

WEREWOLVES AND *PHILOSOPHES*

Thomas S. Kidd

The First American Evangelical: A Short Life of Cotton Mather by Rick Kennedy
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The Reverend Cotton Mather believed in angels and demons. This belief may not have been wrong; indeed, it may have been rational. These are among the conclusions Rick Kennedy draws in *The First Evangelical*, his gleefully revisionist biography of Mather, the prolific author and devoted Boston pastor who, with his father Increase, dominated Boston's church life for much of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

"Revisionist" history carries bad connotations for conservatives, but sometimes history needs revising. Kennedy is seeking to rehabilitate the image of Mather, who has typically been painted as a loathsome and neurotic witch-hunter, and rarely as a positive figure in any sense. Kennedy believes that from a Christian perspective, there is a lot more to say about Mather. But you have to resolve to be generous to the minister, he warns us. You have to be patient with—even open to—Mather's wonder-filled world of angels, demons, witches, portents, and levitation.

Lesser pop Christian writers often try to rehabilitate historical figures for the Kingdom of God (Thomas Jefferson really was a Christian!), and sometimes for Republican Party politics. But Kennedy is not engaging in historical hocus-pocus. Kennedy is a formidable academic historian at Point Loma Nazarene University and the author of many serious books and articles on American intellectual history. Against the conventional portrayals of Mather, both by critics during Mather's lifetime and recent historians, Kennedy is offering a Mather of warm piety, effective ministry, and intellectual curiosity. As part of this rehabilitation, Professor Kennedy is asking us to pause and ask what we *really* know about the commonplace beliefs of Mather's era regarding spiritual beings and their activity among humans. On what basis do so many moderns, even among the devout, dismiss these beliefs out of hand?

Kennedy even takes seriously Mather's readings of God's particular providence, some of which would make most Christians wince today. Most provocatively, Kennedy seems to defend Mather's interpretation of an accident in which his two-year-old daughter tragically fell into a fire. She did not die but

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was disfigured for life. Mather's take? "Alas for my sin, the just God threw my daughter into the fire!" he exclaimed. Everyone from liberal mainliners to most traditional evangelicals today would balk at this kind of attribution of suffering to God, especially the suffering of children. Yet to Kennedy it shows a kind of theological sobriety that marked the thought of Mather and the Puritans generally. "Cotton never tried to protect God from responsibility for everything; and he never assured the mother of a suffering baby that a loving God would not do this to a baby." Previous historians interpreted the episode as classic Mather neuroticism. To Kennedy it speaks to Mather's theological courage to face facts.

Still, one need not be wishy-washy theologically to say that Mather had little theological justification for saying that God "threw" his daughter into the fire as a judgment against Mather's sin. The Bible has plenty of instances in which God brings calamity against people for their sin, but God also allowed the devil to bring disaster to Job, even though Job had not sinned. In the Gospel of John, Jesus teaches his disciples that a man was born blind not because his parents had sinned but because the infirmity allowed the work of God to be displayed in the man's life. All believers have to contend with the reality that God permits all manner of suffering, even though God has the power to stop it. But this does not require us to believe that accidents are individual judgments against sin, especially the sin of a bystander. At other times, Mather himself confessed that a wise pastor never tries to explain too closely the workings of divine sovereignty and human freedom.

All eras seem like times of transition, but Mather's midcolonial-era Boston was changing culturally and politically in obvious ways. As in England, the Glorious Revolution

of 1688–89 resulted in a new, Protestant-friendly government in Massachusetts. England fought two generations of imperial wars against Catholic Spain and France following the accession of William and Mary, and it beat back two major Jacobite rebellions that would have returned Catholic Stuart kings (descendants of the deposed James II) to the throne. These developments meant that New England went from a hostile relationship toward the monarchy in the 1680s to an extraordinary devotion to England's kings and queens, and to the "Protestant succession" that kept Catholics off the throne.

As Kennedy generously notes, I described New England's pro-British cultural and religious alignment after 1689 as the "Protestant Interest" in a 2004 book of the same name. I had frankly imagined that the book was now a cult classic at best, until I saw Kennedy putting it to such good use in this biography. Kennedy accepts the notion that the Protestant Interest effectively replaced Puritanism, but he argues that beneath the umbrella of the Protestant Interest, Mather led the emergence of a new religious alignment: that of evangelicalism, or what Mather (handily) called the "evangelical interest."

As sympathetic as I am to this argument, with its elaboration of my "Protestant Interest" thesis, I will follow in the train of many reviewers of Eerdmans's Library of Religious Biography series and lament the absence of endnotes in the book to demonstrate evidence for Kennedy's thesis. Kennedy offers to correspond via e-mail with anyone wanting more information about his sources, but I wished to find out quickly where and how often Mather and others used the term "evangelical interest," as it was not a term I could recall encountering. A quick search in colonial-era imprints in America and England gave me no leads, and the only instances I could immediately find of the

“evangelical interest” (I am sure Kennedy could provide more) was in Mather’s diary, where he used the term occasionally, sometimes in the plural “evangelical interests.” The fact that this term did not appear much in published documents of the time (unlike the frequently used “Protestant Interest,” a term that appeared in the title of a Mather publication in 1726) makes me wonder how many people, besides Mather in his private thoughts, employed the category.

