

## *Vital Nature and Vital Piety: Johann Arndt and the Evangelical Vitalism of Cotton Mather*

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*Despite a surfeit of studies recognizing Cotton Mather's support for a range of alchemical and occult practices, historians have yet to integrate these occult activities with Mather's religious and scientific thought as a whole. I argue that we can bring clarity to Mather's engagement with the occult by refracting it through his reverence for Lutheran Pietist Johann Arndt, whose writings, especially Vier bucher vom wahren Christentum (Four Books of True Christianity), offer a key to Mather's employment of hermetic materials in his major works of natural philosophy. Through analysis of The Christian Philosopher and The Angel of Bethesda, as well as Mather's private writings, I suggest that Mather's cosmology was vitalistic in ways not previously acknowledged by historians. This view of creation as dynamic, enchanted, and marked by divine signatures—evidenced most clearly in Mather's concept of the nishmath-chajim—helped Mather reconcile the new science, Puritan covenant theology, and alchemical traditions descending from Paracelsus. By positing a divine, dynamic presence in nature, Mather retained an orthodox view of God as sovereign and transcendent while intimately engaged in a process of cosmic redemption, slowly transmuting the base matter of a fallen creation into a new heaven and new earth.*

EACH new American generation gets the Cotton Mather it desires and deserves. Over the last two centuries, the controversial and prolific Puritan minister, author, and pamphleteer has worn the mask for a motley array of movements in American intellectual history. As Richard Lovelace noted, Mather has been variously pictured as “a reactionary and a progressive; as a self-centered neurotic and a sublime mystic; as the last gasp of theocratic Puritanism and the earliest harbinger of the Enlightenment in America.”<sup>1</sup> Lovelace himself contributed a memorable addition to this costumed ball of Mathers: his Cotton, the theologically streamlined forerunner of revivalism, was cut to fit the trim, resurgent figure of American evangelicalism during the late 1970s.

The author would like to thank David D. Hall and Jan Stievermann for their advice and assistance in the preparation of this article.

<sup>1</sup>Richard Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian University Press, 1979), 2.

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This evangelical resurgence coincided with the beginning of serious reconsideration of the secularization thesis, the assertion that modernization entails the inevitable retreat of religion from the public sphere and the gradual withering of religious belief and practice at home.<sup>2</sup> These revisions rebounded on the historiography of Mather, who Perry Miller once blamed for hastening the demise of New England Puritanism—and speeding the secularizing processes of “Americanization”—by substituting the virile Calvinism of his ancestors for a flaccid faith rooted in feelings and personal experience.<sup>3</sup> Historians of science, for instance, who had debated whether to hitch Mather’s horse to the cart of liberal progress or conservative reaction, tried a new tune. Rather than laud him as a hero of emergent models of empirical medicine (in his promotion of smallpox inoculation in Boston in the 1720s) or damn him as a credulous peddler of bigotry and medieval superstition (in his defense of the Salem witchcraft trials), some developed a more complex portrait, shaded by the new mood of ambivalence and ambiguity. Rejecting the anachronistic secular binaries of natural versus supernatural, religious versus rational, historians gave us a Mather who embraced the natural philosophy of Isaac Newton and John Ray without departing in any serious respect from an orthodox sixteenth-century view of Providence. In his natural theology and medical works, Mather strove to avoid the twin extremes of Cartesian mechanism, then coming into vogue among English elites, and popular superstition, that perennial weed in the unruly flowerbeds of folk magic and astrology. Like most Protestant writers of his age, Mather fought to keep nature enchanted but not too enchanted. An imbalance in either direction, he feared, would undermine social order and weaken the conditions necessary to stoke the embers of vital piety in New England.<sup>4</sup>

We now enjoy a surfeit of studies mapping Mather’s attempts to bridge the gaps between the new science and the old theology. Yet, by framing the tension around the twin discourses of natural philosophy and Reformed theology, historians have largely ignored a third intellectual current—Christian hermeticism, alchemy, and the occult—which exercised considerable influence in Mather’s thought. As Walter Woodward notes,

<sup>2</sup>Recent debates over the state of the secular thesis have produced an extensive literature. For an introduction to debates, see Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); see also Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>See Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), 213–14.

<sup>4</sup>For examples from the history of medicine, see Louise A. Breen, “Cotton Mather, the ‘Angelical Ministry,’ and Inoculation,” *Journal of the History of Medicine* 46 (July 1991), 333–57; Patricia Ann Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction: The Preacher-Physicians of Colonial New England* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991); Margaret Humphreys Warner, “Vindicating the Minister’s Medical Role: Cotton Mather’s Concept of the *Nishmath-Chajim* and the Spiritualization of Medicine,” *Journal of the History of Medicine* 36 (July 1981), 278–95.

Mather's endorsement of alchemy in New England has received scant attention.<sup>5</sup> In part, such oversight may be blamed on the binary logic of secularization, which long skewed the way that historians read their sources by occluding epistemological middle grounds such as alchemy and vitalism. Thus, despite Mather's frequent allusions to alchemical writers in his works of physico-theology, his espousal of occult practices such as natural astrology, and his close familiarity with a range of occult studies available to Puritan elites, scholars of New England Puritanism have yet to integrate his engagement with the occult with his scientific and religious thought as a whole. As Woodward writes, the "spiritual and scientific views Mather espoused in his most important scientific work, *The Christian Philosopher*, look back as much to the European pansophic movement of the seventeenth century as they look forward to the rational Enlightenment of the eighteenth."<sup>6</sup>

In what follows, I argue that we can bring clarity to Mather's engagement with hermeticism and alchemy by viewing it through his reverence for the writings of the Lutheran Pietist Johann Arndt. Through works such as *Verus Christianismus* (*True Christianity*), Arndt offered Mather an exemplar of the spiritual life and the proper use of occult materials. Through analysis of relevant passages from *The Christian Philosopher* and his major medical treatise, *The Angel of Bethesda*, as well as Mather's private writings, I will demonstrate that Mather embraced Arndt's pietism while fully recognizing the hermetic dimensions of his work. Although a century of advances in natural philosophy, culminating in the mechanistic physics of Newton, separated Mather from the initial publication of *True Christianity* in 1609, he nevertheless advanced a vitalism of the middle way. This view of creation as dynamic, enchanted, and marked by divine signatures—expressed in concepts such as the *nishmath-chajim*—helped Mather reconcile mechanistic natural philosophy, Puritan covenant theology, and hermetic traditions descending from Paracelsus. In much of Mather's work, this vitalist sensibility is pervasive yet undertheorized, practical rather than speculative, concerned with fostering conditions conducive to the promotion of vital piety in the souls, congregations, and communities of New England. By positing a divine, dynamic presence in nature, Mather sought to skirt the Scylla and Charybdis of mechanism and superstition, retaining an orthodox view of God as sovereign and transcendent while intimately engaged in a process of cosmic redemption and regeneration, slowly transmuting the base matter of the fallen creation into a new heaven and new earth.

