Philosophical Thoughts in Cotton Mather's "The Christian Philosopher"

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The article analyzes the philosophical ideas of the 17-18th century American thinker Cotton Mather. In his treatise Christian Philosopher (1721), the author, almost for the first time in the history of early American philosophy, used the word "philosopher" in the title. The article aims to analyze the structure of the treatise, its ideas, and basic concepts. Thirty-two chapters of The Christian Philosopher (1721) described the latest advances in natural philosophy at the time. The American preacher, philosopher, scientist Cotton Mather (1663–1728) wrote many pamphlets, treatises, essays. He had a significant influence on American political thought in the 18th century. His worldview is religious on the one hand and scientific on the other.

Keywords: Cotton Mather, early American philosophy, Christian philosopher, natural philosophy

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Introduction

There was a period in the history of early American philosophy when puritanism dominated. In the short period between the activities of the first American philosophers such as John Winthrop (1588-1649), Roger Williams (1603-1683) and others, and the period of the Great Awakening, with representatives of Samuel Johnson (1696-1772), Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), an American thinker worked whose ideas are rather difficult to classify. In 1721, the American thinker Cotton Mather (1663–1728) wrote one of the first books in the history of American philosophy to contain the infrequent word "philosopher." The future philosopher was born in Boston, Massachusetts. His father was a Puritan, his name was Increase Mather (1639-1723), and he was president of Harvard College. The most famous work of the American thinker has the Latin name *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), which was translated as "The Great Acts of Christ in America." The English subtitle is "The Ecclesiastical History

of New England from Its First Planting in 1620, until the Year of Our Lord 1698." Readers of the *Magnalia* have often dismissed the work as unwieldy, pedantic, and incomprehensible (Halttunen, 1978: 311), but it did not prevent the book from becoming an important historical asset.

> "… [*Magnalia Christi Americana is a*] greatest effort in the century to organize the experience of these people" (Miller, 1953: 33).

Many researchers devoted their work to the personality and activities of Cotton Mather, for example, Karen Halttunen *Cotton Mather and the Meaning of Suffering in the Magnalia Christi Americana* (1978); Rick Kennedy *The First American Evangelical: A Short Life of Cotton Mather* (2015); Richard F. Lovelace *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism* (1979); Kenneth Silverman *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (1984) and many others. The purpose of this article is to emphasize the philosophical nature of the teachings of Cotton Mather, because he is usually perceived as a scientist, a digester of the achievements of the natural sciences, but not as an empiricist philosopher.

The natural philosophy of Cotton Mather

The concept of nature as the opposition of culture is already applicable to the views of American educators. Later, in American transcendentalism, a new binary opposition between culture and civilization will emerge. Sergii Rudenko and Volodymyr Prykhodko write details about these anthropological questions (Rudenko & Prykhodko, 2020). Cotton Mather would agree with the statement that nature and human culture are antonyms. For example, Rick Kennedy published a brief biography of Cotton Mather, the discourses Mather's ideas and life, his impact on colonial America. The researcher describes the role that American philosopher played in laying the basis for the Great Awakening. Kennedy describes a story of a young American thinker Benjamin Franklin visiting the Mather's study that functioned as his place for study (Kennedy, 2015).

Despite the title of his book, historians of science and not historians of philosophy are more interested in his ideas.

On the example of his explanation of the history of the texts of the ancient philosopher Aristotle, we can conclude about his education:

> "It's indeed amazing to see the fate of the writings which go under the name of Aristotle. First falling into the hands of those who could not read them, and yet for the fake of the famous author were willing to keep them; they were for a long while hid under ground, where many of them deserved a lodging. And from this place of darkness the torn or worn manuscripts were anon fetched out; and imperfectly and unfaithfully enough transferred, and conveyed from Athens to Rome, where copies were in like manner taken of them. The Saracens at last got them, and (the concise and broken style a little suiting them) they spoke Arabic; and even in Africa there were many Aristotelian schools erected. They were from thence brought over into Spain, and exhibited with such translations and commentaries as it pleased the Arabians to bestow upon them. When learning revived under Charlemaigne, all Europe turned Aristotelean; yea, in some universities they swore allegiance to him; and O monstrous!" (Dr. Cotton Mather's student and preacher, 1781: 50-52).

