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**Alsted, Johann Heinrich**

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## **Title\***

Alsted, Johann Heinrich

## **Alternate names (if there are any)**

Johann Heinrich Alstedt

## **Dates and places of birth and death\***

(Born: mid-March 1588, Ballersbach (Mittenaar) / Died: 9 November 1638, Alba Iulia)

## **Abstract\***

Alsted was a foremost encyclopedist of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. He provided both a complete presentation of all the subjects of philosophy (of which encyclopedia consisted) and a method to learn them. This method was an original synthesis of the dialectic of Petrus Ramus, the combinatorial art of memory of Raimond Lull and Giordano Bruno, and the method of presentation of philosophical disciplines of Bartholomäus Keckermann. Alsted's encyclopedism was intended as a remedy to the postlapsarian condition of man and was functional to the pedagogical reform pursued at the Academy of Herborn; this was, in turn, an essential part of the Calvinist state reform of the county of Nassau-Dillenburg. In theology, the importance of Alsted consists of having introduced millenarianism in the Reformed Europe, though his early, optimistic views on the imminent end of the world would change to pessimistic as a consequence of the Thirty Years' War.

## **Biography**

Alsted was born in 1588 in Ballersbach, in the county of Nassau-Dillenburg. After having studied from 1599 at the Herborn Paedagogium, in 1602 he enrolled at the Herborn Academy, which was founded by Johann VI of Nassau-Dillenburg as part of a general reform of the state on a Calvinist basis, for which Ramus' logic served as pedagogical foundation (Menk 1981; Hotson 2000a, 15-24). In Herborn, Alsted studied under Johannes Piscator (who introduced Ramism in the Academy) and Mathias Martinius, another 'semi-Ramist' (Hotson 2000b, 17, 157; Hotson 2000a, 15). In 1606 he moved to University of Marburg, where he studied under Rudolph Goclenius the Elder and Gregor Schönfeld, by whom he was introduced to mnemotechnics (Hotson 2000a, 56-59), while in 1607 he moved to Basle to study under Amandus Polanus (a Philippo-Ramist). In 1609 he became a teacher

at the Herborn Paedagogium, and in 1610, after a call from Martinius to the Academy of Bremen, he could become extraordinary professor of philosophy at the Academy of Herborn, while a call from the University of Frankfurt in 1615 allowed him to become ordinary professor. In 1619 he was delegate of Johann VII of Nassau at the Synod of Dordrecht, and could then assume the third chair of theology, while in 1626, after the death of Piscator, he took the first chair. In these years he published his *Systema mnemonicum* (1610), *Panacea philosophica* (1610) and *Cursus philosophici encyclopaedia* (1620), and was teacher of Jan Amos Comenius (1611-1613). When the prosperity of Herborn was undermined by the events of the Thirty Years' War, in 1629 he accepted the offer of the Prince of Transylvania Gábor Bethlen of a professorship at the Academy of Alba Julia (Hungarian: Gyulafehérvár, Latin: Apulum). In Transylvania, Alsted had to establish the educational program of the local Calvinist ruling class (Keul 2009, 167-186). He died in Alba Julia in 1638, after having published his *Encyclopaedia septem tomis distincta* in 1630. (Hotson 2000a, 11-13).

## Heritage and rupture with the tradition

The main aim of Alsted was to provide a presentation of all learning in philosophy, i.e. an encyclopaedia (Vasoli 2005, 21-29). This aim was theological in nature, since it served as remedy to the postlapsarian condition and to provide men with a complete knowledge (Hotson 2000a, 66-73). Moreover, it was functional to the reform of knowledge pursued in Herborn, and would influence Comenius and Samuel Hartlib (Hotson 2011; Čížek 2012). For this aim, Alsted developed first a method of teaching and learning, which consists of memorization itself (Alsted 1609; Alsted 1610a). This method includes both the dialectic of Ramus (as a systematic ordering of notions) and the visual techniques of Bruno and Lull (Hotson 2000a, 39-46; Rossi 2000, 55-60, 97-138; Ong 1965, 163-165). Alsted's encyclopedic project is outlined in the *Panacea philosophica*, in which the unification of knowledge is made possible, on the one hand, by the discipline of *ars magna* (appropriated from Lull), which explains the notions common to all sciences and precedes ontology (Savini 2009); on the other hand, knowledge is made possible by *canonica*, which presents the general *praecognita* of philosophy and explicates the method of exposition of particular disciplines. This is inspired by Keckermann's logic, and consists of *lexica*, *praecognita*, *systemata*, and *gymnasia*. *Lexica* and *praecognita* define the concepts and the nature of a discipline, *systemata* explicate its contents, and *gymnasia* are the exercise of the discipline itself (Hotson 2000a, 31-32). This method underpins the *Cursus philosophici encyclopaedia*, where Alsted follows a Ramist explanation of the contents of philosophy, providing general definitions and divisions by dichotomies (Hotson 2007, 149-273; Burton 2012, 53). In the *Cursus*, however, *ars magna* disappears (Savini 2009), as the whole encyclopaedia is based on *archelogia* (concerning principles), *technologia* (on the properties, order and division of disciplines), *hexilogia* (on mental habits), and *canonica* (described also in Alsted 1612). Philosophical disciplines are divided, in the *Cursus*, into theoretical (on necessary things, and including pneumatics, mathematics and cosmology), practical (on contingent things, i.e. the subject of ethics and politics), and poetic (concerning second notions, as rhetoric and mnemonics) (Vasoli 1975; Hotson 2000a, 70-71). This partition of philosophy is kept in his 1630 *Encyclopaedia*, which presents also a new combinatorial art, based on Lull's and Bruno's mnemotechnics (though deprived of their magical i.e. summoning components (Yates 1966)) and on the knowledge of *praecognita*, which makes possible the learning of the entire encyclopedia (Hotson 2000a, 163-181).

In theology, Alsted maintained Trinitarian positions. His arguments in favour of Trinity, such as that reality follows three-fold structures, would be used by Leibniz against the Socinians (Antognazza and Hotson 1999; Hotson 2000b, 66-69). Moreover, along with Joseph Mede he was the founder of Reformed Millenarianism (Hotson 2000b, 1-30): in his *Methodus ss. theologiae* (1611) and in the *Cursus* he provides a calculation of the end of the millennium (i.e. the time of the triumph of Christ) and of final judgement for 1694. This position was probably determined by the influence of the Hermetic tradition, envisaging a near regeneration of man. With the dramatic

events of the Thirty Years' War, however, Alsted would foresee for this date only the beginning of the millennium (Alsted 1624, Alsted 1627, Hotson 2000b, 20-30, 94-120).

**Cross-References (if there are any; please include a list of other entries in this encyclopedia that may be of further interest to your readers.)**

Hartlib, Samuel  
Wars of Religion  
Ramism  
System  
Universities  
Images in science  
Ontology  
Reformation  
Socinianism  
Theology  
Pneumatics  
Technology  
Metaphysics  
Education - Renaissance Philosophy  
Goclenius, Rudolph  
Keckermann, Bartholomaeus  
Melanchthon, Philipp  
Wars of Religion  
Aristotelianism  
Encyclopedia and Encyclopedism  
Calvinism - Renaissance Philosophy  
Combinatorics - Renaissance Philosophy  
Bruno, Giordano  
Lullism

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