By the term vitalism I intend a cosmological stance, rooted in the traditions of the Hermetic Renaissance, Jewish Cabbala, and Neoplatonism, which posits

<sup>5</sup>Walter W. Woodward, *Prospero's America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606–1676* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 207.

<sup>6</sup>Woodward, 207–08.

the existence of a “life force” divine in origin and present in all matter, organic and inorganic alike. Vitalism sees nature as dynamic and united through its shared possession of this secret spark, a hidden force or “arcanum” that, as W. R. Ward writes, is “the improver of all virtue in things . . . incorporeal and immortal . . . [with] the power to renew and restore.”<sup>7</sup> In using the word, I invoke Ward’s suggestion that vitalism constitutes an important component of the thought-world of early evangelicalism.<sup>8</sup> For Ward, vitalism captures several related aspects of the early evangelical mentalité. In addition to describing a cosmological stance and a theological conception of divine action in the world, it also communicates the social energy of evangelicalism as a practice and theology. Responding to a perceived crisis of piety in institutional Protestantism, English Puritans such as William Ames and Lewis Bayley and Lutheran Pietists such as Johann Arndt and Philipp Jakob Spener sought to kick start the stalled Reformation through the publication of devotional works that stressed godly living and the cultivation of a state of experiential union with the person of Christ, a living faith commonly known as “vital piety.” For early evangelicals, a lively faith and a lively sense of nature went hand in hand.

Of course, not all forms of liveliness were permissible. Just as piety could, when warmed by strange fires, bubble up into enthusiasm, vitalist models of nature could easily stray into dangerous territory. Mather dismissed the “plastick nature” of Cambridge Platonists such as Ralph Cudworth, who posited an active, immanent spirit or divine substance that carried out its duties unconsciously in nature, not unlike the Platonic *anima mundi*. While Mather found the suggestion of an essential unity without distinction between creator and creation incompatible with his sense of orthodoxy, his critique of the Cambridge Platonists did not signal a fundamental opposition to vitalism itself. Like John Ray and Isaac Newton, Mather nourished the belief that some variant of vitalism was required to resist the materialist dangers implicit in mechanism—dangers which, in granting widening explanatory power to the concepts of matter and motion, posed troubling

<sup>7</sup>W. R. Ward, *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History, 1670–1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 11. Until recently, vitalism has interested mainly historians of Renaissance and early Enlightenment science. See Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) and John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996). The present essay attempts to bring this category to bear upon the history of American religion.

<sup>8</sup>Boyd Hilton makes a related point when he states that evangelical “vital religion” in the early nineteenth century was “the counterpart of vitalism in physiology, to catastrophism in geology, and to mechanistic dualism in natural philosophy generally.” See Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 300.

questions to traditional beliefs about the non-material world—including God, mind, heaven, and the soul—and the foundations of morality.

Rather than look to England for a metaphysic to anchor his natural theology, Mather turned to the Continent, specifically the Lutheran Pietists encamped at Halle around August Hermann Francke, heirs to a school of mystical piety inaugurated by *True Christianity*, Johann Arndt's classic manual of devotion. If Mather criticized the Cambridge Platonists, he had only praise for Arndt, whose works properly subordinated all earthly pursuits—medical, scientific, economic—to the religion of the heart. By seeking first the kingdom and its righteousness, Puritans and Pietists together affirmed that God would bless the spiritual seedpods of Halle and Boston, guaranteeing their steady growth in practical knowledge and economic prosperity, ameliorating physical need and suffering, spurring hopes of the dawning millennial age, and attracting the eyes of the world.

### I. COTTON MATHER AND CHRISTIAN HERMETICISM

Historians have tended to view Cotton Mather as a bridge between seventeenth-century New England, which enjoyed a relatively high degree of ethnic and cultural homogeneity, and the early eighteenth century, when such uniformity came under mounting pressure from a range of social, economic, political, intellectual, and environmental forces. Counted among these challenges was the mechanistic natural philosophy of Isaac Newton, whose *Principia* (1687) presented the universe as an ordered and highly regulated system of natural laws. Though Newton construed his physics as a defense of traditional conceptions of divine action, with the passing of time, many observers (Newton among them) recognized that waxing attention to secondary causes opened up dramatic reconceptions of the First Cause in Protestant theology. Mather's writings reveal a sustained effort to integrate the new mechanistic science with his Puritan cosmology. Yet, this attempt to harmonize apparent tensions between God's two books, nature and scripture, drew on a third stream: the traditions of alchemy and Christian hermeticism. Only by attending to all of these influences—Reformed theology, the new science, and the occult—can we begin to see Mather's natural theology in the round.

Mather's engagement with the occult was nothing if not complex. One reason that historians have been so late in appreciating its role is that he so often seems to condemn it outright. For instance, in *Angel of Bethesda*, Mather denounces the widespread belief in astrology, particularly its influence on medicine through the works of the English alchemist Nicholas Culpepper: "The Assigning of particular *Plants* to particular *Planets*, or to say, as your *Culpepper* continually does, that such an Herb is governed by

*Saturn . . . and the Rest; It is a Folly akin to the Idolatry and the Superstition of the Roman-Catholics, in looking to Saints, for their influences on our Several Diseases. Tis amazing to see Mankind so Planet-Struck.*"<sup>9</sup>

