


Reformation hermeneutics and the spirit of humanism

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The Reformation had a profound impact on hermeneutical practices by challenging ecclesiastical authority and emphasising interpretive freedom, addressing a crucial gap in historical theology. This study aimed to assess the influence of Martin Luther's principle of self-interpretation of the Bible and Matthias Flacius' organismic methodology, which builds on that principle, on the foundations of modern hermeneutics, particularly the methodological hermeneutics represented by Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Set within the context of the 16th-century Reformation, the study conducted a rigorous textual analysis of historical theological documents, revealing a significant paradigm shift towards more inclusive and rational interpretations of sacred texts. This shift, aligning with emerging humanistic values, marked a lasting transformation in the field of hermeneutics.

Contribution: The primary contribution of this study lies in its detailed exploration of the historical roots of modern hermeneutics, highlighting the Reformation's pivotal role in shaping contemporary interpretive methodologies. By elucidating the connections between theological reforms and hermeneutical practices, this research enriches the discourse on the development of hermeneutics and underscores the enduring relevance of Reformation-era innovations. These insights provide valuable perspectives on the interplay between historical and contemporary hermeneutical theories, closely aligning with the intersection of historical theology and interpretive methodologies, thus offering a significant contribution to the field.

Keywords: self-interpretation of the Bible; Luther; Flacius; Reformation hermeneutics; humanism.

Introduction

The Reformation era, particularly its challenge to ecclesiastical authority through the principle of self-interpretation of the Bible (*scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*) proposed by Martin Luther and further developed by Matthias Flacius Illyricus, played a pivotal role in shaping the foundational theories of modern hermeneutics, such as the methodological hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Despite the contemporary prominence of hermeneutics, the theological interpretative traditions of the Reformation, imbued with humanistic spirit, have been overshadowed, leading to a neglect of their historical development and significance. The importance of revisiting the Reformation's interpretive practices lies in their contribution to promoting individual interpretive freedom, aligning with the humanistic values of liberty and rationality.

The originality of this study stems from its focus on the overlooked hermeneutical traditions of the Reformation period, particularly the principles set forth by Luther and Flacius. By examining the early hermeneutical theories and their underexplored connections with modern interpretive methodologies, this research addresses a significant knowledge gap in the field: Luther's principle of self-interpretation of the Bible, as developed by Flacius, formed the initial methodological hermeneutics. Dannhauer's subsequent disciplining of methodological hermeneutics led to the scientification of Schleiermacher and his predecessors' hermeneutical methods and the diversification of interpretive approaches. However, in this development process, the original humanistic spirit of Reformation hermeneutics was obscured. The existing body of literature often emphasises post-Schleiermacher contributions to hermeneutics, thus overlooking the foundational impact of earlier thinkers (Alexander 1993:1). This study aims to bridge this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the development of hermeneutical practices from Luther to Flacius, supported by a critical review of the literature that traces the evolution of interpretive theories.

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The primary aim of this study is to elucidate the historical roots and evolution of hermeneutical practices, with a specific focus on the transformative period of the Reformation. This study primarily conducts its analysis based on the hermeneutic ideas found in Luther's *assertio omnium articulorum* and *de seruo arbitrio*, as well as Flacius' *clavis*, with a particular focus on the organic methodology mentioned in the latter. This methodology has played a significant role in advancing the development of hermeneutics and also exemplifies the spirit of humanism. The objectives include: (1) to analyse the contribution of Luther's principle of self-interpretation of the Bible and (2) its further development by Flacius to the foundations of modern hermeneutics and (3) to explore the impact of Reformation-era hermeneutical practices on the advancement of individual interpretive autonomy. By addressing these aims and objectives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical underpinnings of hermeneutical theory and its ongoing significance in the contemporary scholarly discourse.