Investigating the question of whether Cotton Mather can be called a philosopher, it is necessary to analyze the knowledge of the thinker. Cotton Mather knew the history of philosophy, the history of philosophical texts, ideas, thoughts. In his treatise, he gives a clear definition of philosophy:

> "The ESSAYS now before us will demonstrate that *Philosophy* is no *Enemy*, but a mighty and wondrous *Incentive* to *Religion*; and they will exhibit that PHILOSOPHICAL RELIGION, which will carry with it a most sensible *Character* and victorious *Evidence* of a *reasonable Service*. *GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST,* and *GOOD WILL TOWARDS MEN*, animated and exercised; and a Spirit of *Devotion* and of *Charity* inflamed, in such Methods as are offered in these *Essays*, cannot but be attended with more Benefits, than any *Pen* of ours can declare or any *Mind* conceive" (Mather, 1721b: 1).

He was from the Mather dynasty, who had lived in Massachusetts Bay for four generations. His father, Increase Mather (1639-1723), was a Puritan preacher, he headed the first college in New England, and he was president of Harvard (1685-1701). He attended one of the oldest schools, the Boston Latin School, and graduated from Harvard in 1678 at the age of 15.

> "By *twelve* years of Age, he had composed many *Latin* Exercises, had conversed with Tully, Terence, Ovid and Virgil, had gone thro' his *Greek Testament,* and entred upon Isocrates, Homer and his *Hebrew Grammar;* and at that Age was admitted into *College* (Sibley, 1885: 6).

As Louis Weeks states in his article *Cotton Mather and The Quakers* (1970) in Quaker History, the thinker awakened Americans from church blindness and awakened them in the spirit of the Great Awakening (Weeks, 1970). He did this thanks to his numerous books, one of which is called *A midnight cry.* In his little work *A midnight cry an essay for our awakening out of that sinful sleep, to which we are at this time too much disposed; and for our discovering of what peculiar things there are in this time, that are for our awakening* (1692), the thinker rather modestly compares himself to the philosopher:

> I have ordered a Small Impression ... So that perhaps I may say of this book, as the philosopher did of his, 'Tis published, but Scarce made Publick (Mather, 1692).

Cotton Mather was a very productive thinker; he wrote half a thousand books and essays. Thanks to his publication activity, he became one of the most influential religious leaders in America. Thanks to his efforts and social and religious activities, the inhabitants of the North American colonies, who were already the second and third generation of settlers, returned to the theological roots of puritanism, and the moral tone of the colonies was awakened. The most important work of his life was the book *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), in seven parts of which he described his philosophy of American history, described many biographical and historical facts. His major works are *Boston Ephermeris* (1686), *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (1692), *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693), *The Biblia Americana* (1693–1728), *Decennium Luctuosom: a History of the Long War* (1699), *Pillars of Salt* (1699), *Corderius Americanus: A Discourse on the Good Education of Children* (1708), *Bonifacius* (1710), *Theopolis Americana: An Essay on the Golden Street of the Holy City* (1710) and The Christian

Philosopher (1721). In the book *Christian Philosopher* Cotton Mather demonstrated himself as a scientist who investigates the nature of things. He is interested in scientific discoveries, has encyclopedic knowledge. Robert Boyle (1627–1691), an Anglo-Irish natural philosopher, was a kind of role model for Cotton Mather; the philosopher especially liked the book *Some Considerations Touching the Usefulness of Experimental Natural Philosophy* (1663). He considered similar experiments acceptable in medicine. For Cotton Mather, medicine was the grace of God that he sent to people. The thinker was interested in the question; can a Christian use this medicine (for example, medicine for smallpox) and humbly thank God for His good providence? Onesimus, one of Mather's slaves, once told how he was vaccinated in Africa; the American thinker was intrigued by this story. He read studies of the practice of vaccination by Emanuel Timonius of Constantinople in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*. Cotton Mather tried to convince Boston doctors that vaccination would save the inhabitants of the colony from smallpox, that science could give a person protection. He did not understand why the smart people of the colony were against such a method of protection:

> "And how strangely do Men that call themselves Physicians betray their Anatomy, and their Philosophy, as well as their Divinity in their invectives against this Practice?" (Mather, 1721a: 17).

Alan Heimert in *Religion and the American Mind* (1966) believes that Puritan pastors such as Increase Mather were not afraid of experimenting with vaccinations; the Puritan mind believed that the will of God must be discernible both in nature and in revelation (Heimert, 1966: 5).

In 1721, Cotton Mather published the book *The Christian Philosopher*, an important one for historical and philosophical analysis. This book is the first systematic scientific study published in North America. On the one hand, Cotton Mather tried to emphasize the successes of Newtonian science, and on the other hand, their consistency with religion. As already mentioned, he drew inspiration from Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and others. Researcher Winton Solberg has actualized interest in Cotton Mather's book. Solberg's publication *The Christian Philosopher* allows for a new assessment of the American thinkerɔs philosophical and religious views. The structure of the treatise allows us to evaluate the list of ideas that the thinker thought about. It becomes obvious that for Cotton Mather, the concept of philosophy differs from the modern definition. The thinker worked in conditions of religious consciousness dominance, but intellectuals were interested in scientific discoveries. Therefore, philosophy was associated with the natural sciences. Cotton Mather's book consists of 33 chapters: 1. Of the Light; 2. Of the Stars; 3. Of the Fixed Stars; 4. Of the Sun; 5. Of Saturn; 6. Of Jupiter; 7. Of Mars; 8. Of Venus; 9. Of Mercury; 10. Of COMETS; 11. Of Heat; 12. Of the Moon; 13. Of the Rain; 14. Of the Rainbow; 15. Of the Snow; 16. Of the Hail; 17. Of the Thunder & Lightning; 18. Of the Air; 19. Of the Wind; 20. Of the Cold; 21. Of the Terraqueous Globe; 22. Of Gravity; 23. Of the Water; 24. Of the Earth; 25. Of Magnetism; 26. Of Minerals; 27. Of the Vegetables; 28. Of Insects; 29. Of Reptiles; 30. Of the Fishes; 31. Of the Feathered Kind; 32. Of the Quadrupeds; 33. Of Man [Mather, 1721b]. As can be seen from the chapters listed, Cotton Mather's sphere of interests was not limited to speculative discussions about the nature of religion; on the contrary, his interests were very broad from physics and astronomy to biology and mineralogy.

In the first chapter, he analyzes the nature of light. Instead of the popular metaphysics of light, he, based on the teachings of William Molyneux (1656–1698), the translator of the works

of Rene Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727), postulates the nature of light as matter. He begins with the fact that the laws of nature support the material world. All mechanical processes in the world are consistent with God's glory, whom the philosopher calls the First Cause. For him, it becomes obvious that the light passing through different transparent objects meets resistance, and this is possible only if there are material qualities:

> "…Light is a Body. Its Refraction, in passing through a Diaphanous Body, shows that it finds a different Resistance" (Mather, 1721b: 9).