By limiting ourselves to such flourishes we see but half the picture. A closer reading reveals a sustained effort to discriminate between "good" and "bad" varieties of occult practice. Mather praised the "noble Medicines" of the most prominent alchemist in the New England colony, John Winthrop Jr.; in *Magnalia Christi Americana*, he celebrated Winthrop as a "true adept" and a "Christian Hermes."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, throughout *Angel of Bethesda*, Mather cites alchemical authors with approval. His medical theory of the *nishmath-chajim*, an element in the human body responsible for regulating relations between the spiritual and physical worlds, draws on the hermetic notion of the *archaeus*, a spiritual life force present in all human bodies, developed by the Belgian alchemist Jan Baptista van Helmont. Mather concocted medicines that were distributed by New England alchemists and once scribbled the location of a medicinal recipe by van Helmont onto the frontispiece of his copy of the *Transactions* of the Royal Philosophical Society. Indeed, as late as 1717, Mather comes off as planet-struck in his correspondence to the Royal Society, calculating the effect of the heavenly bodies on natural processes such as planting and reaping crops.<sup>11</sup>

When historians have taken account of Mather's engagement with the occult, they have viewed it as erratic, a jumbled miscellany of appropriations from a hodgepodge of sources. We might correct this misreading by viewing Mather's occult interests through the lens of his respect for Johann Arndt. The writings of Arndt and other Lutheran Pietists such as A. W. Boehm, Arndt's first English translator, reinforced the practical vitalism that undergirds Mather's scientific and medical writings. In them, Mather may have perceived a model for his own attempts to discern "true" from "false" systems of hermetic thought: the faithful manipulation of the occult forces in nature to speed the advancement of the Kingdom of God versus the devilish practices that diverted these powerful currents into the gutters of personal greed and ambition.

Directed by their interest in scientific questions, historians have tracked the influence on *The Christian Philosopher* and *The Angel of Bethesda* of contemporary treatises of natural philosophy and physico-theology, while

<sup>9</sup>Cotton Mather, *The Angel of Bethesda*, edited by Gordon W. Jones (Barre, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1972), 301.

<sup>10</sup>Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, vol. 1 (Hartford: Silus Andrus and Son, 1853), 157–62.

<sup>11</sup>Woodward, 208. See also Michael P. Winship, "Cotton Mather, Astrologer," *New England Quarterly*, LII (1990), 308–14; David Levin, "Giants in the Earth: Science and the Occult in Cotton Mather's Letters to the Royal Society," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., LV (1988), 751–70.

paying little attention to nonscientific works such as Arndt's *True Christianity*. Similar lacunae persist in the literature on Puritan–Pietist networks. While studies of Pietism have certainly flourished over the last three decades, we have yet to understand it sufficiently in an Atlantic context. As Jonathan Strom notes, German scholars have focused largely on mainstream “Church Pietists” and ignored North America; American scholars have focused on radical Pietist sectarians while ignoring their orthodox brethren. Strom writes, “scholars of American religious history, while frequently acknowledging the numerous influences of Pietism on religion in North America, generally have not integrated themes of Pietism into their work.”<sup>12</sup> As early as 1961, Ernst Benz called on historians to pay greater attention to the reception and influence of Arndt's *True Christianity* on American religion.<sup>13</sup> A half-century later, still we wait.

The point is not to overdraw Arndt's influence. Rather, I suggest that we try to see Mather as he saw himself: as the would-be Johann Arndt of New England, the representative of a “true *American Pietism*.”<sup>14</sup> As a close reading of *The Christian Philosopher* and *Angel of Bethesda* demonstrates, Mather fully recognized the hermetic dimensions of Arndt's *True Christianity*, a work that stands behind his own synthesis of orthodox theology, mechanistic science, and Christian hermeticism. For both Mather and Arndt, natural philosophy and medicine were intended for the service of piety: vital religion fed and flowed from a vital sense of nature. It is to a closer consideration of Arndt's thought and Mather's reception of it that we now turn.

## II. VITAL NATURE AND VITAL PIETY: JOHANN ARNDT AND THE FOURTH BOOK OF *TRUE CHRISTIANITY*

Although Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) is typically considered the founder of Pietism, Johann Arndt (1555–1621) may have truer claim to the

<sup>12</sup>Jonathan Strom, Hartmut Lehmann, and James Van Horn Melton, eds., *Pietism in Germany and North America, 1680–1820* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009), 2–3.

<sup>13</sup>“The broad influence of Arndt upon English and American Protestantism,” Benz wrote, “should receive special attention.” See Ernst Benz, “Ecumenical Relations between Boston Puritanism and German Pietism: Cotton Mather and August Hermann Francke,” *Harvard Theological Review* 54, no. 3 (July 1961), 161; See also Ernst Benz, “Pietist and Puritan Sources of Early Protestant World Missions (Cotton Mather and A. H. Francke),” *Church History* 20, no. 2 (June 1951), 28–55.

<sup>14</sup>Cotton Mather, *The Diary of Cotton Mather II*, ed. Worthington C. Ford, *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Seventh Series VII–VIII (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1912), 23. Of course, Richard Lovelace, in *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather*, suggested that we do just this; however, his argument is concerned with showing the congruity between the Pietist and Puritan promotion of evangelical piety; mine is with demonstrating the congruity between Arndtian and Matherian cosmology.

title. A Lutheran theologian and mystical writer who served in various pastorates during his career and as a superintendent of ecclesiastical affairs at Celle, Arndt set down the movement's major themes a half-century before Spener's *Pia Desideria*. First among these was a desire to reach out and take hold of the "new life" promised by the gospel. Believing that the catalyzing energy of the Reformation had spent itself on partisan wrangling and arid scholasticism, Arndt proposed a return to first principles, a turn from orthodox formalism to a vibrant, inward, and active faith.

Observing that zealous Lutherans had razed the grand houses of Catholic devotion while building nothing to take their place, Arndt branded himself the architect of a new piety. In 1612, he published *Little Paradise Garden*, a bestseller through which he endeavored to set up a school of prayer. Somewhat controversially, he returned to the well of classic medieval devotion, translating Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* and editing several versions of the *Theologia Deutsch*. The influence of the great Catholic mystics—Angela da Foligno, Bernard of Clairvaux, Meister Eckhart, and Johann Tauler—would be most evident in *True Christianity*, a work that helped set the emergent chords of evangelical piety in England and America over the eighteenth century and beyond.<sup>15</sup>

By any measure, *True Christianity* must be ranked among the most influential works of Protestant devotion ever produced. As Johannes Wallmann notes, no other book apart from the Bible itself enjoyed comparable rates of circulation in early Protestant history.<sup>16</sup> The first full edition, *Vier bucher vom wahren Christentum (Four Books of True Christianity)*, was published in 1609. By 1740, the work had run through ninety-five editions in Latin, English, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, French, Czech, Russian, and Icelandic.