The God as author and interpreter

Dilthey explicitly stated that the science of hermeneutics begins with Protestantism (Dilthey 1966:597). The self-interpretation of the Bible is a core concept in Protestant theology and hermeneutics; thus, the development of modern hermeneutics can be traced through the introduction and expansion of this principle.¹ This principle was not an invention of Luther but first appeared in the works of Augustine, who proposed the self-interpretation of the Bible to offer a method for reading the Bible, aimed at alleviating the difficulties in understanding its obscure passages (Grondin 2001:60).² In contrast to medieval tradition, the fundamentally new aspect of Luther's approach lies in his increasing compulsion, during the conflict with Rome, to critically assert Scripture against certain traditions and doctrines that were clearly in tension with, or even opposed to, the Scripture (Lohse 1995:205). Luther's objective was not to propose a method for understanding the Bible but to emphasise the authority of the biblical text itself, refusing to equate ecclesiastical interpretation with the biblical text.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, the Bible was considered ambiguous, which contradicted God's clear testimony (Kaufmann 2016:322). Roman Catholicism proposed various doctrines for interpreting the Bible, which held equal authority with the Bible. This not only granted the Church exclusive interpretive authority, requiring laypeople and clergy to understand the Bible through the Church's doctrines but also led to various arbitrary interpretations. It was against this historical backdrop that Luther reaffirmed the self-interpretation of the Bible, opposing any interpretive authority. He believed, 'No one has attained a position equal to Scripture' (Luther 2006a:83). According to Luther, the Bible

1. For the historical background of the self-interpretation of the Bible, refer to Leppin (2019:84–88). For historical threads on the development of theological hermeneutics, refer to Dilthey (1966:597–611, 1900:191–197); Grondin (2001:33–68); Scholz (2015:780–781); Green (2009:412–414).

2. For Augustine, obscure passages also serve a rhetorical purpose because they are meant to disarm the cultured despisers of the Scriptures and to move the reader in heart as well as in mind, that is, to delight as well as teach (Bruns 1992:141).

is like a vineyard, and all interpreters are like workers labouring in the same vineyard at different times, doing different tasks, but all within the same vineyard (Luther 2006a:87, 89). Luther's principle of self-interpretation of the Bible established the primary position of the biblical text in interpretive activities, with all interpretations grounded in the text itself. Emphasising the priority of the biblical text, Luther (2006a) drew on Augustine's view that:

[I]t is forbidden to place the writings of any interpreter, however holy he may have been, on a par with the Scriptures of the Apostles and Prophets, which is also forbidden by common sense. (p. 89)

He set the biblical text as the standard, excluding any subjective interpretations, emphasising:

[T]hat Scripture alone should rule and that it should not be interpreted by my own spirit or that of any other human, but understood by itself and its own Spirit. (Luther 2006a:85)

According to Luther, a good interpreter does not impose their own ideas on the text or use the Bible to confirm their own thoughts but rather reveals the meaning inherent in the Bible itself.

In the preface to his 1520 work *Assertio omnium articulorum*,³ Luther (2006a) stated:

That is, it [*the Bible*] is in itself entirely certain, entirely accessible, entirely comprehensible, its own interpreter [*sui ipsius interpres*], testing, judging, and illuminating everything by everyone, as also written in Psalm 119: The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple. (p. 81)

This statement reflects the core idea of Luther's principle of the self-interpretation of the Bible: the Bible is a manifestation of God's thoughts; although its text may be ambiguous, God's thoughts are absolutely true and clear. To understand the Bible, one must rely on God's wisdom, seeing the Bible as God's revelation and not dependent on other interpretations. Therefore, in Luther's (2006a) view:

Here the Spirit clearly grants enlightenment and teaches that knowledge is conferred solely through the words of God, just like through a door or an opening or a first principle [*as it is said*], from which one must start who wishes to reach light and knowledge. Again [*it is said in Ps 119*]: The sum of your word is truth. (p. 81)

By emphasising the self-interpretation of the Bible, Luther sought to eliminate the Church's monopolistic authority over biblical interpretation and also opposed any subjective and arbitrary interpretations.

