Magdeburg (1550-51), the *Catalogus* and its influence, the "Centuries," and the bitter pamphlet wars of the years leading up to the Formula of Concord (1577).

While we learn a great deal about his intellectual and religious life, other sides of Flacius remain obscure. We know, for example, that he was married and had several children, but we know next to nothing about his emo-

tional life outside the context of the religious struggles that consumed him. Olson rarely uses personal letters as sources. He does, however, ascribe great prominence to the imprisonment, torture and eventual martyrdom, at the hands of the Roman Inquisition, of Flacius' Venetian relative Baldo Lupetino, "il piu gran Luterano del mondo" (p. 25). Lupetino, who had been one of Flacius' early religious mentors, was arrested in 1543 and not executed until thirteen years later; Olson weaves the continuing story of his plight into the biography as an ongoing concern for Flacius.

Olson clearly identifies strongly with his subject, and this produces some of the book's more disconcerting peculiarities. Olson has a tendency to act as Flacius' champion. Olson makes a point of exonerating Flacius from unfair accusations leveled against him in past centuries—charges of which most readers will probably be entirely unaware. Is Flacius remembered as the author of vicious *ad hominem* attacks against his former Wittenberg colleagues? On the contrary: "Flacius avoided personal polemics," while his opponents produced "scornful and abusive writings" (p. 182). What about the so-called "cutter flacianus," the fabled knife with which he is supposed to have defaced manuscripts during his search for historical documentation? A fabrication "hatched at the court at Dresden to defame him" (p. 269). The book is all praise and no blame for its subject. The closest Olson comes to criticism is when he admits Flacius' occasional misattribution of sources in his historical writing—but even here he is quick to fend off the charge of sloppy research.

Olson has no qualms about introducing a confessional bias into the work; at times he seems to carry sixteenth-century polemics into the present. Flacius' version of the Reformation apparently represents, for Olson, the single correct religion. Accordingly the polemics and battles of the mid-sixteenth century should be understood as battles for the truth. Prominent throughout the work is the irenic-minded Melancthon, Flacius' foil and main opponent after 1548, and Olson repeatedly condemns him—as a compromiser of the movement, a betrayer of his own conscience, and a toady to the princes. He has harsh words as well for Kaspar Schwenkfeld and Andreas Osiander, with whom Flacius clashed in the 1550s, and he makes a point of endorsing the use of Luther's pejorative term *Schw rmer* (enthusiast, fanatic) to describe both men (p. 291). Even more striking are the several references to Pope John Paul II's apologies for the "sins" of the Catholic Church. Olson quotes papal addresses of 1982 and 1994 referring to "tensions, errors and excesses" of Catholic history and responds that

“[i]n order to deal with the current pope’s appeals for forgiveness one must know for what forgiveness is being sought”—and he proceeds to seek the answer to this very question. He thus uses the Pope’s own words to justify a faintly muckracking, righteous tone that may disturb Catholic readers. Indeed, he continues, any assessment of Flacius that does not squarely confront these Catholic “errors and excesses” risks distortion. “The frequently-expressed opinion that he was mad or irrational is not tenable if one considers his context among the ‘excesses’ of the Counter-Reformation,” particularly Lupetino’s execution (p. 18f.). By implication, if Flacius showed bitterness and harshness in defense of Lutheranism, it was justified by Catholic atrocities.

Olson’s theological certainty may alienate a few readers. However, his skill in shedding light on arcane doctrinal points is impressive, and his insights are profound. He is especially good in treating the implications of the Augsburg Interim, and Flacius’ opposition to it. Olson draws attention to Flacius’ alarm at attempts to re-Catholicize Protestant liturgical life in the wake of the Schmalkaldic War. To please the Emperor, more compromise-ready Protestants were often willing to make seemingly minor changes in practice, providing that the core dogmas—especially justification—were left in place. Flacius, on the other hand, recognized that the supposedly neutral area of liturgy was precisely the Reform’s most vulnerable point and refused to concede anything. His best-known dictum, *Nihil est adiaphoron in casu confessionis et scandali* (roughly, “there are no indifferent matters when it comes to confessing the faith or giving offense”) became axiomatic for those who resisted seemingly innocuous liturgical compromises, for exam-

ple, the use of Catholic-looking vestments for Protestant ministers.[2] As Olson puts it, “there is an intrinsic meaning in ceremonies” that prohibits their alteration willy-nilly in response to political currents (p. 155). This discussion, along with a similarly lucid account of the majoristic and synergistic controversies, will help readers who find the doctrinal struggles leading up to 1577 too thorny and opaque to comprehend.

This is a beautiful book, richly illustrated, sumptuously printed, and fortified with a wealth of documentation, though it suffers from far too many typographical errors. This is classic confessional biography. It will be useful and enjoyable for anyone seeking to understand the religious thought of a Lutheran hard-liner of the mid-sixteenth century, provided one is willing to swallow a small dose of confessional chauvinism.

Notes:

[1]. The standard biography in German is still Wilhelm Preger’s *Matthias Flacius Illyricus und seine Zeit*. Erlangen: T. Blaessing, 1859-61; rpt. Hildesheim: G. Olms & Nieukoop, 1964.

[2]. This same phrase would later be revived under National Socialism by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church.

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Citation: Nathan Rein. Review of Olson, Oliver K., *Matthias Flacius and the survival of Luther’s reform*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2003.

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