The first three books of *True Christianity* share an anthropological concern: as Wallmann puts it, the "re-establishment of the image of God in the human soul."<sup>17</sup> Through interiorization and self-observation, the individual ascends on rungs of purgation and illumination to eventual union with Christ. In the fourth book, however, Arndt steps off the mystic's ladder to take up cosmology. His theme is the ancient trope of *liber natura*, the "book of nature." As macrocosm is to microcosm, Arndt writes, so the universe is to the human body. Smaller and greater worlds are tethered with lineaments of sympathy. Arndt opens in the following manner:

<sup>15</sup>Ward, *Early Evangelicalism*, 9.

<sup>16</sup>Johannes Wallman, "Johann Arndt (1555–1621)," in *The Pietist Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Carter Lindberg (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 21.

<sup>17</sup>Wallman, 32.



Moses, the Prince of prophets, in his book of Genesis, produces two very strong proofs of the Being of a God. The first is taken from the Macrocosm, or great world. The second from the Microcosm, or lesser world, which is man. And because by these the Maker and Preserver of all things is manifested, and in lively characters engraved upon our hearts; therefore the Holy Scriptures do frequently appeal to them both. I also intend in this book to follow the same method, and by various reflections upon both the greater and the lesser world, endeavour to show, that the creatures are as it were the Hands and Messengers of God, in a sound and Christian sense, leading us to the knowledge of God and Christ.<sup>18</sup>

For Arndt and other proponents of a hermetic piety, God was the driving force in matter, an all-pervading essence, the unitive bedrock beneath a flurry of observable forms, organic and inorganic alike. This conception descended from the writings of Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, also known as Paracelsus, a peripatetic doctor and theologian born in Switzerland and educated in Italy. Paracelsus rejected the ancient Greek system of medicine descended from Galen, which diagnosed illness as an imbalance in one of the four humors, treatment consisting in the logic of opposition (excessive dryness, for instance, being treated with wet, excessive heat with cold), in favor of novel approach, which reduced the list of elements from four to three (a number more congenial to Christian theology) and assigned particular illnesses to specific organs in the body, which were treated experimentally with chemical therapies. Basic to the Paracelsian worldview was the notion that humanity was reflected in the cosmos and shared one and the same essence with it. This *quintessentia*, the so-called fifth element, was the aim of the alchemist's efforts. It flowed freely from God himself, infusing all matter with the spark of life.<sup>19</sup>

Paracelsian vitalism attracted Arndt and later Pietists who sought to vitalize religion, whose liveliness they felt had been wasted on abstruse polemical debates. Vitalism, Ward notes, also appealed for its promise in addressing "the perceived weaknesses of a mechanical or materialist philosophy."<sup>20</sup> This promise was not lost on later English natural philosophers such as Isaac Newton and John Ray nor, indeed, on their American contemporaries. In Arndtian vitalism, Mather found a practical means of resisting both

<sup>18</sup>Johann Arndt, *Of True Christianity*, second ed. (London, 1720), vol. 2, para. I (quoted in Ward, 9).

<sup>19</sup>Recent important studies of Paracelsus include Charles Webster, *Paracelsus: Medicine, Magic, and Mission at the End of Time* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008); Andrew Weeks, *Paracelsus: Speculative Theory and the Crisis of the Early Reformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Walter Pagel, *Paracelsus: An Introduction to Philosophical Medicine in the Era of the Renaissance*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Karger, 1982).

<sup>20</sup>Ward, 11.

materialism and the unorthodox occult, preserving a strong sense of a world sustained, enlivened, and improved by divine presence.

In 1713, Mather shifted from his failing efforts to secure publication for *Biblia Americana* to a new project on natural philosophy, which would in time become *The Christian Philosopher*.<sup>21</sup> That same year, Mather found himself increasingly captivated by the spiritual writings and energetic reform efforts of Lutheran Pietists, a captivation fed by his correspondence with August Hermann Francke and Anthony W. Boehm, the Hallensian who in 1712 completed the first full English translation of *True Christianity* (a copy of which he sent to Mather) while serving as chaplain to Prince George of Denmark, the consort of Queen Anne.<sup>22</sup> In a diary entry from March 1713, Mather confided his respect for the “admirable Piety, shining among the Professors of the modern Pietism.” He praised the Lutheran writers as “notable Dawns of the Kingdome of God among the Children of Men,” whose efforts inspired him to “seek a particular preparation for Services which I may do, in the coming in of the Kingdome of God.”<sup>23</sup>

Mather’s diary reveals a particularly strong engagement with *True Christianity* during 1715 and 1716, the same period in which he finished writing *The Christian Philosopher*.<sup>24</sup> In an entry in February 1716, Mather reported his intention to begin a practice of reading to his wife, Lydia, each morning from Arndt’s devotional manual as they lay in bed. “It may not only be a Service to myself,” he wrote, “but also greatly serve the Interests of Piety in my excellent Consort, if I should use, every Morning before I rise, to read a Chapter in my dear *Arndt*; and communicate unto her the principal Thoughts occurring on it.”<sup>25</sup>

A few weeks later, Mather reported an intense desire for union with God, a desire inflected with Arndtian notes of mystical self-annihilation. “That Sort of prayer or that Elevation of the Mind in Prayer, which is in the *Verus Christianismus* called, *Supernatural Prayer*, is what I would exceedingly aspire unto, and grow more experienced in,” he wrote in the entry for March 4, 1716. “I would soar towards it, in great Essays at the *sacrificing-Stroke*, which with a Self annihilation will bring me on towards an Union with God . . . and when I feel in this way GOD becoming All in All unto me, I would

<sup>21</sup>Mather’s original title for the work was *The Christian Virtuoso*.

<sup>22</sup>Ward, 10.

<sup>23</sup>Mather, *Diary* II, 193.

<sup>24</sup>His initial exposure to Arndt’s devotional classic came through the 1708 Latin translation, a copy of which remains in the Mather’s library. See Kennerly M. Woody, “Bibliographic Notes for Mather’s *Manuductio Ad Ministerio*,” *Early American Literature* 6.1, Supplement (Spring 1971), 15. A. W. Boehme later sent Mather a copy of his English translation, in two volumes; the first volume was released in 1712, the second in 1714.