Luther regarded the Bible as clear and unambiguous, especially in its expression of God's thoughts. He believed that if we consider the Bible to be the word of God, through which God conveys definite and true thoughts, then the Bible must naturally be clear, for God intends to teach people through lucid language rather than obscure phrases. In his

3. *Assertio omnium articulorum Martini Lutheri per bullam Leonis X. novissimam damnatorum* [Assertion of All the Articles of Martin Luther Condemned by the Latest Bull of Leo X].

significant work focusing on hermeneutical issues, *De seruo arbitrio* (Ebeling 1991:324), Luther (2006b) noted:

The Holy Spirit is no skeptic! He has not inscribed doubts or mere opinions in our hearts, but certainties of truth, more certain and firmer than life itself and all experience. (Luther 2006b:233)

Certainly, he acknowledged that due to linguistic limitations, such as unfamiliarity with vocabulary and grammar, some passages might be challenging to understand, but this does not impede our grasp of the Bible's overall meaning (Luther 2006b:235). Luther (2006b) believed:

If the words are unclear in one place, they are clear in another. The same matter, explained clearly to the whole world, is sometimes stated in the scriptures with clear words, at other times it hides behind unclear words. (p. 237)

Luther's hermeneutic thought suggests that it is not about forcibly adapting ancient texts to fit the times, the world and the interpreter's life, but rather, by persistently knocking and listening, the text itself will open up and share its life (Ebeling 1994:83).

Overall, Luther emphasised that the Bible should be seen as an expression of God's thoughts, with God instructing people through clear language. The Bible is a complete textbook of faith, encompassing both its content and linguistic expression (Beutel 1992:329). Any obscurity or ambiguity in the Bible is actually due to the limited linguistic knowledge of people. Luther denied the possibility of all reasoning or metaphorical interpretations, which, in his view, imply that there are other meanings hidden behind the language that are not explicitly expressed. In this regard, Luther (2006b) noted:

We would rather mean that neither an inference nor a figurative speech is to be admitted in any scripture, unless the clear context of the words compels this and the absurdity of an obvious matter, which contradicts an article of faith, enforces it. Otherwise, it is necessary to adhere everywhere to the simple, pure, and natural meaning of the words, which grammar and usage provide, the language that God has created in humans. (p. 443)

Luther's principle of the self-interpretation of the Bible excludes any interpretative methods based on reasoning or metaphor, allowing only grammatical and historical interpretation. This principle acknowledges the explicit textual meaning of the Bible, as God is both its author and interpreter, instructing humanity through clear language.

It is noteworthy that although Luther emphasised the self-interpretation of the Bible, he did not propose a complete hermeneutical theory. Luther's principle of the self-interpretation of the Bible merely reflects a stance and attitude towards understanding the Bible; he did not systematically expound on biblical interpretation or construct a hermeneutical methodology centred on this principle. After Luther introduced the principle of the self-interpretation of the Bible, this principle faced strong criticism from the Roman Catholic Church. To prevent this principle from being discarded due to attacks by the Roman Catholic Church, Luther's follower Flacius elevated the issue of biblical

language to a central position and proposed a series of interpretive rules around the principle of the self-interpretation of the Bible to ensure an objective and effective understanding. Flacius' approach contributed to the formation of modern hermeneutics.

Organismic methodology

Luther's advocacy for the self-interpretation of the Bible provoked strong objections from the Roman Catholic Church, which contended that understanding the Bible solely based on the text itself was unattainable. The Council of Trent, convened between 1545 and 1563, began discussing the issue of the Bible's inability to interpret itself from its fourth session and published the first official edition of its decrees in 1564 (Dilthey 1900:195). At the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church reaffirmed its adherence to church authority and tradition in the understanding and interpretation of the Bible, in contrast to the Protestant reformers who advocated for the principles of scriptural perspicuity [*perspicuitas*] and self-sufficiency, opposing the Catholic stance (Mueller-Vollmer 2006:2). During the Council of Trent, the issue of the Bible's textual ambiguity was further amplified, casting doubts on the effectiveness of the principle of self-interpretation.

