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Prayer as Science in Early America

Even Jesus might need more than a few days to resurrect Cotton Mather. After three centuries of public malediction for his apparent inconsistencies, moralism, political meddling, and perceived complicity in the Salem Witch Trials, his rehabilitation will be slow in coming if it comes at all. Lovelace's *American Pietism of Cotton Mather* could have marked the beginning of a Mather renaissance, but now, thirty years after the fact, Lovelace's work remains the most recent comprehensive study of Mather's theology.

Lovelace suggests that Mather's approach to piety was one of synthesis rather than of incongruity. While Lovelace applies this idea to Mather's integration of various strains of spirituality within the Christian tradition, I argue that Mather's synthesis extended to the boundary between religion and science. Cotton Mather implicitly taught that truth is holistic and absolute by applying the same purposes, assumptions, and methodology both to his research in the natural sciences and to his practice of prayer. While he may not have been the first to reconcile the science of his day with his personal faith, because of the detailed records he left behind Mather set himself apart as a vivid example of scientific-theological synthesis at the dawn of the modern era.

Mather published *The Christian Philosopher* in 1720. Today the title would read "The Christian *Scientist*?" but without any reference to Mary Baker Eddy or her followers. Mather used the word "philosophy" denoting "natural philosophy" or the natural sciences. His purpose in writing *The Christian Philosopher* was to educate, convert, and inspire the people of New England. He did not hope to innovate, but rather to summarize the latest scientific knowledge and to introduce it to laymen. In doing so, Solberg has suggested, Mather not

only introduced the work of Isaac Newton to New England but “introduced the Enlightenment to America.”

Mather’s purpose was not purely educational. At the outset of the work, he stated that “the essays now before us will demonstrate that philosophy is no enemy but a mighty and wondrous incentive to religion.” Arguing for God’s existence based on evidence in nature, Mather hoped to refute the arguments of atheists; and, exploring the minute details of the natural world, he hoped to inspire committed Christians to deepen their faith.

Mather’s assumptions in his scientific endeavor included the sovereignty of God, the unity of knowledge, the attainability of proof, and the dubiousness of any idea incompatible with Scripture.

His methodology lay not in active experimentation, but rather in the adoption of an exhaustive perspective, the collection of sources deemed reliable, and the corroboration of those sources with personal observation. He considered every possible category of natural phenomenon, from the heavenly bodies and forces of physics, such as magnetism and gravity, to reptiles, mammals, and humankind. The source Mather cited included both the top scientists of his day, such as Newton, as well as ancient authorities, including Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Muslim texts.

Mather’s contribution lay in his condensing, evaluating, and presenting data from these diverse sources. For example, on the topic of light, he affirmed the observation of his contemporaries (as true then as today) that light behaves as both rays and particles manifesting great speed.

Before turning to compare Mather’s science with his practice of prayer, I will consider some possible objections. One might suppose that Mather was a proponent of non-science cloaked in scientific language, a set of beliefs that was, in fact, Mather’s religion in

disguise; and that to draw connections between this non-science and Mather's practice of prayer would prove nothing more than that Mather's religion-in-disguise was the same as his public religion.

However, this objection does not take into account the most startling possibility: Mather did not distinguish between his science and his religion. Religion was not his science, as may have been the case for many during the Middle Ages when theology was the "Queen of the Sciences"; nor was science his religion, as was the case for many during the height of modernism. For Mather, science and religion were two aspects of a unified experience of reality. They had everything to do with each other, for both were forms of knowledge. In order to fully understand the implications of this, let us now turn to Mather's teaching on prayer.

While it purports to be his autobiography, Cotton Mather's *Paterna* focuses on his understanding of prayer. The text is comprised almost entirely of extracts from his journals, which focus primarily on his efforts in prayer. He began writing the work after the birth of his first son in 1699 and completed it in the latter years of his life, shortly after *The Christian Philosopher*. The title might best be translated as "the words of a father," revealing much of his intention. He personally addressed it to his son and never intended it for publication.

While the size and nature of his audience differed markedly from that of *The Christian Philosopher*, Mather's purposes in writing *Paterna* were nonetheless to educate, to convert, and to inspire. He hoped to draw lessons from his own life, especially from his personal practice of prayer, as a means for educating his son, that he might learn from both his example (holiness and prayer) and from his mistakes (laziness and hypocrisy).

A less obvious purpose of the spiritual instruction that Mather offered was his son's conversion. Ronald Bosco, the editor of the critical edition of the text wrote that "the Puritan's experience of his conversion and his desire to convey as much of the specifics of his conversion experience as he can is the central impulse in all Puritan autobiographical endeavors." At the time of its original composition, Cotton Mather was addressing *Paterna* to his as-yet-unconverted eldest son, Increase, Jr., who would later die at sea. After this tragedy, it appears that Mather rewrote the text to address it to Samuel, his youngest son. Mather believed that God had promised him a son destined for spiritual greatness and had believed that Increase, Jr., would be that son; therefore, we have every reason to believe that his son's conversion was among his primary motivations for writing.

Mather's assumptions in prayer were the same as those in his scientific undertakings. He believed in God's ultimate control over all things, even in the midst of his infant daughter's death and his oldest daughter's near-death. "In my distress, when I saw the Lord thus quenching the coal that was left unto me and rending out of my bosom one that had lived so long with me as to steal a room there, and a lamb that was indeed unto me as a daughter, I cast myself at the feet of his holy sovereignty."