<sup>25</sup>Mather, *Diary* II, 335–336. Mather seems to have been reading Arndt’s work in Latin, as he was proposing to translate its ideas for his wife.

be entirely swallowed up in Him.”<sup>26</sup> In the entry for March 18, he repeats his plan for daily readings from *True Christianity*, making them the meat of his private prayers later in his library: “of how much Advantage may it be, to the Interests of Piety, in my Heart and Life!”<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about the process by which Mather managed to secure the publication of *The Christian Philosopher*, which appeared in London in 1720. His diary suggests he feared resistance to its publication, as he had found in the case of *Biblia Americana*.<sup>28</sup> On March 8, 1716, Mather lamented the misuse of the new natural philosophy and despaired that his extensive commitments prevented him from writing a work that might restore right relation between nature and nature’s God: “Is there no Possibility, for me, to find the Time, that I may contrive a System of the Sciences wherein they shall be rescued from Vanity and Corruption, and become consecrated unto the glorious Intention of *living unto God*, and the real and only Wisdome?” For Mather, scientific knowledge was no end in itself. By offering evidences and illustrations of God’s might, wisdom, and goodness, science served as a powerful engine of piety, a goad to holy living. He sensed that his Pietist correspondents understood this truth far better than the natural philosophers in London. Referencing Halle, the university founded in 1694 by Frederick I of Prussia, Mather wrote, “If I see, that I cannot obtain the Liesure for it, I will address my Friends in the *Frederician University*.”<sup>29</sup>

Mather spied declension not only in the metropole of London. On April 27, 1716, lamenting the declining educational standards at Harvard, he resolved to make a donation of “certain Books,” including *True Christianity*, that might “correct the present wretched Methods of Education there.”<sup>30</sup> Nearly a week later, on May 1, he announced a plan to extend Arndt’s reach beyond his wife’s bedside to include the rest of his household, including his servants. “For my Table-talk in my Family,” Mather wrote, “I would oblige my Kinsman in the Morning to read a Portion in the *Verus Christianismus* of my *Arndt*, and at the Table, I would call for, some Repetition of it, and make it one of the Subjects, which I would inculcate on my Domesticks.”<sup>31</sup> While there is no record of whether his domestic staff appreciated this new daily discipline, Mather’s efforts to share the love of his “dear Arndt” bore fruit

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 337.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 341.

<sup>28</sup>Indeed, it took until the twenty-first century for Mather’s 4,500-page manuscript to find its first publisher. Mohr Siebeck and Baker Academic plan to publish the *Biblia* in ten volumes, having released the first in 2010. See Cotton Mather, *Biblia Americana, Volume 1: Genesis*, ed. Reiner Smolinski (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010).

<sup>29</sup>Mather, *Diary II*, 339–40.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 348.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

with at least one member of his family. When his daughter, Katy, began suffering from consumption at the age of 27, Mather drew comfort from the fact that she cited *True Christianity* as her favorite book.<sup>32</sup>

What attracted Mather to Arndt? Clearly, his devotion to a religion of the heart. Though separated by a century, Mather saw himself addressing a similar crisis of piety in the church. His zeal for revival fed his interest in natural philosophy. Vital piety was linked to a view of nature as dynamic and alive with the activity of God. In words that might apply equally to Mather, A. W. Boehm used his 1716 preface to Arndt's *Garden of Paradise* to defend the usefulness of *True Christianity* to students of natural philosophy. Arndt's writings are to be praised, Boehm writes, because they "do happily keep the *Middle-way*, betwixt *False Enthusiasm*, and *False Naturalism*, the two great and dangerous Rocks so many do split upon in these latter Days."<sup>33</sup> Mather set for himself just such a task in *The Christian Philosopher*: the pursuit of a middle way between superstition and materialism. Through Arndt's vitalist vision, we begin to see how Mather's engagement with the occult was more than erratic and come by chance: it was an armature on which to hang his assemblage of plundered curiosities and observations.

### III. JOHANN ARNDT AND *THE CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHER*

*The Christian Philosopher* is a largely derivative work. This fact should not undercut appreciation of its importance, especially in an age when writers drew freely from other works without indication of debt. *The Christian Philosopher* represents the first serious attempt by an American writer to grapple with the new natural philosophy of Newton and John Ray. As Winton Solberg notes, it is "the best record we have of an advanced understanding of the roots of science in America in the early eighteenth century."<sup>34</sup>

*The Christian Philosopher* fits the genre of physico-theology, which by the end of the seventeenth century enjoyed enormous popularity in England. An arm of natural theology that seeks to establish the existence and qualities of God from evidence of purpose and design in the natural world, it was dominated by a singular theme: the harmony of science and religion. Most often, writers employed some form of the design argument, which enjoyed a long tradition running back to Plato.

<sup>32</sup>E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Family Literacy in Early 18th-Century Boston: Cotton Mather and His Children," *Reading Research Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (Autumn 1991), 359.

<sup>33</sup>Quoted in Benz, "Ecumenical Relations," 162.

<sup>34</sup>Solberg, "Introduction to Mather," *Christian Philosopher*, lxix.

While *Christian Philosopher* confidently sings the harmony of nature and scripture, Mather indicates his awareness of rising challenges to the harmonial position. “*Atheism* is now for ever chased and hissed out of the World,” he writes, perhaps gesturing to the fashionable materialism of Hobbes and Descartes: “every thing in the World concurs to a Sentence of *Banishment* upon it.”<sup>35</sup> Such emergent threats no doubt fueled Mather’s attraction to Arndt. A total of 114 lines in *The Christian Philosopher* are drawn from *True Christianity*—a not-inconsiderable number, though they pale in comparison to works of natural philosophy and physico-theology, notably those of William Derham, from whom Mather drew 2,104 lines, or nineteen-percent of his text, and John Ray, from whom he drew 1,530 lines, or nearly fourteen-percent of his text.<sup>36</sup> Given these differences, it is perhaps unsurprising that historians have paid far greater attention to Mather’s reliance on the great English naturalists than on German Protestant mystics. Yet, as Solberg suggests, a purely quantitative analysis of Mather’s debt to *True Christianity* offers a misleading account of its influence.<sup>37</sup>

For one thing, it makes sense that Mather would pilfer more prodigally from works of natural philosophy than from a manual of spiritual devotion. Derham and Ray were both naturalists, their close observations of the animal, vegetable, and mineral creation served as the raw ore that Mather mined for his comprehensive survey of the natural world. When Mather cites Arndt, in contrast, it is not to pad his manuscript. The references to *True Christianity* in *The Christian Philosopher* frame Mather’s fundamental purpose, a purpose he shared with Arndt: that nature should be studied to stoke the fires of vital piety. Just as Mather saw himself as the Arndt of New England, he hoped that *The Christian Philosopher* might become the *True Christianity* for a new century. Living at a time when human knowledge of the natural world was expanding rapidly, Mather felt all the more strongly the need to equate knowledge of nature with piety, a classic trope of the Christian hermeticist.