In Flacius' understanding, objective interpretation should be conducted according to rules, and his proposed organismic methodology for interpreting the Bible offers this possibility. Only based on this organismic methodology, can interpreters avoid subjective arbitrariness. It was against this historical backdrop that Flacius once again defended the principle of self-interpretation, particularly highlighting the obstacles to understanding the Bible caused by language issues (Flacius 1968:7, 9). Although he believed that God's thoughts in the Bible were clear, he also acknowledged that, given the Bible was written in human language, its linguistic expression bore a certain level of ambiguity, necessitating interpretation (Flacius 1968:11, 13). The interpretation Flacius emphasised was not the Church's method, which relied on the philosophical thoughts of ancient sages or other disciplinary knowledge but was based on the biblical text itself. Therefore, to continue opposing the Church's monopolistic interpretive authority and propose a method that was both grounded in the principle of self-interpretation and ensured objective and effective understanding, Flacius distilled a set of interpretive rules from the biblical text, ancient philology and rhetoric.

Flacius' hermeneutical thought is primarily manifested in his work *Clavis*.⁴ As a member of the Lutheran tradition, he continued and expanded upon Luther's principle of the self-interpretation of the Bible and elaborated on the rules for interpreting the Bible in detail. Dilthey pointed out, 'However, the final establishment of hermeneutics is owed to biblical interpretation. The first significant and perhaps most profound of these writings was the *Clavis* of Flacius (1567)' (Dilthey 1900:194). He further suggested that Flacius' hermeneutical thought contained the germs of modern

4. *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae* [The Key to Sacred Scripture].

theories about the interpretive process (Dilthey 1966:604–605). Gadamer also expressed a similar view, stating that Flacius had already achieved a self-reflection of hermeneutics during the Reformation period (Gadamer 1993:284). Specifically, his golden rule was the hermeneutical circle of the whole and parts, as well as the consideration of the *scopus* (purpose or aim) of the text (Greisch 2015:444).

The work *Clavis* by Flacius consists of two main parts. The first part is a Latin dictionary of the Bible; the second part deals with rules for interpreting the Bible. The first part provides readers with the basic premises for understanding biblical texts, namely knowledge of biblical vocabulary, while hermeneutical thought is concentrated in the second part. In this second part, Flacius delves into the difficulties of understanding the Bible, solutions and interpretive rules.⁵ Flacius first lists 51 potential reasons that might hinder one's understanding of the Bible, most of which are related to language issues, such as foreign languages (item 4), ancient languages (item 5), linguistic styles (item 6) and differences in language among authors (item 7). He emphasises the importance of language for understanding, asserting:

Language is namely a sign or an image of things and, as it were, a kind of spectacles through which we view the things themselves. Therefore, if the language is either obscure in itself or to us, we recognise the matters themselves only with difficulty through it. (Flacius 1968:7)

Besides overcoming linguistic challenges through improving one's own language knowledge and capabilities, these can also be surmounted through the biblical text itself, as Flacius equally believes, 'The Holy Spirit is simultaneously the author and interpreter of Scripture' (Flacius 1968:31). While Flacius inherited Luther's hermeneutical principles, his contribution was pioneering in concretising these principles and developing a detailed concept for the interpretation of the Bible (Großhans 2019:178). According to his view:

For prophecy and the whole Scripture are (according to the testimony of Peter in his first letter, verse 20) not a matter of one's own insight or interpretation. But as it was given by the Holy Spirit through the prophets, so it must necessarily also be interpreted through His light (2 Peter 1:20). (Flacius 1968:31)

He proposed two types of interpretive rules: special interpretive rules, which are derived from an analysis of the Bible itself, mainly targeting specific issues within the Bible, and general interpretive rules, based on ancient philology and rhetoric, mainly addressing general ambiguities within the Bible.

The special interpretive rules are derived from the Bible itself, such as the principles that God's word is the most truthful, there is a harmony between the law and the gospel, and God and His word should be the final adjudicators of all disputes and questions. The general interpretive rules are divided into two main categories: eight concerning the interpreter themselves and four concerning the biblical text.