Nevertheless, I am sure that Kennedy has correctly identified an evangelical interest that was supportive of the pro-British, anti-Catholic Protestant Interest but whose adherents worried about the broad-minded, interdenominational tendencies of the Protestant Interest. To be a member of the Protestant Interest, you basically had to support political, imperial, and ecclesiastical Protestantism, and oppose Catholicism. This was not a high bar, spiritually or doctrinally. Thus Mather and his emerging cohort sought to combine the new realities of alignment with imperial Britain with the spirit of warm Puritan piety.

This is a valuable explanation of evangelicalism’s origins, but is Mather the most obvious candidate as American evangelicalism’s founding father? At times, Mather remained as interested in doctrinal and ecclesiological brawling, and as focused on the mandates of public moral reform, as his father Increase and other second- and third-generation American Puritans were. This partly explains Mather’s fit of fury when the Presbyterian-leaning and broad-minded (though still theologically conservative) Brattle Street Church was founded in Boston in 1699. Even Kennedy admits that when the fuming Mather linked the church’s origins to a Satanic plot, it was not the pastor’s finest hour.

While Mather had already passed from the scene when the revivals of the Great

Awakening began in the 1730s, the Brattle Street Church’s founding pastor, Benjamin Colman, was arguably the most important pastoral leader of Boston’s own revival. I wonder if Cotton Mather would have even approved of the Great Awakening? (His son Samuel did not.) Doing so would have required accepting the ministry of the Anglican itinerant George Whitefield, the most celebrated Anglo-American leader of the revivals, who took Boston by storm in 1740. Perhaps Colman is a better candidate for Boston’s key early evangelical?

In any case, Kennedy makes a powerful argument that Mather deserves reconsideration as both a steely providentialist and a first-rate intellectual of his era. Or at least as a first-rate compiler of ideas. Kennedy explains that Mather’s seminal works, including the *Magnalia Christi Americana* and the *Biblia Americana*, were not books with linear narratives and arguments, but rather “hives” of interconnected European and American knowledge. They were “books that were filled with long quotations from multiple authors. Such volumes drew students into scholarly conversations going on in Europe,” and would, Mather hoped, facilitate New England’s—and Harvard’s—full introduction into the transatlantic republic of letters and Christian Enlightenment.

Kennedy is especially good at outlining why Harvard was not quite so integrated into that European intellectual world, and how a Mather college presidency might have given the institution a jolt of philosophical dynamism had his bid succeeded. Under Mather’s leadership, the school would likely have become more “Bible-oriented, critically engaged, intellectually groundbreaking, and ethnically diverse.” Mather showed signs of interest in more fully integrating African American and Native American students into the life of the college. But without a

Mather presidency, the college remained “unremarkable,” genteel, and staid. Kennedy explains that Harvard had a vested interest in not garnering too much notice in England, given its oxymoronic status as a dissenting (Congregationalist and non-Anglican) college. This was part of the reason why, in spite of the ambitions of Mather and others, Harvard called itself a college instead of a “university.” English politicians and Anglican Church authorities might overlook a quaint dissenting training school, but a world-class university would have attracted unwanted attention and likely would have jeopardized Harvard’s existence.

Kennedy’s Mather was an exponent of the “biblical” or “evangelical” enlightenment, categories that did not necessarily clash in the eighteenth century. Historians still debate the characteristics (or even existence) of something called “The Enlightenment,” but clearly Mather wished to be a full participant in the latest Anglo-American conversations about science, biblical studies, social reform, and other salient topics of the era. In this sense, he was a forerunner to Jonathan Edwards, who similarly participated in a transatlantic evangelical republic of letters, to more lasting fame and theological significance.

In the spirit of the biblical enlightenment, Mather compiled his “most monumental book,” the *Biblia Americana*. Again, Mather meant the book to serve as a “hive” of the best biblical scholarship, or a “feast of fat things full of marrow.” While many Enlightenment figures took a skeptical or even hostile approach to the Scriptures, Mather compiled a banquet of ancient and modern biblical authorities from a remarkable range of commentators, including Jews, Catholics, and some writers dubious about the Bible’s

reliability. The conversation about these matters would feed the faithful and ultimately, Mather believed, make them more secure in their understanding of the Word of God. Mather was the “first important American scholar to realize that a battle for the Bible was brewing among Protestant scholars,” Kennedy says. Orthodox believers must engage with the ongoing conversation of biblical studies, and with the Bible’s critics, and not run away from the debate, Mather believed.

Contending with critics and non-Protestant perspectives would refine believers’ faith. We need not fear apostasy, though some of weak faith and arrogance would indeed fall away under the skeptics’ influence. The critics failed to see, Mather contended, that our best source of knowledge was not in the individual’s reason, or solo outbreaks of innovative genius, but in the witness of the faithful, rooted in biblical understanding, over the ages. Whatever else we can say about Mather’s theological contributions, the *Biblia Americana* marked him as Boston’s, and perhaps the colonies’, most learned pastor-scholar of the pre–Great Awakening era. Yet he remained open to the possibility of, among other phenomena, witchcraft, werewolves, ghosts, and angelic visitations. This was a new sort of *philosophe*.

Whatever reservations I have about Kennedy’s argument emerge from the bold revisionism of the book, its placement of Mather as America’s first evangelical, and its intriguing claims about the nature of the Christian intellectual life. Add to these qualities the book’s liveliness and brevity, and Kennedy has produced a delightful portrait of one of the most important clerical leaders of the American colonial era. †