Mather cites Arndt seventeen times in *The Christian Philosopher*, on topics as various as water, mountains, minerals, man, plants, the stars, and the sun (his work appears anonymously on eleven occasions). Appropriately, Mather begins his physico-theology with the phenomenon of light, the first of God’s creations according to the Genesis narrative. In Christian hermetic thought, the scriptural primacy of light affords further alchemical interpretation. As Ward notes, “the light that was God’s creative agent in the beginning could

<sup>35</sup>Mather, *Christian Philosopher*, 308.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 1. Solberg has shown that Mather also drew significantly on the works of John Harris (1,263 lines, or eleven-percent of the text), George Cheyne, and Nehemiah Grew (Solberg, lxi–lxii).

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, lxiii.

be identified with the active alchemical agent”; typological exegesis frequently identified this purified essence animating and pervading all material reality with Christ himself.<sup>38</sup> Thus, it is fitting that the first Arndtian reference in *The Christian Philosopher* appears in the inaugural essay, “Of the Light.” After citing the commonplace that in the contemplation of light the mind begins to know God, Mather writes, “The *Verus Christianismus* of the pious *John Arndt* very well does insist upon that Strain of Piety; GOD and His LOVE exhibited in the *Light*.”

Mather continues to cite Arndt as an authority in the second essay, which addresses the stars. Concerning their vast number, Mather cites a Latin quotation from the “learned *Arndt*”: the spiritual significance of the great number of stars which God has arrayed in the heavens is to indicate the hidden presence of an even greater number of celestial spirits dedicated to God’s unceasing praise. In the hermetic logic of correspondence, nature echoes supernature.

Interestingly, Mather would certainly have disagreed with Arndt’s conclusion in Book Two of *True Christianity* that most sicknesses “come about for the most part through the stars.” Yet, nowhere in his writings does he express any concern about potentially false or heretical errors in Arndt. Perhaps the latter’s declared opposition in *True Christianity* to what he called the “misuse of astrology” mollified Mather. Certainly, he would have found common cause with Arndt’s affirmation that that “the heavenly bodies do have an influence on our life,” particularly as Arndt acknowledges in the same passage that “all the activities of the stars are brought under the rule of faith and prayer.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, nowhere in his voluminous writings does Mather see fit to condemn a single aspect of Arndt’s cosmological positions or attempt to sift an “orthodox” line of spiritual teaching from some of his more controversial or potentially heterodox views. On the contrary, nearly every quotation from *True Christianity* in *The Christian Philosopher* is drawn from Book Four, the locus of Arndt’s Paracelsian meditations on the book of nature. This suggests that Mather considered Arndt no less an authority in matters of natural philosophy than of piety.

Mather’s failure to qualify his endorsement of Arndt’s vitalist cosmology is surprising, given contemporary controversies over the orthodoxy of *True Christianity*.<sup>40</sup> A. W. Boehm, in his introduction to the 1714 English translation (a copy of which he sent to Mather), acknowledges these controversies directly. “It is possible,” Boehm writes, “that some . . . will be

<sup>38</sup>Ward, 12.

<sup>39</sup>Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, ed. and trans. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 217.

<sup>40</sup>In recent years, German scholars have energetically debated Arndt’s orthodoxy; see Hans Otte and Hans Schneider, eds. *Frömmigkeit oder Theologie: Johann Arndt und die Vier Bücher vom wahren Christentum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

offended at several Passages in the Fourth Book, which are, I confess, by no means reconcilable to certain Principles now generally received among our Virtuosi." After a century of discovery, natural philosophy had made much of his work seem antiquated. But Boehm asked his readers to remember that future generations might look similarly askance at many of their ideas about the natural world. He writes, "what may be in this Part either defective or amiss, the more Curious may easily supply or correct from Mr. [Robert] Boyle, Dr. [Nehemiah] Grew, and Mr. [John] Ray; who have indeed admirably cultivated this Province, and make Philosophy subservient to Religion."<sup>41</sup> In scientific matters, Arndt's work might be supplemented rather than replaced.

On matters of divinity, Boehm similarly addresses those in his audience ready to dismiss Arndt's theology as old fashioned. Here he is much less accommodating. "No matter whether he be charged with Popery or Puritanism," Boehm writes, "the whole Substance of his Doctrine is to stand in the old Paths of the Saints, and to be exercised in the true Following of Christ."<sup>42</sup> One might conclude Mather was of much the same mind. Again, Mather's strongest endorsement of Arndt's orthodoxy lies in the fact that virtually all of his quotations from *True Christianity* are drawn from Book Four, where Arndt's Paracelsian trappings are most on display.

In Essay 23, Mather signals directly and positively his awareness of Arndt's hermetic credentials. Identifying Arndt only as "a *German Writer*," Mather quotes his views on the spiritual significance of mountain ranges—"like so many natural chemical furnaces in which God tempers and matures various metals and minerals."<sup>43</sup> Mather's quotation suggests his familiarity with the hermetic metaphor of God as alchemist engaged in the spiritual and physical purification of matter, using the earth itself as a great crucible. As God sifts and refines the souls of the elect through affliction and the interiorized stages of sanctification, the godly alchemist engages in the experimental manipulation of natural forces for the glorification of God and the expansion of the divine kingdom.