5.This section is included in the book *Seminar: Philosophische Hermeneutik*, co-edited by H.G. Gadamer and G. Boehm, refer to Gadamer and Boehm (eds. 1979:43–52).

The former set standards for the interpreter's capabilities and character, including firstly, seeking God's guidance before interpreting; secondly, applying biblical doctrine through faith; thirdly, venerating the Bible and viewing reading as a dialogue with God; fourthly, avoiding being influenced by anxious emotions; fifthly, not fearing difficult passages; sixthly, reflecting after understanding; seventhly, examining the text and context more carefully when puzzled and eighthly, if unresolved questions remain, noting them down for deeper discussion exposition (Flacius 1968:89, 91). The latter category pertains to the requirements for interpreting biblical texts, encompassing four rules: 'scopus', 'argumentum', 'dispositio' and 'tabellaris synopsis' (Flacius 1968:93).⁶

'Scopus' emphasises seeking the overall direction, goal and intent of a biblical text, akin to the head or face of the scripture (Flacius 1968:91). 'Argumentum' requires the interpreter to understand the summary of the biblical text's main theme, which encompasses both the perspective and an overview of the entire work (Flacius 1968:91). 'Dispositio' aims to observe the structure and layout of the entire book, such as noting where the head, chest, hands, feet, among others, are located. Based on this, it involves carefully considering how this body is constituted, how it encompasses all these parts and how these parts together form a whole. It also examines how the consistency among these parts or between the parts and the whole body, especially the head, is established (Flacius 1968:93). 'Tabellaris synopsis' involves organising the dissected parts of the biblical text into a table, noting the contents corresponding to the head, hands, feet and body (Flacius 1968:93). By grasping the overall goals and summaries, we can comprehensively understand the various parts of the biblical text, thereby accurately interpreting the true meaning of each paragraph, sentence, and word. Conversely, we can also understand the whole through its individual parts. Flacius uses the analogy of an organism to describe the method of understanding, positioning the biblical text in an organic and harmonious relationship akin to that of a human body. This approach illustrates his organismic methodological thinking. Only through this methodology can we truly delve into the Bible and comprehend the essence of God's word.

Overall, the special and general interpretive rules proposed by Flacius are designed to address the challenges of understanding biblical texts. These rules serve to standardise the interpretive process, minimising subjectivity and arbitrariness. Next, we will delve into the spirit of humanism within hermeneutical thought during the Reformation period.

The spirit of humanism in Reformation hermeneutics

Dilthey noted that with Flacius, there emerged an awareness of means and rules, which was unprecedented in previous

6.In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Theology at the University of Jena, Flacius provided insights into these rules. His intention, when interpreting each of the epistles, was to rigorously expound the original biblical texts (Gehrt 2019:41–42).

hermeneutical thought (Dilthey 1900:195). Indeed, Flacius aimed to base the age-old and commonly used interpretive procedures on the trivium (grammar, rhetoric and logic or dialectics), thereby distinguishing them from other methods of interpretation (Geldsetzer 1993:215–216). Flacius differentiated between rules for resolving general issues in biblical texts and rules for resolving specific issues within them. These two distinct forms of hermeneutical rules later received systematic reflection in the work of Johann Conrad Dannhauer.⁷ Besides, he also differentiated between rules for interpreters and rules for texts, both categories of which were also reflected in Dannhauer's work.⁸ Although Flacius did not use the term 'hermeneutics',⁹ distinguishing between general and specific rules, as well as formulating rules separately for interpreters and texts, has become a fundamental characteristic of Reformation hermeneutics. Flacius offered multiple dimensions of reflection for biblical interpretation, starting from the text itself and the interpreters. Furthermore, it is essential to recognise the rational power generated by the awakening of rule consciousness. With Flacius, one must employ the full force of reason and the tools provided by related sciences to interpret biblical texts (Großhans 2016:386). Of course, the correct understanding of the Bible is not merely for knowledge itself but to enrich our practical life with the message of the gospel (Zovko 1993:196).

