

Howard Hotson. *Johann Heinrich Alsted 1588-1638: Between Renaissance, Reformation, and Universal Reform.* Oxford Historical Monographs. New York: Clarendon Press, 2000. xiv + 233 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820828-0.

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Alsted's Resolution of Bruno and Calvin: The Heterodoxy of the Confessional Elite

Alsted's Resolution of Bruno and Calvin: The Heterodoxy of the Confessional Elite

Howard Hotson's outstanding intellectual biography of Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588-1638) expands interest in a neglected area of intellectual history. Alsted, a Calvinist theologian, delegate to the Synod of Dort, and professor at Herborn, has been considered primarily in light of his influence on Comenius, the Czech pedagogue and proponent of pansophism who, in turn, has been linked by G.H. Turnbull and Hugh Trevor-Roper with Samuel Hartlib and the intellectual transformations of the English Civil War. In this first of three volumes, Hotson contextualizes and explains the thinking of a forgotten theologian, a representative of the pre-Enlightenment encyclopedic tradition long written off as an epigone. Alsted's roles as theologian, encyclopedist and church politician are drawn together in Hotson's depiction of the intellectual history of Reformed Europe 1570-1630. Both traditional intellectual historians with their focus on exposition, analysis and comparison as well as new cultural historians with their demand for bridges from the world of thought to other areas will find themselves wondering why such a fascinating topic hasn't already been more widely examined.

As readers, we are all familiar with the rehabilitative, apologetic biographies of justly obscure figures about whom we feel no differently after having read them. But Hotson's work is no dry recitation of either the content of Alsted's oeuvre or reasons we should change the tra-

ditional historical picture; instead, Hotson's work draws us into the often-opaque context of a period when scholars were sharply affected by the developing rigidity of confessional boundaries and the exigencies of territorial state politics on the eve of the Thirty Years' War. Alsted's works were both numerous and voluminous, giving rise to a variety of judgments and characterizations. Hotson must reconcile previous interpretations of Alsted as an orthodox Calvinist, a millenarian, the endpoint of the Ramist tradition, the last great Lullist, and an enthusiastic hermeticist with ties to occult and semi-occult fields of study such as neo-Platonism, Kabala, alchemy and Paracelsianism. How can an orthodox Calvinist, theoretically an opponent of magical thinking who voted with the majority on nearly every issue at Dort, also be an enthusiastic alchemist? The answer lies, according to Hotson, precisely in the peculiar combination of circumstances that characterized Alsted's environment. Alsted was the last flower of a number of traditions that saw their legacies truncated by the political and confessional problematics of his age. In Hotson's resolution of these apparently contradictory influences, Alsted is transformed from a rigid, orthodox thinker to a figure whose optimism about the unity of knowledge was repeatedly thwarted and whose most earnest intellectual convictions were forced into secrecy by academic and confessional developments preceding 1618.

Hotson begins with an examination of the three most important institutional traditions that shaped Alsted's thinking: the Ramism of Herborn Academy, the Protes-

tant 'scholasticism' of Heidelberg, and elite hermeticism at Marburg. Most interesting in the discussion of Alsted's Ramism is the claim that Herborn's curricular emphasis resulted from the political imperatives of the tiny imperial county of Nassau-Dillenberg, an argument that questions standard assumptions about affinities between Calvinism and Ramism in textbooks like Carl Andresen's influential *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (1980). Instead, Hotson argues, the innovator Johann VI governed a territory whose military and political responsibilities exceeded its financial and intellectual resources. Caught up in the expanding costs of the military revolution, Johann armed his own subjects; afraid of rebellion while his attention was elsewhere, he stressed the disciplinary aspects of Calvinism to protect his subjects from re-Catholicization and fashion them into a self-disciplining, defensive force. The need to educate officials to inculcate these ideals meant that pastors and teachers would have to be prepared as quickly as possible, avoiding time-intensive Aristotelian training with its superfluous subtleties. Herborn's Ramism, then, was nurtured more than anything from the pragmatic needs of Nassavian confessionalization. For the same reason Heidelberg clung to Aristotle; the Palatinate's richer treasury meant a greater role in inter-confessional polemic and a more pronounced obligation to further reform after the Peace of Augsburg ignored the status of Reformed territories. Heidelberg professors and students needed Aristotelian curricular tools to compete on an international stage. Ever-greater numbers of students, however, came to Heidelberg from Herborn and similar academies unprepared, so systems had to be devised to accommodate Aristotelian content to the Ramist framework. This problem, addressed first by Alsted's teacher Bernhard Keckermann, is the root of Alsted's encyclopedic program, which always favors comprehensiveness over simplicity. Alsted thought that the difficulty of addressing diverse materials could be addressed by the re-integration of a Lullist mnemonic system into the Ramist encyclopedic tradition, which had rejected the arts of memory as anti-intellectual and stressed textual analysis instead. Alsted was exposed to the Lullist tradition along with many other fruits of hermeticism, such as alchemy, during his residence at Marburg after 1606, in a period when Moritz the Learned reformed the theological faculty to include hermeticists.