In a later essay, Mather likewise invokes Arndt when discussing the spiritual lessons drawn from consideration of the plant world. After expanding on the "Vegetable Sermons" of the trees, those "*Field-Preachers*" who, like "*Angels flying thro the midst of Heaven*," cry "*Fear God, and glorify him!*" Mather paraphrases an observation of the "*pious Arndt*" that "every Creature is enstamp'd with Characters of the Divine Goodness, and brings Testimonies

<sup>41</sup> Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, vol. 2, trans. A. W. Boehm (London: Joseph Downing, 1714), iv.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, iv–v.

<sup>43</sup> Mather, *Christian Philosopher*, 105. Solberg's translation is from the Latin.

of a good Creator.”<sup>44</sup> In one sense, this observation fits the main current of natural theology: that nature flows in harmony with scripture in testifying to the glory, power, and goodness of God. At the same time, however, the notion of divine signatures has a specific lineage within the Christian hermetic tradition. In this “science of symbols,” the law of correspondence drew on the Neoplatonic view that nature functioned as the “exterior form of the supernatural.”<sup>45</sup> Again, Mather invokes Arndt as an authority in a way that indicates his support of concepts basic to alchemical and hermetic thought.

Mather closes his section on the vegetable world with an extended extract from *True Christianity*. As it summarizes a driving motive behind Mather’s naturalist activities (and that of Protestant natural theology more generally), it bears quoting at length:

The sun, the moon, and all the host of heaven, when they give their light, bear witness at the same time to the majesty and goodness of Him that made them. The earth praises God when it is fruitful and flourishing. The herbs and flowers, by their fragrance, beauty, and variety of colors, show forth the might and wisdom of their Maker. The birds with their songs; the trees with their fruits; the sea with its inhabitants; in short, all the creatures in their several places, praise the God that made them, whilst they fulfill his will, and answer the end for which they were created. And not only so, but they call upon mankind, by the virtues and powers which God has implanted in them, as witnesses of his wisdom and goodness, to praise and glorify God.<sup>46</sup>

To Arndt, creation is a tireless evangelist, preaching day and night the eternal qualities of the creator: all good, all wise, all powerful. True knowledge of the creation is coterminous with theodicy; properly apprehended, it provokes a uniform response in the naturalist—a deepening of piety, manifested through holy living and a desire to share the good news with one’s fellow creatures. The investigation of secondary causes is prolegomena to wisdom, knowledge of the first cause that set all things in motion and then sifts and refines them through hidden, diurnal processes—an arduous walk of purification that in due time will bear a cosmic regeneration of heaven and earth.

#### IV. FROM “PLASTICK NATURE” TO *NISHMATH-CHAJIM*: HELMONTIAN VITALISM AND *THE ANGEL OF BETHESDA*

When searching for reasons to explain Cotton Mather’s deep identification with Johann Arndt, one must take into account their shared interest in the healing arts.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>45</sup>Ward, 10.

<sup>46</sup>Mather, *Christian Philosopher*, 150.



Like Mather, Arndt studied medicine at Basel and a close associative bond between theology and medicine pervades his writings. For Arndt and Mather, divinity and philosophy were eminently practical sciences. Since all sickness derived ultimately from sin, Lutheran Pietism and New England Puritanism approached the healing of bodies hand in hand with the healing of souls.

It is therefore not surprising to find Arndt's shadow looming over Mather's most important medical work, *The Angel of Bethesda*. In some ways, *Angel* should be viewed as a companion volume to *The Christian Philosopher*, a compendium of medical theories, therapies, and cures that reveals Mather's voluminous knowledge of traditional and alchemical medical authorities. Indeed, alchemical influence sits at the heart of *Angel*. Mather's theory of the *nishmath-chajim*, a half-physical, half-spiritual element that regulates the human body before and after the Resurrection, mediating between the physical and spiritual worlds, was derived largely from the theory of the archaicus, developed by the mystic, doctor, and Paracelsian disciple, Jan Baptista van Helmont (1579–1644).

Some historians have interpreted the *nishmath-chajim* as Mather's effort to buttress the medical authority of New England's ministerial class at a time when this authority was being questioned.<sup>47</sup> Certainly, Mather worried about the decline in ministerial authority and regarded the high number of preacher-physicians in New England as one fact that favorably set off the colonies from England. He writes, "the Greatest Frequency of *Angelical Conjunction*—the common term for this combined ministry of soul and body—has been seen in these Parts of *America*."<sup>48</sup> But ministerial prestige was not the only prism through which Mather refracted his ideas. While intending *Angel* as a practical home medical text, a *vade mecum*, Mather had loftier ambitions. Specifically, he hoped its publication would signal a decisive moment in the war against Hobbesian materialism. The repudiation of Hobbes, whose denial of spirit and ethical relativism threatened orthodox Protestant beliefs by reducing all reality to motion and matter, was a signature of English natural theology during the seventeenth century.<sup>49</sup> By demonstrating and explaining the activities of spirit, naturalists believed they could prove the existence of God—a belief that drove the study of witchcraft, among other subjects. *The Angel of Bethesda* falls clearly within this tradition.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup>See, most notably, Margaret Humphreys Warner, "Vindicating the Minister's Medical Role: Cotton Mather's Concept of the *Nishmath-Chajim* and the Spiritualization of Medicine," *Journal of the History of Medicine* 36 (July 1981): 278–95.

<sup>48</sup>Mather, *Magnalia*, 493.

<sup>49</sup>See Samuel Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan: Seventeenth-Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1962); Rogers, *Matter of Revolution*; and Reill, *Vitalizing Nature*.

<sup>50</sup>Warner, 282.

As his writings testify, Mather was deeply concerned with finding new ways to promote spiritual renewal in New England. His engagement with medicine flowed from his ministerial commitments, which included the belief that physical illness had ultimate spiritual causes and that God periodically employed disease and sickness to afflict his elect. This view of medical providentialism was widely shared in earlier Puritan culture, but in Mather's day, other positions had begun to emerge which ignored the spiritual sources of illness to focus purely on natural causes. The threats posed by emergent materialist accounts in medicine were broadly analogous to those facing natural philosophy.

Mather began working in earnest on *Angel* in 1720, completing it in 1724. Unlike *The Christian Philosopher*, he never succeeded in finding a publisher. Throughout these years, his engagement with Arndt continued. In his diary entry for February 23, 1723, Mather prayed that Jesus, the light of the world, might be "a Principle of Life in me, disposing and quickening of me to every Thing that is holy and just and good."<sup>51</sup> On one level, his desires are wholly compatible with conventional Reformed theology. However, his simple words may also allude to a hermetic subcurrent. As his "dear Arndt" professed in Book Two of *True Christianity*, "God himself is the essential life and the life of all living things . . . . God's goodness shines forth from all creatures as from the book of nature."<sup>52</sup> Life, for both Mather and Arndt, was the essential principle: how to tap and unleash it on a groaning creation.