Luther's ideas challenged the Church's authority and granted individuals the freedom to interpret the Bible, thereby emphasising the value and agency of the individual. Flacius inherited and expanded upon this notion by establishing clear rules for interpreters and texts, further deepening the interpreter's agency and significance in the interpretive process. This methodology not only highlighted the importance of individual agency but also emphasised the role of rules in ensuring the objectivity of the understanding process. Moreover, the formulation of these rules reflected the significance of the free use of reason and the realisation of self-humanity shaping in the interpretive process. Flacius (1968) noted:

It is the duty of Christ to open the Scriptures to us and to enlighten our hearts so that we understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). From His fullness, we must all receive. This happens by recognising and accepting Him in faith. (p. 31)

This means that interpreters understand and accept God's teachings through their inner faith and shape their humanity through practice. Therefore, in Flacius' view, the commonality between the doctrine of God and Aristotelian ethics lies in the fact that the aim of both doctrines is not knowledge but practice (Flacius 1968:65). Within this framework, the role of faith is to affirm the truth and reliability of God's thoughts, while reason is dedicated to uncovering and eliminating the

7. For discussion on Dannhauer's hermeneutical thought, refer to Sparr (2014:189–195).

8. As early as 1525, in response to Erasmus's critique in *De libero arbitrio*, Luther made it clear that it is necessary to distinguish between the external clarity and obscurity of the language of the Bible, and the internal clarity and obscurity at the level of the inner spirit (Körtner 2022:88–89). This can be seen as a precursor to Flacius' distinction between rules for interpreters and rules for texts.

9. According to the research by H.-E.H. Jaeger, the concept of hermeneutics was explicitly introduced in Johann Conrad Dannhauer's 1630 work *Idea Boni Interpretis et Malitiosi Calumniatoris* (Jaeger 1974:44).

ambiguities that language may introduce, ensuring an accurate understanding of God's thoughts. Reformation hermeneutics, by emphasising individual freedom and the rational application of rules, laid the foundation for the hermeneutics of the Enlightenment period, especially the formation of rationalist hermeneutics centred on logical and symbolic rules.

Following Flacius, Dannhauer regarded hermeneutics as a discipline belonging to logic, using it to distinguish the truth and falsehood in the meanings of discourse (Alexander 1993:52–53). This disciplinary approach advanced the scientification of hermeneutics during the Enlightenment in the 18th century, where hermeneutics primarily emerged as a science composed of various interpretive methods. Georg Friedrich Meier proposed general hermeneutics or the 'general art of interpretation', viewing it as a 'science of rules' (Meier [1757] 1996:5). He believed that:

[B]road interpretation (interpretari sensu latiori) refers to clearly recognising the meaning from signs; and a broad interpreter (interpres sensu latiori) is either the person interpreting or someone capable of interpreting. (p. 7)

Similarly, Friedrich August Wolf also believed that hermeneutics 'is a science of rules, from which the meaning of symbols can be recognised' (Wolf 1831:24). Wolf proposed a triple interpretation of grammar, history and philosophy: grammatical interpretation involves the meanings of ancient languages, historical interpretation involves the historical background of events described in the text, and philosophical interpretation addresses the correctness of the author's thoughts (Wolf 1831:274–276). Similarly, Friedrich Ast differentiated between historical, grammatical and spiritual understanding: grammatical understanding involves the content of the text, historical understanding involves the linguistic expression of the text and spiritual understanding targets the author's spirit and the spirit of antiquity (Ast 1806:177–178). Furthermore, he distinguished three types of interpretation: textual interpretation addressing the meanings of words, meaning interpretation addressing the significance of paragraphs within the context and spiritual interpretation addressing profound thoughts in the text (Ast 1806:192–205). Even in later Romantic hermeneutics, the process of scientification was still maintained. For example, although Schleiermacher held certain biases, viewing past hermeneutics as 'merely a collection of incoherent and partly very unsatisfactory observations', he also endeavoured to elevate hermeneutics to the status of a 'science' focused on methods of interpretation (Schleiermacher 2008:234–235). He distinctly differentiated between grammatical interpretation aimed at language and psychological interpretation aimed at the author's thoughts (Schleiermacher 2012:120–121). Building on this foundation, Dilthey attempted to demonstrate that interpreters, by delving into various concrete manifestations such as society, art and religion, penetrate into the objective spirit, thereby reconstructing the totality of life and laying the groundwork for the human sciences (Dilthey 1992:205–220). Gadamer ultimately completed the ontological turn in hermeneutics,

