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Metaphysics and Theory of Knowledge
in *Paralipomena dialectices*.

Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520-1575)

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1.

Life and Works

A disciple of Luther, tireless writer, philologist, theologian and philosopher – Matthias Flacius Illyricus (Latin: Matthias Flacius Illyricus; Croatian: Matija Vlačić Ilirik), discredited and admired, forgotten and rediscovered, is described in Croatian history as one of the greatest exponents of Renaissance culture. Despite this, until the nineties of the twentieth century there were very few authors who have committed themselves to preserve his work. But Flacius' unfortunate destiny in the areas he comes from is quite understandable, for the simple fact that one of the main features of Croatian culture was its support to the Catholic world, and a Protestant theologian could only be dangerous – not only for Catholicism, but also for the identity of the people. If we also add the fact that, in 1514, Pope Leo X defined the Croatian people as a *“Scutum saldissimum et antemurale*

Christianitatis”¹ for its resistance against the invasions of the Ottoman Empire, it is not surprising that Flacius’ work has not been taken into much consideration for almost 400 years².

1.1 Biography

Matthias Flacius Illyricus was born in Albona, in Istria, on 3 March 1520 from Andrea Vlacich Francovich, who came from a noble family, and Giacomina di Bartolomeo Luciani. His name was latinized (Matthias Flacius), and the complement Illyricus was added with the aim of emphasizing his origins. It refers to the province of Illyria,

1. “A shield and door of Christianity”. On this issue cf. Jorga, N., *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches*, Frankfurt am Main 1990; Franičević, M., *Povijest hrvatske književnosti*, Zagreb 1974; Schwarz, K., *Turci kao protestantska nada*, Forum, XXVII., n. 5-6, JAZU Zagreb 1989; *Zbornik radova s međunarodnog skupa Matija Vlačić Ilirik*, Labin 2004.

2. What Franjo Zdenko says in his afterword to *Hermeneutika Matije Vlacica Ilirika* – the translation of Ivan Kordić’s PhD thesis published in 1992, is quite interesting: “According to the Croatian interpretation of Flacius’ work, there is not much inspiration for young researchers, considering the experience of Bilokapić and Kordić”, in I. Kordić, *Hermeneutika Matije Vlačića Ilirika*, Hrvatsko filozofsko društvo, 1992., p. 180. And Kordić also says: “If a young Croatian theologian decides to write a dissertation on Flacius, in the hope to find ecumenical traces in his work, he/she will not find much on Flacius’ work in the Croatian theology of neo-scholastic inspiration. The only starting point is the Protestant and Catholic foreign literature” in *Ivi.*, p. 179. Particularly useful on this topic: Zenko, F., *Recepcija Vlačića u Hrvatskoj kao ideologizirajuće posredovanje sa sadašnjim životom*, in *Filozofska istraživanja*, 43, 1991.

today's Istria, that Flacius left at the age of 19. In Venice he received an education, which was mainly humanistic, from Johannes Baptista Egnatius, a well-known humanist, and it was in that period that his uncle, Baldo Lupetino, a Lutheran Franciscan, convinced him to complete his studies beyond the Alps, spending first one year in Basel, then in Tübingen and finally in Wittenberg where he met, in 1541, Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon. Meeting the most famous representatives of Reformation was one of the most important moments in his life.

Flacius will become the most radical defender of Luther's doctrine, thus coming into conflict with Melanchthon who, over time, had become ready for many compromises with the Catholic world. In 1548, the Augsburg Interim was signed in the city from which it took its name by Charles V and the Protestants, with the aim of ending the clashes between Protestants and Catholics. Many Protestants supported this kind of solution, changing their radical ideas and approaching the Catholic world. This group includes Melanchthon, but definitely not Flacius. He decided to move from Wittenberg to Magdeburg where, under his guidance, from 1549 to 1557, resistance to the Augsburg Interim was organised for the first time. No kind of doctrinal compromise with the Catholic Church – Flacius was clear. His literary activity flourished in Magdeburg, where he began working on his majestic project, *The Magdeburg*

Centuries, repeatedly subverting Melanchthon's positions.

In 1557, he was hired as a professor at the University of Jena, but only four years later he was fired for the famous debate on original sin. It came into conflict with the theologian Victorin Strigel when he adopted a position on sin as not being an accident of human nature, but involved in its substance. This assertion led him to ruin and to his dismissal, because there were only two ways out of this kind of reasoning: the creator of that substance was Satan or the greatest good – God – was the creator of sin. Neither of them seemed acceptable and Flacius could no longer teach.

The following period was characterised by his stay in Regensburg, where he lived from 1562 to 1566. It was in that period that he wrote his monumental work, *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae*, where he states that the pure word of the Bible is the true source of divine thought and any kind of Church mediation could only lead to a departure from the true message of God. The only intermediary is the Holy Spirit, which gives individuals the ability to understand, without misunderstanding them, the Holy Scriptures. Thanks to this work, Flacius is defined by the philosophers of the twentieth century (Dilthey and Gadamer) as the founder of hermeneutics.

He spent the following period of his life, from 1567 until 1573, in Strasbourg (Strassburg), where he began to write his last great work – *Glossa*

compendiaria in Novum Testamentum. Only two years later, on 11 March 1575, he died in Frankfurt³.

