Chapter III

THE REBIRTH OF MILLENARIANISM

In the 1620s not a few English Puritans were moving both by the logic of their Biblical exegesis and the signs of the times in the direction of chiliasm. Yet they hesitated to take the final step and to advocate the ancient doctrine of the future millennium since they were conscious that it had been often branded as heretical by the Reformers. But when chiliasm received the support of a leading German Calvinist divine, Johann Heinrich Alsted, they began to forget their inhibitions.

a. Johann Heinrich Alsted

For most English-speaking theologians and students of Church history Johann Heinrich Alsted is but one European name amongst many others. Thus to understand the impact of his chiliasm it is necessary first of all to show his importance in the Reformed Churches. He was born in 1588 in Herborn in Hesse-Nassau. His father, Jacob, was a zealous Reformed minister serving at Herborn, Ballersbach and Bicken; his mother, Rebeccah, was the daughter of Johann Pincier, pastor at Wetter in Hesse. Jacob Alsted was also a teacher and he taught his son until the boy was old enough to enter the Herborn preparatory school in 1598. At this time Herborn was an important centre of Calvinist education and the areas of instruction included music, arithmetic, humanistic philology and religion. The young Alsted applied himself to his studies with such diligence that he received distinction among his fellow students.

After completing this preparatory course, he was accepted as a student in the University and his name was entered in the ‘matrikel’ when he pledged obedience to the laws of the school. The high quality of his scholarship continued during his years at Herborn and after completing his studies he departed on an academic journey, a necessary part of an education in those days. While on this journey, he listened to the distinguished teachers of the day at Marburg, Frankfurt, Heidelberg, Strassburg and Basle. He then returned to Herborn and in 1608 became the teacher of the freshman class of the preparatory school and tutored students in philosophy and philology.

By 1609 he had launched his career as an author by publishing Flores Theologici and Clavis Artis Lullianae. The following year he was appointed to the faculty of the University and he soon became its most famous teacher. His writings attracted young men to Herborn from most of the countries of Europe where the Reformed faith had

¹For Alsted’s life see P. R. Cole, A Neglected Educator: Johann Heinrich Alsted (Sydney, 1910), and H. Heppe, ‘Alsted’ Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie, Bd. I (1875).
obtained a foothold. An unusual aspect of this tie between Herborn and other Reformed groups was the close relationship between the Calvinists of Eastern Europe and Alsted. A well known East European student who attended Herborn was John Amos Comenius, who enrolled at the school in 1611 because the Rhineland educational centre was friendly to the Moravian Brethren. Promotion came rapidly to Alsted and he received frequent invitations to teach elsewhere.

When dissension broke out between the Calvinists and the Arminians and the Synod of Dort was called in 1618 for the purpose of settling the dispute, the Count of Nassau, with some of his fellow Rhineland rulers, was invited to send representatives to the meeting. Among the delegates chosen were Alsted and John Bisterfeld. The orthodox Reformed group as represented by Gomarus and his followers won a definite victory. Alsted figured prominently in the decisions which were made, and his role at the synod was celebrated by the Dutch royal poet, Heinrich Stromberg. While in Dordrecht, Alsted visited some of the Dutchmen he had known at Herborn and he became acquainted with the leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church. Upon his return to Herborn he found that a new house had been built for him and he was promoted to Professor of Theology. Later in 1619 and again in 1625 he was elected rector of the University. At the death of John Piscator in 1626 he was appointed to the first chair of theology and thus was put in charge of the theological faculty.

The coming of the Thirty Years’ War found Alsted in the midst of an increasingly busy life. The war caused great devastation in Herborn for not only did large armies ravage the area but the plague followed and took its toll. In 1626 a fire swept the town completing the destruction that the war had begun. The school continued in a severely weakened condition as students left to pursue their studies elsewhere and the victorious Catholic princes cut off its endowment. The lists of students matriculating in the years immediately after 1626 are quite small and represent for the most part young men from Herborn and its immediate neighbourhood.