emphasising the interpreter's situation in the process of understanding (Gadamer 1990:312–346) and the fusion of horizons between the reader and the author (Gadamer 1990:305–312). However, in the ontological perspective of hermeneutics, the hermeneutical approaches from the Enlightenment through to German Romanticism fell into the naive quagmire of objectivism by focusing on scientific methodologies for reconstructing the author's thoughts (Gadamer 1990:177–203).

Unfortunately, from the perspective of the current representative and influential history of hermeneutics, the hermeneutics of the Reformation has been incorporated into the disciplinary context of hermeneutics as a science of interpretative methods, resulting in the neglect of its own humanistic values. For example, Dilthey, in his article 'Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik', organises the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and its prehistory. He acknowledges the hermeneutics of the Reformation, particularly the awareness of rules awakened in Flacius, which were expanded into various interpretative methods in subsequent developments of hermeneutics. However, the entire history of hermeneutics before Schleiermacher is summarised by Dilthey as 'a building of rules' (ein Gebäude von Regeln) (Schleiermacher 2008:194–198). Joachim Wach, in his three-volume work 'das Verstehen', primarily elucidates the history of hermeneutics in the 19th century, but even when discussing the prehistory of Schleiermacher, only the hermeneutics of Ast and Wolf are mentioned, with Reformation and Enlightenment hermeneutics only briefly noted in the introduction (Wach 1926:1–82). Grondin's presentation of the history of hermeneutics in *Einführung in die philosophische Hermeneutik* is relatively balanced. However, regarding the hermeneutics of the Reformation, Luther is seen as merely rediscovering the principle of biblical self-interpretation already present with Augustine, with Flacius defending this principle from the perspective of grammatical interpretation (Grondin 2001:59–62, 65–68). This view of the history of hermeneutics undoubtedly dilutes the inherent value of Reformation hermeneutics. If we were to summarise the current popular view of the history of hermeneutics in the words of Paul Ricoeur, it presents two preoccupations: one is the development from particularity to generality along the epistemological path and the other is the shift from the epistemological path to the ontological path (Ricoeur 2016:4).

Humanism advocates a return to the original texts, aiming to provide a more reliable basis for the Church's interpretative tradition (Schubert 2016:273). The humanistic tradition calls for *ad fontes* to foster a more accurate understanding of biblical texts and classical antiquities. According to Konrad Burdach, the concept of humanism firstly revolves around the idea and demand for spiritual education, which seeks to pursue the ideal of humanity; secondly, it specifically refers to an academic direction that believes by delving into the culture of a specific period in human history, such as the Greco-Roman era, where one can find and understand human ideals, drawing inspiration and knowledge from them. In this regard, humanists consider the art, literature,

science and language of the Greco-Roman era as classic cultural expressions and ideal models of human education. The educational goal of humanism is to achieve this through the imitation and revival of these classical cultural achievements (Burdach 1918:103–104). The tradition of humanism is also reflected in the theological domain during the Reformation period. Taking Erasmus of Rotterdam as an example, he emphasised a direct return to the Bible as the source, with the goal of making everyone a theologian, practising virtues, and achieving a conscientious life (Menchi 2016:292–296). Erasmus sought to elucidate the content of piety and hoped that the task of theologians would emulate Christ, enabling everyone to understand and pursue the path to a good life (Tortoriello 2023:70).