He describes the speed of light, emphasizing its amazing nature. In his opinion, light flies through 1000 diameters of the Earth per minute, and the distance from the Earth to the Sun should be correspondingly 12000 diameters of the Earth. Referring to George Cheyne (1672–1743), who was a physician, philosopher, and mathematician, he said that light is about six hundred thousand times faster than sound. Having analyzed the natural phenomenon — light, the philosopher continues to analyze the sources of light, which can be more eternal and abstract than the stars in the firmament. In the second chapter, the philosopher logically comes to the analysis of a natural phenomenon — the stars. The American philosopher writes about the stars that they are like our sun. He is in solidarity with Christiaan Huygens (1629–1695), a Dutch astronomer, who was famous scientists and a major figure in the scientific revolution, and who argued the same. Their ideas are similar to those of Giordano Bruno, who considered the stars to be suns, and that the planets around them should be inhabited. Unfortunately, Bruno suffered and his convictions, but they could coexist with Christian doctrine:

> "The learned Hugens has a Suspicion, that every Star may be a Sun to other Worlds in their several Vortices. Consider then the vast Extent of our Solar Vortex and into what Astonishments must we find the Grandeur and Glory of the Creator to grow upon us! Especially if it should be so (as he thinks) that all these Worlds have their Inhabitants, whose Praises are offer'd up unto our GOD!" (Mather, 1721b: 16).

Mentioning the telescope, the philosopher emphasizes its importance for research. Cotton Mather says that in recent decades, the telescope has been improving. Now it is able to bring even more distant objects of the Universe closer. To emphasize that scientific instruments do not contradict the Will of God, he finds the argument in paraphrases from the Holy Scriptures (Psalms 107:8, 15, 21, 31).

> "My GOD, I cannot look upon our Glasses without uttering thy Praises: By them I see thy Goodness to the Children of Men!" (Mather, 1721b: 16).

According to Cotton Mather, the distance to the nearest stars is so great. According to him to the nearest stars 2,404,520,928,000 miles. According to the latest research, the nearest star, Proxima Centauri, is actually 25 trillion miles away. The thinker was ten times wrong, but even such calculations are impressive. Proxima Centauri is a small star located 4.244 light-years (24,9 trillion miles) away from the Sun in the constellation of Centaurus. The American philosopher agrees with Sir Isaac Newton. He also considers the Sun to be a solid body surrounded by a radiant atmosphere. The light of the Sun comes from the burning of the Sun's surface, which can burn for a very long time. All the planets of the solar system

move in proportion, which confirms the presence of divine influence. For example, one of the most amazing planets Saturn, and around the body have a luminous ring. This oversized ring surrounds him like a hoop. Cotton Mather knew about the observations of Saturn and that the ring appears in the oval, and then disappears, which is connected with the tilt of the planet's axis. The thinker describes information about Jupiter, about Mars and its atmosphere, about Venus. He is interested in the phenomenon when the Moon looks larger on the horizon than in the sky. He agrees with René Descartes that the Moon at the horizon can be compared to objects such as hills or trees. Exploring atmospheric phenomena such as rain, snow, rainbow, the philosopher claims that there are still many mysteries of nature. He analyzes the ideas of Plato, Pliny and other thinkers of antiquity:

> "His powerful Thunder, who can understand? Yet our Philosophy will a little try to see and say something of it… What better definition of the Wind than the Stream of the Air? Plato long since defin'd it, The Motion of the Air about the Earth" (Mather, 1721b: 61, 69).

Analyzing air, not as an element, which was characteristic of ancient natural philosophers, Cotton Mather considers air to be a substance endowed with weight. This is no longer a formless matter, which permeates everything around. It is matter endowed with physical properties and weight. For the first time, Galileo thought about this. Later, Robert Boyle proved it through experiments. The philosophy of the Age of Enlightenment and Great Awakening in the United States of America has gradually become associated with experimental science. If the human mind can penetrate the secrets of nature, then the law discovered by reflection can and must be confirmed by a repeated experiment.

Air, as the philosopher argued, is vital for all animals, even those who live underwater. In the 18th century, there was a concept according to which a vital flame burns in living organisms; this subtle substance is in the heart. The flame of life is sustained by breathing, which is not really far from the truth. A rather simple concept of internal fire explained the body temperature and the vital importance of air, without which instant death occurs. When we breathe, we absorb oxygen, which starts the oxidation process with the release of heat. By their nature, both the breathing process and the combustion process are similar processes.