As in his scientific research, Mather remained suspect of any insights or seeming knowledge that he received in prayer that were not confirmed in scripture and life experience. "I have had what I thought was [a direct revelation from God that] so baffled [me] in one or two Considerable Things, in which it never failed, that I am at a perfect loss what to make of it. I must not reproach the work or say that it is not often a gracious work of heaven." From his diaries, we know that Mather received these revelations in times of deeper than usual prayer: days of fasting, receiving the Lord's Supper, or during travel for his ministry. These revelations could concern personal topics, such as the physical and spiritual

well-being of his children, or international events, however vague, such as the “shaking” of England, Ireland, and Scotland. Such insights had a dark potential which Mather fully considered: Each revelation “may be a jewel of God. But the counterfeits of this jewel are so very fine that it will require a judgment almost more than human to discern them.”

Elsewhere he expressed that he was afraid “lest under my extraordinary trials from the invisible world, I have at any time gratified the hidden desires of evil angels.”

Nonetheless, in the midst of such self-critical reflections on his experience, Mather believed in the attainability of external proof. Supernatural realities could be verified in his experience of prayer. His revelations promised both to confirm his status as a godly man, which was, after all, the earnest desire of any Puritan, and to provide specific extra-biblical information. He did not divulge specifics of any of his revelations to his son, but assured him that such experiences could happen, however untrustworthy compared to the certainty of Scripture.

Mather’s diary confirms his eager quest to corroborate insights in prayer with verifiable fact. In November, 1698, during a day of prayer and fasting, he wrote: “I had my mind irradiated with a strange assurance from heaven that the ship [bearing my brother-in-law] is well and that it will shortly arrive with some special tokens of divine favor for me.” Two weeks later, the ship arrived with his brother-in-law and the first published copies of Mather’s *Eleutheria*. Tellingly, the full alternate title of that work was *An idea of the Reformation in England: and a history of non-conformity in and since that Reformation, with predictions of a more glorious reformation and revolution at hand*.

Mather’s methodology in prayer, as in science, involved his adoption of an exhaustive perspective, the collection of reliable sources, and the verification of those

sources with personal observation. However, in contrast to his scientific endeavors, Mather's prayer life included a significant amount of active experimentation.

By adopting an exhaustive perspective in prayer, Mather removed all constraints as to the form and content of his devotions. In form, his prayers ranged from the most public to the most private, from the most drawn out and planned to the most brief and spontaneous. In content, he considered everything as potential material for prayer, from the fates of nations to the vanity of that beautiful woman walking down the street. On the one hand, Mather expressed an explicit desire to find a "logical and regular method for daily meditation"; but, on the other, his prayers reflected an ever developing process of trial and error.

In prayer, as in science, Mather sought to maximize his use of reliable sources. These included his Puritan forebears, the Church fathers, and, of course, the Bible, although he also frequently quoted classical pagan authors such as Seneca and Cicero.

Although Mather himself was his only test subject, his personal religious experience became the matter of experimentation. Early in his Christian growth, his commitment to methodically pursuing holiness quickly led him beyond the precedent of the teachings of others. Of the nineteenth year of his life, he wrote: "I became inclined and instructed unto such methods of religion as I had no earthly tutor for."

After his first experience of a possible direct revelation in 1696, Mather committed himself to observing their possible causes, effects, and fulfillment. However, when his first wife died in 1702, despite spiritual assurances to the contrary, his pursuit of such revelations began to wane. Rather than give up the experiment as a complete failure, he persisted observing these insights when they did occur without pursuing them when they did not.

In 1705, referring back to his wife's death, Mather wrote: "Though I have been humbled with such a wondrous defeat of [a direct revelation] in one famous instance, which has caused me for diverse years to be rather shy than otherwise of anything having such a tendency, yet behold it will again [happen] to me. Let me diligently observe the consequences!"

Mather included in prayer all of the methods he utilized in science: the adoption of a comprehensive perspective, the use of all sources he deemed reliable, and the corroboration of those sources with personal observation. In a sense, Mather's experimentation was merely an extension of his observation. What is remarkable here is that Mather applied such experimentation to prayer, and that he relied on such a high degree of independent judgment. Because he embraced experience as experiment, Mather's prayer life was more scientific than his work on science; nonetheless, Mather was as worthy to be called "scientist" as any on the American continent in his day.

As Mather understood it, truth was all-inclusive. He could exult, "I feast myself with the sweets of all the sciences." His pursuit of knowledge was not subject to any firm or arbitrary boundaries between disciplines. In his purposes, assumptions, and methodology, Mather did not distinguish between science and religion. He did not merely reconcile them, but embraced them as part of a unified whole. Mather synthesized elements that would seem utterly contradictory today: the supernatural was natural, the affective was rational, and the non-action of prayer was the best road to action. Truth, for Mather, was one. His unified purposes, his worldview, and his methods attest to this by the utter consistency of his approach to the scientific and the religious.

Standing at the dawn of the Age of Science and on the fringe of civilization, Mather integrated a scientific outlook with his religious beliefs. Mather may not be so much a

forerunner of what has occurred, as Lovelace has suggested with regard to Evangelicalism, but rather a grasp at a future that never materialized: the complete synthesis of science and religion.