In the humanistic tradition, truth is regarded more as a matter of edification than a certainty controlled by methodological scientific means (Grondin 1995:127). Consequently, hermeneutics is fundamentally committed to the interpreter's acquisition of knowledge and edification through the reading of the Bible. The Reformation hermeneutics, which is based on the principle of scripture interpreting itself, aligns well with the core values of the humanistic tradition. Although from the perspective of the possibility of reconstructing textual meaning alone, Reformation hermeneutics also runs the risk of falling into naive objectivism. However, when we trace back to its inherent humanistic spirit, we find that Reformation hermeneutics is not merely about proposing methods for achieving objective understanding; it also points to the pathways for human self-cultivation and the realisation of human dignity. Interpretive methods can ensure that *ad fontes* does not degenerate into arbitrariness. More importantly, the core of this methodological awareness is the spirit of human-centred free rationality, which not only helps every individual to discover from the Bible the path to Christ and a better life but also turns the word of God into a living force intimately related to our lives. The development of hermeneutics during the Reformation period not only signifies the importance of individual freedom and the use of reason but also reflects the key role of Reformation hermeneutics in promoting the development of humanism. Through the examination of this historical process, we can gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical foundations of modern hermeneutics and how the spirit of humanism is deeply rooted in the hermeneutical practices of the Reformation period.

In summary, the hermeneutical explorations advocated by Luther and Flacius, centred around the self-interpretation of the Bible, emphasising a return to the original texts, the freedom of individual understanding, the rational application of rules in formulating interpretations and the shaping of individual humanity. Research in modern hermeneutics often focuses on the interpretive work of Reformation hermeneutics on biblical texts, considering it as a counterpart to a general hermeneutics with broad applicability. However, the core of Reformation hermeneutics lies not just in the interpretation of the Bible; more importantly, it showcases

the profound impact of the humanistic spirit, emphasising the respect for and elevation of individual freedom and rational values.

Conclusion

The idea of the self-interpretation of the Bible not only challenged the authority of the Church and traditional doctrines but also represented a profound cultural and intellectual innovation. This principle advocates a return to the text, highlighting the value of individual understanding and rational thinking, which posed a direct challenge to the mainstream authority at the time. In the present context, this principle can significantly influence modern humanities and social science research because it encourages interpreters to fully exercise their initiative and creativity. The work of Luther and Flacius not only advanced the methodology of hermeneutics but more importantly, deeply embodied the core spirit of humanism, emphasising reason, freedom and the value of the individual. Through their contributions, we can observe a shift in the field of hermeneutics from adherence to strict dogma to the pursuit of openness and diverse interpretations. This transformation has not only changed the paradigm of religious studies but also profoundly affected the research methods of literature, philosophy, history and other disciplines, promoting a more in-depth and comprehensive academic exploration. These changes highlight a significant shift from dogmatic approaches to more open and exploratory methods, marking a high regard for individual wisdom and rational thinking.

During the Enlightenment, hermeneutics sought scientification, thereby comprehensively advancing the methodological dimensions of Reformation hermeneutics. This attempt at scientification was further pushed by Schleiermacher and eventually developed by Dilthey into a task that laid the foundation for the entire human sciences. Gadamer's hermeneutics achieved a transformation from methodological to ontological, but at the same time, it placed traditional methodological hermeneutics, including Reformation hermeneutics, on a path tending towards naive objectivism. Although Gadamer recognised the integration of Reformation hermeneutics with the humanist tradition, his focus remained on the feasibility of the method. Moreover, he categorised the Reformation hermeneutics as a form of incompleteness in terms of methodological dimensions (Gadamer 1990:177–180). However, Reformation hermeneutics is rooted in the humanistic tradition; it is not merely a consciousness of method but more importantly, it emphasises human dignity. Centred on humanity, Reformation hermeneutics illuminates the path for understanding the Bible and facilitating self-cultivation for everyone, turning the word of God into a living force closely related to our lives. This aligns precisely with the concept of *Bildung* that Gadamer drew from the humanist tradition as the foundation for ontological hermeneutics (Gadamer 1990:15–24), with both emphasising that understanding can be a force for shaping humanity.

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Author's contributions

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