During these dark days for Calvinist education in the Rhineland, Alsted received an invitation to take a position elsewhere. It has already been noticed that he was well regarded by the Reformed believers in Eastern Europe and one of their number, Prince Gabriel of Transylvania, offered him a position at a new school in Stuhl-Weissenburg. Gabriel felt that a man of Alsted’s stature could lend some glamour to his academy. Despite many ties that bound him to Nassau, not the least of which was the fact that he had married the daughter of the local publisher, his desire for an undisturbed place to teach and write led him to accept the offer. By the autumn of 1629, Alsted was settled in Transylvania where he devoted himself to the organization of the new school and to teaching and writing. He never returned to his homeland but died at Stuhl-Weissenburg in 1638.
Alsted is an example of the kind of theologian produced during the age of Protestant orthodoxy. It has been noticed by many students of late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century theology that the theologians of this era tended to structure their beliefs into systems in a way which was unknown in the first years of the Reformation. These structures had more in common with medieval Aristotelian systems than they had with the arrangements of doctrine by Luther and Calvin. Alsted, however, did not adopt all the distinctions of Aristotelian logic since he was strongly influenced by Ramism.

That Alsted followed Ramus in insisting upon a simplified arrangement of knowledge can be seen in his Double Mnemonic System of Knowledge (Systema Mnemonicum Duplex) and Mnemonic System of the Liberal Arts and of All Curriculum Subjects (Artium Liberalium et Facultatum Omnium Systema Mnemonicum). His most famous expression of Ramist organization was the Encyclopaedia septem tomis distincta. This book was widely used throughout the academic world of the seventeenth century. The Puritan students at Cambridge University and Harvard College read it and the Catholic students of France found it valuable. Cotton Mather claimed that Alsted's Encyclopaedia enabled a student...to make a short work of all the Sciences' for it was a veritable 'Northwest Passage' to them. A student who had this book had all that an average seventeenth-century scholar could or need know. The fame of this massive contribution to learning was tarnished later in the century by the appearance of vernacular encyclopaedias with alphabetical arrangement. However, as late as 1671, the great German philosopher, Leibnitz, suggested a plan for an encyclopaedia which involved a revision of Alsted's work. Another impetus for Alsted's encyclopaedic interest came from the Lullist tradition. This particular intellectual inheritance came from the work of the Catalan, Ramon Lull, whose long and busy life spanned one of the most highly systematised period of Western thought.

*Hepp, Reformed Dogmatics (tr. G. T. Thomson, 1950) quotes Alsted at least twenty-five times.


*This encyclopedia was published at Herborn in 1630 and had 2,543 pages in seven volumes. Cf. the article 'Encyclopaedia' in the Encyclopedia Britannica.


*P. Miller, op. cit., p. 102.

*For Lull and Lullism see Edgar Peere, Ramon Lull (1929) and Paolo Rossi 'The Legacy of Ramon Lull in Sixteenth-Century Thought' in Medieval and Renaissance Studies (The Warburg Institute, 1961).
From each of these traditions that have been mentioned, namely, the Aristotelian, the Ramist and the Lullist, Alsted received an impetus for treating every conceivable subject. Given this all embracing approach to theology and the study of Holy Scripture it was to be expected that eventually he would include the mysteries of the Apocalypse of John and the Prophecy of Daniel in his universal studies. It was in the interpretation of these books and the development of a millenial theory that he was destined to make his most distinctive contribution to eschatology.