In the section devoted to cold, the philosopher mentions Adam Olearius (1599-1671), a German traveler who visited Muscovy. The natural philosopher is fascinated by the power of the cold. Freezing, the water expands and can lift weights, lump metal objects. In northern countries, the weather can be so cold that breathing moisture can freeze and people can suffer from frostbite.

Cotton Mather described the properties of gravity even before Cadwallader Colden (1688–1776) and his audacious claims to intellectual superiority. He explained the importance of this force, which counteracts the centrifugal force, which in turn keeps the planet in orbit. Cadwallader Colden announced in the mid-18th century that he had discovered the cause of gravity. In addition, if Isaac Newton formulated the exact laws by which it was possible to predict the effects of gravity, he could not answer one question of the causes of the properties of gravity. The American educator described his ideas in work under the title *An Explication of the First Causes of Action in Matter; and of the Cause of Gravitation?* (1746) (Dixon, 2016). Later in the American Enlightenment era, thinkers Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson (Sobolievskyi, 2018), and others will work. However, magnetism as a force is significantly different from gravity:

> "It is observed by Sturmius, That the attractive Quality of the Magnet was known to the Antients, even beyond all History. Indeed, besides what Pliny says of it, Aristotle speaks of Thales, as having said, the Stone has a Soul, because it moves iron… Once for all, Gentlemen Philosophers, the MAGNET has quite puzzled you. It shall then be no indecent Anticipation of what should have been observed at the Conclusion of this Collection, here to demand it of you, that you glorify the infinite Creator of this, and of all things, as incomprehensible" (Mather, 1721b: 108, 111).

The philosopher emphasizes the importance of all kinds of minerals for humanity; in the section on insects, he clarifies that Aristotle himself gave the name of this species of living (Entoma). Later, Pliny called them insects (Insecta). Some French philosophers considered insects to be imperfect animals, although Cotton Mather believes that they are perfect but in their own way. From insects, the philosopher goes on to describe animals and fish. Gradually he comes closer to describing a man, his body, and soul. The American philosopher is surprised by such a complex structure of the human body, which includes hundreds of bones and muscles, united into a single system:

> "REASON, what is it but a Faculty formed by GOD in the Mind of Man, enabling him to discern certain Maxims of Truth which God himself has established and to make true Inferences from them! In all the Dictates of Reason, there is the Voice of God. Whenever any reasonable thing is offered, I have GOD speaking to me…" (Mather, 1721b: 283).

Conclusions

Christian philosopher (1721) was a book that is comparable in significance to such books as Pliny's *Natural Philosophy*, *Disciplinae* by Marcus Terentius Varro. In the late Antique era and the Early Middle Ages, Pliny's encyclopedia was not forgotten, and it was used by the largest scientists of that time. Information from *Natural History* was used as a source of scientific knowledge, especially in astronomy and medicine. However, the scope of Pliny's work was much wider, and his encyclopedia was even used to compose sermons and commentaries on the Bible. Pliny was sometimes called the Latin Aristotle. Cotton Mather planned to create his own counterpart to Pliny's *Natural History*. In his book, the American philosopher of the era of the Great Awakening described all the known phenomena, all the scientific knowledge of his time. He demonstrated knowledge of the work of Galen, Pliny, Aristotle, Descartes, Boyle, Newton, and many others. The book contains quotes in the original language, written in Latin and Greek. The thinker himself calls his treatise the philosopher and is convinced of the theoretical and practical significance of his work. Unlike earlier American thinkers, the Puritans, who were primarily interested in theology and ethics, Cotton Mather was interested in experimental natural philosophy. He devotes each chapter to the glorification of God. This is not yet deism of American Enlightenment, but it is not puritanism either, which is why this philosopher can be attributed to the Great Awakening era.

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