Hotson, undaunted by the apparent contradiction of an anti-image, anti-ritual, anti-superstitious Calvinist embracing alchemy in private, traces this predisposition to Alsted's theological stance. Despite his apparent or-

thodoxy, Alsted was not a strict Calvinist on all points, for he and his teachers saw the encyclopedic program as a path to their ultimate goal: the *instauratio imaginis Dei ad hominem*, or restoration of God's image in man. This goal presupposes that human nature was not, as Calvin had postulated, totally depraved as a consequence of the Fall, but merely severely, perhaps irretrievably, corrupted. The Fall created the need for memory, and philosophy as a means of perfecting the intellect was dedicated to the restoration of the divine image by treating the sordid remnants of prelapsarian perfection. Alsted's heterodoxy consists primarily in his optimistic anthropology, then, and not in his alchemical pursuits. That encyclopedic education as a means of restoring God's image seems to contradict the fundamental tenets of Protestant theology demonstrates an important but in Hotson's book underemphasized point that Calvinist elites were not as self-consciously confessional as much of the current literature suggests they must have been. Alsted turned to alchemy because his initial examination of the writings of Bruno suggested that it would provide practical, universal solutions like those favored at Herborn to the problem of restoring degenerate human nature. Consequently, we should understand the initial fascination of Alsted and the Marburg scholars with Rosicrucianism not as a puzzling confessional self-contradiction, but rather an witness to their desire to achieve their goals of further reform: "Just as the further ecclesiastical reformation advocated by the theologians had been grafted onto the social, political and military reforms pursued by the princes, so now some sought to add philosophical and medical dimensions to an increasingly general reforming agenda...so the promise of still greater efficacy held out by occult philosophy and alchemical medicine proved irresistible to princes like Moritz the Learned and the hermetic Calvinists who gathered around him" (104).

Yet precisely as the excitement over Rosicrucianism in Marburg reached its peak, Alsted, the partisan of Lull and Bruno, the author of mnemonic texts, fell publicly silent on hermetic topics. Why did the prolific author drop his pen in the face of such positive developments at Marburg? The answer, Hotson writes, lies in the conflicts uncovered by this development, for interest in hermetic reform created friction with conservative Calvinists encyclopedic program. And it was exactly in this atmosphere, when Alsted was trying to use his encyclopedic program to demonstrate human ability for self-rehabilitation, that the same theological question broke out feverishly in the Reformed world, culminating in the Canons of Dort. By placing Alsted at the center of his

account of Dort, Hotson interprets Dort not as a gathering of centrist or conservative theologians assembled to cast out their erring brethren at the margins (a group to which Alsted conceivably would have belonged), but a meeting in which the theological center was still forming: the irresolvable tension between Calvin and Bruno at the center of Alsted's syncretistic thinking paralleled a similar problem within the Calvinist camp between theological conceptions of the need for humans to reform and theologically-conceived possibilities of them actually doing it. Alsted's subscription at Dort thus symbolized a retreat from eclecticism into polemical theology that also typified the general direction of international Calvinism. But even Alsted's desire to join the theological center betrays its problematic quality, according to Hotson, for Alsted's *Theologica polemica* suggests that he remained inclined to consider the central matters handled at Dort to be *adiaphora* in the face of larger, external threats to the Reformed community. Finally, Hotson turns to the question of the mature Alsted's retention of "occult sympathies" as manifested in his correspondence and his continued discussion of Kabala and other hermetic matters in later recastings of his encyclopedia, arguing that they continue to reflect Alsted's efforts to reconcile his various sympathies, as does his influential apocalyptic treatise, the deceptively biblical *Diatriba de mille annis apocalypticis*, focused on Revelations 20 and appearing to eschew numerology and astrology. Precisely the "sober" qualities of this text, Hotson remarks, explains its on Protestant millenarianism, but hermetic influences remained, a matter outlined in the final chapter but intended to be treated in another forthcoming volume.

Hotson's compelling presentation of Alsted leaves few questions unanswered, but one persistent issue might have benefited from an expanded presentation. Hotson relies heavily on "confessionalization," a paradigm developed by Heinz Schilling, Wolfgang Reinhard, Heinrich Richard Schmidt and others to explain the growth of confessional sentiments and tensions as an aspect of early modern state-building. The widely accepted paradigm has nonetheless been increasingly critiqued, particularly in the area of culture, which Schilling et al. often present in a monolithic fashion that suggests culture in the age of confessionalization pursued confes-

sional goals unidirectionally. I am not criticizing here Hotson's omission of the popular reception of Ramist curricula or Alsted's encyclopedic program, which is implicit if we assume that Johann's confessional politics achieved their goals. Instead, a critique might be formulated following questions about its instrumentalization of culture as a tool of the elites for the discipline of the masses. Perhaps unintentionally, Schilling's paradigm has revived the questionable dichotomy between popular and elite culture in which elites self-consciously follow theological or political programs and subjects must be disciplined. Although Hotson does not waste words on terminological debates, he seems to view Alsted's intellectual peregrinations as an example of how confessionalization works. Still, Alsted could also be read as a challenge to this paradigm, as a well-integrated member of the Calvinist confessional elite who held intellectual convictions clearly heterodox from our perspective but which were less troublesome in his own period. Precisely Alsted's quest after the *instauratio imaginis Dei* in contravention to Calvinist orthodoxy shows the independence of members of the confessional elite from the allegedly totalizing influences of confessional culture, for, Hotson shows that Alsted maintained this heterodoxy after the Canons of Dort and even incorporated it into his writings.

The panoply of intellectual movements described here can be overwhelming, but Hotson's book will interest a variety of audiences: strongly diverging intellectual currents are represented here in union with each other, which will hopefully draw scholars in different sub-fields together for discussion in the same way that Alsted's thinking attempted to resolve an apparently unbridgeable gap. Hotson performs another subtle favor in his introduction of the well-crafted studies of Gerhard Menk on confessional developments in Nassau and Hesse to the non-specialist audience; neither does he neglect Hungarian secondary literature on Alsted's Transylvanian period. Moreover, Hotson's deft expository style leads the audience effectively through a series of extremely complex connections. This recreation of the inner and public worlds of an influential teacher who exemplifies the tensions of his age should spur further interest in this area from specialists and non-specialists alike.

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