b. The Path to Millenarianism

One of Alsted’s earliest theological works, the *Methodus Sacrosanctae Theologiae* (1614) contained brief expositions of the books of Daniel and Revelation as well as a history of the Christian Church. His brief explanation of the Apocalypse began with a number of principles of interpretation. One should always, he stated, separate the clear statements of the book from those which are more difficult. In the former category are those concerning the dragon, rewards for the righteous, punishment of evil, Christ, faith and eternal life. The obscure portions of the book include those dealing with such events as the contents of the seals, vials and trumpets. These could be classified in three ways, that is, by comparing them with Scripture, history and experience. After citing many allusions to the Old Testament Scriptures contained in the Apocalypse, Alsted discussed how a study of history would shed light on details in the Revelation. Such historians as Eusebius could assist in an understanding that the Apocalypse described the persecution of the early Church and the spiritual degeneration after Constantine’s time until finally the Roman ‘beast’, the Pope, was given power. A comparison with experience was also valuable, for Alsted felt that his own times were included in the era prophesied by the book. He continued his explanation of the Apocalypse by presenting a series of tables that give general suggestions for the interpretation of the seven churches, seals, trumpets and vials. In the description of the opening of the seven seals, the angels represented the ministers of the word, the seals were the persecutions that the early Church faced, the horses were tyrants, the sealed ones the elect Jews; the crowd represented the elect of the Gentiles and the little book was the ministry of the Revelation. The seven trumpets stood for heresy, the stars for heretics, the two witnesses for the prophets and apostles, and the woman who fled to the wilderness the Church. The seven vials represented disasters which would come upon the Antichrist.

In this same work is a resumé of the history of the Church from its beginning to the seventeenth century. As Alsted discussed this topic he mentioned that Revelation 20 with its description of the millennium began its fulfillment in the fourth century, for the end of the persecutions in Constantine’s reign marked the binding of Satan. The beast of
the Apocalypse was the Roman Pope whose power grew from the year 600 until Popes such as Gregory VII and Gregory IX were so powerful that they could defeat the emperors of all Europe. The Roman Church tried to abolish the study of prophecy and it persecuted the pious but in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries prophecy revived at the hands of Wycliffe, Hus, and their followers.

The final section of the Methodus is the Commentary on Daniel and one of its more lengthy and interesting parts is the exegesis of 11: 36-45, a passage which Alsted felt applied to the Roman Antichrist, the Papacy. He made a series of comparisons between the evil Being of Daniel's prophecy and the Pope. The Antichrist was to speak 'marvellous' things against the god of gods and the Pope did this when he claimed that men should not read the Scriptures because they are obscure and hard to understand. Furthermore, the Pope claimed that the sacrifice of Christ was not enough, so the priests create new sacrifices continually in the mass.

In addition the Antichrist was to have trouble with the 'king of the south' who, according to Alsted, represents Mohammed and his religion. The Papacy fought the Muslims (apparently a reference to the crusaders) and even succeeded in taking the Holy Land. Edom, Moab and some of the children of Ammon were able to escape out of Antichrist's power; these predicted respectively the Greek, Ethiopian and Reformed Churches. References in the prophetic writings to Egypt, Libya and Ethiopia were applied by Alsted to the expansion of Spain and other Catholic countries who supported the Pope into the New World and Asia so that the vast riches of these lands were at the disposal of Antichrist. Daniel 11: 44 stated that though Antichrist prospered, 'rumours' out of the east and out of the north would trouble him. The news from the east was the fall of Constantinople in 1453 which upset all of Europe, especially Italy. A little later a force of Muslims invaded Italy (1481) and occupied some parts of Calabria thus threatening central Italy. At the announcement of this, there was such confusion in Italy that even Pope Sixtus made preparation for flight. The news from the east hurt the Papacy's temporal position while the news from the north concerning the Reformation, harmed its spiritual position. Daniel wrote that when he heard this news he would go forth to destroy many. Alsted interpreted this to mean the agencies of the Counter-Reformation such as the Jesuits, the Inquisition and religious wars. He explained Daniel 11: 45, 'And he shall plant the tabernacles of his palace between the seas in the glorious holy mountain; yet he shall come to his end and none shall help him' as a reference to the Council of Trent which was planted 'between the seas' in the sense that it met between the German and the Italian people, sea in prophetic Scripture referring to people. But this Council could not help the Pope for God reduced its teaching to nothing in its attempted defence of papal claims.