1.2 Works

Matthias Flacius Illyricus literary works, written by Ante Bilokapic, is a part of the dissertation discussed at “Antonianum” University in Rome, which presents a very detailed classification of Flacius’ works. Bilokapic visited many libraries (München, Stuttgart, Göttingen, Münster, Erlangen, Nürnberg, Vienna, Basel, Zagreb, Trieste, Pula, Rome) and examined several works by Flacius. After finding more than 300 different titles, he tried to systematize them and classify them into 6 different groups:

1. Works on history: *Catalogus testium veritatis, Centuriae Magdeburgienses*, several lyrics against Catholics, liturgical works and those against the Council of Trent.
2. Biblical-exegetical works: *Regulae, De vocabulo fidei, Clavis, Glossa* and others.
3. Theological works: the central topic is always original sin.

3. Cf. Matešić, J. (ed.), *Matthias Flacius Illyricus – Leben und Werk*, Internationales symposium Mannheim, Freiburg, Südoeuropa – Gesellschaft, München 1991; Mirković, M., *Matija Vlačić Ilirik*, Zagreb 1960; Preger, W., *Matthias Flacius Illyricus und seine Zeit*, De Graaf, Nieuwkoop 1964. On the importance of Flacius, cf. Veljak, L., *Prva međunarodna konferencija o Frani Petriću*, in *Prilozi za istraživanje hrvatske filozofske baštine*, 80 (2014), pp. 491-502.

4. Polemical-propaganda writings.
5. Autobiographical works.
6. Different works that can not be classified according to a well-defined criterion.

Despite this very precise and exhaustive classification, I find that another systematization of his works – provided by Ivan Kordic, who has identified some hermeneutically important works, including *Paralipomena dialectics*⁴ – is also particularly interesting. According to Kordic, these works include:

1. *Regulae et tractatus quidam de sermone sacrarum literarum* (The rules and certain discussions on the language of the Holy Scriptures), published in 1551. This is a comparative and linguistic study of the terms and characteristics of the Hebrew, Greek and Latin languages in the construction of names, verbs and pronouns. In this work we also find his hermeneutical program⁵ and his working method

4. Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *Paralipomena dialectices. Libellus lectu dignissimus, et ad dialecticam demonstrationem certius cognoscendam, cuius etiam in praefatione prima quaedam principia proponuntur, apprime utilis*, Basilae 1558; Matija Vlačić Ilirik, *Paralipomena Dialectices*, Talanga, J., Grgić, F. (eds.), Zagreb, 1994.

5. When talking about the hermeneutical system or the development of hermeneutical rules by our author, these terms must be conceived in a particular way. Flacius did not know the term “hermeneutics” (used for the first time by M. J. C. Dannhauer: *Idea boni interpretis er malitiosi calumniatoris*, 1670). We are referring to some hermeneutical traces within his work, and not to a clear hermeneutical system.

for the first time: understanding the nature and structure of the Holy Scriptures and setting some convincing rules to interpret them. According to Flacius, a text can be explained, interpreted and understood if we follow the principles and rules found on the basis of the laws of language and of the knowledge of the structure and content of the text itself.

2. *Paralipomena dialectices*: where we see the intent to use classical linguistic, philological and philosophical knowledge provided by Aristotle first, and then by other classical authors such as Galen and Euclid, to trace back to an adequate understanding of the sacred text.

3. *Clavis Scripturae sacrae*⁶: in this work, the author develops his hermeneutics, which is used and applied in his struggle for the truth of the Scriptures, as conceived by Flacius. The word *clavis* recalls all possible associations with a hermeneutical situation, especially closure – the key can open the door, but it must be suitable, it must be used properly, we need to know how to use it. The meaning of the sacred texts must be “opened” with the appropriate rules.

6. *Clavis Scripturae sacrae, seu De sermone Sacrarum literarum, plurimas generales regulas continens*, I – II, Basilae 1567.

4. *Novum Testamentum Jesu Christi... cum glossa compendiaria*⁷: Flacius did not just want to find principles and rules for commenting and understanding the Scriptures, but he wanted to write a work to comment, explain and interpret the whole Bible, according to hermeneutical principles. Unfortunately, he does it only with the New Testament.

5. *De Materiis metisque scientiarum, et erroribus philosophiae, in rebus divinis*: Sometimes Flacius rejects philosophy entirely, especially when he is convinced that it wants to replace theology. Of course, the importance of philosophy for the knowledge and understanding of the Bible can not be denied, but in any case, the problem of the final cause of the world and of men can only be solved by theology. Human wisdom in its entirety is not able to understand it. Philosophy and all other sciences are not able to provide valid theological conclusions. They have well-defined areas within which they must remain, in order not to lead to misunderstandings and wrong conclusions. This reasoning is the main reasoning of this work published in 1563.

In my opinion, the hermeneutical criterion for the classification of Flacius' works was absolutely

7. *Novum Testamentum Jesu Christi Filii Dei... cum glossa compendiaria Matthiae Flacii Illyrici Albonensis, Epistola dedicatoria*, Frankfurt 1659

necessary, because, in the history of hermeneutics, he plays a major role as an author whose works contain «*the core of a modern theory for interpretive procedures*» (Wilhelm Dilthey).