A typical chapter of *Angel* describes a particular disease or condition, draws moral lessons from it, and concludes with a long list of opinions for treatment, culling from a wide range of medical authorities and folk remedies. But the entire work is underwritten by Mather's notion of the *nishmath-chajim*—a Hebrew term, meaning "breath of life," which Mather drew from the second chapter of Genesis. He believed his discovery of the *nishmath-chajim* would demolish the threat posed by atheist forms of mechanism, provide a scientific demonstration for the existence of witchcraft, and establish the spiritual dimension of bodily disease and medical treatment. Mather felt his discovery important enough to publish the *nishmath-chajim* chapter separately as a pamphlet in 1722.

No particular aspect of Mather's conception of the *nishmath-chajim* is unique—the chapter consists of thoughts and insights gleaned from other writers, in particular the French physician, Jean Fernel (1497–1558), Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688), and especially van Helmont (1579–1644), whose concept of the *archaeus* runs throughout. Its

<sup>51</sup>Mather, *Diary II*, 700.

<sup>52</sup>Arndt, 213.

true significance lies in Mather's particular synthesis of the material.<sup>53</sup> We might consider the *nishmath-chajim* the quintessence of Mather's attempt to mold a metaphysics of the middle way, a modified vitalism that skirted the twin errors of materialism and enthusiasm. It was the central organizing principle in *Angel*, a quickening specter that linked nature to supernature by bridging the physical and spiritual components of the human creature. Operating, as Warner describes it, through "a subtle fluid composed of fine particles," the *nishmath-chajim* regulated physiological processes such as digestion, sensation, and locomotion.<sup>54</sup> It also directed healing within the body and would be charged with reassembling the saint's body during the universal resurrection of the dead. The *nishmath-chajim* was the alpha and omega of biology, the spark of life and the locus of illness and disease, which Mather understood to be a single phenomenon, rather than a wide range of conditions affecting various parts of the body.

Despite Mather's reliance on the work of the Cambridge Platonists and alchemist writers such as van Helmont, some historians have suggested that Mather's articulation of the *nishmath-chajim* amounts to a clear rejection of vitalism. Warner argues that while Mather's concept of the *nishmath-chajim* shared much in common with the "plastick nature" of Cambridge Platonists such as Cudworth and Henry Moore, the differences are more significant. Warner writes that, while "the role of controlling generation is common to the two [principles]," Mather's conception of the *nishmath-chajim* does not indicate a "general formative force such as the plastick nature that pervades the world . . . . Mather's concept is rather one of individual *nishmath-chajims* for each creature; there is no global *nishmath-chajim*."<sup>55</sup>

It would be tempting to read Mather's rejection of an all-pervasive plastick nature as suggestive of a more generalized rejection of vitalism. Yet, there is nothing mutually exclusive in affirming the existence of particular *nishmath-chajims* while affirming the shared nature and origin of these individual fields of subtle fluids. Just as Mather believed that all forms of disease derived from one source, so all forms of life, physical and spiritual, flowed from one font. By asserting that this life-force took on a discrete shape in particular men and women, Mather guards himself against pantheism, the idolatrous worship of the creation, while asserting an essential unity among souls and between the soul and God. It is also worth noting that there was nothing distinctively anthropocentric about the concept: Mather affirmed that animals and other citizens of the "brute creation" shared in the *nishmath-chajim* under the form of "instinct." Rather than insulating humans from the

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 285.

<sup>54</sup>Warner, 278.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

rest of creation, the *nishmath-chajim* knit humanity into the whole fabric of nature, raising the very dangers that led him to dismiss the pantheistic speculations of the Cambridge Platonists.

As we have seen, for Mather, the discovery of the *nishmath-chajim* was important not only for its ability to overcome the materialist dangers implicit in a mechanical philosophy: it was also the key to recovering religious vitality. The generative principle, the divine light, the inextinguishable spark that brought all creation into being and sustained and guided each creature to its particular *telos* was one and the same with the dynamic spiritual force, the vital yeast in the dough of a fallen creation, transmuting dull matter into a city of gold. In *The Christian Philosopher*, Mather favorably quotes Origen's opinion that Christ's death effects redemption not only for the elect but for all matter: "our *High-Priest's* having *tasted of Death* . . . FOR ALL, is to be extended even to the very *Stars*, which would otherwise have been *impure* in the sight of God; and thus are ALL THINGS restored to the *Kingdom* of the Father."<sup>56</sup> In this rather surprising vision of the salvation of the universe, Mather extends covenant theology to the entire creation; through Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, the union of nature with grace, the life-force of the creator was quickening the dead and enlivening the heart.

## V. CONCLUSION

No doubt, historians are less familiar with this Cotton Mather, apostle of a cosmic creation, than with the clutch of colorful Cottons who parade across the stage in narratives of colonial America. We might wish to keep him in sight a little longer, for he promises access to a facet of the early evangelical mind that has received scant attention from historians. In an age of rapid scientific, social, and religious change, Mather sought a natural philosophy that was neither too hot nor too cold. He turned to vitalism to keep the fires of piety well stoked, avoiding the deadening potential of the mechanistic views circulating among educated elites without boiling over into the raw enthusiasm lurking in popular folk practices of magic and judicial astrology.

Mather's reverence for the devotional works of Johann Arndt has long been explained by the shared soteriological concerns of Pietism and Puritanism. But the early Pietist and late Puritan and would have agreed in taking soteriology and cosmology as conjoined sciences: vital religion fed and flowed from a vital sense of nature. This new reading of Arndt's influence should correct for what past scholars mistook as Mather's divided identity, a man caught

<sup>56</sup>Mather, *Christian Philosopher*, 313–14.

between Puritanism and the Enlightenment. In Mather's appreciation for Arndt's hermetic pietism we glimpse a nascent evangelical vitalism, a metaphysical middle way through which to harmonize the insights of natural philosophy, Reformed theology, and the hermetic traditions into a grand "System of the Sciences . . . consecrated unto the glorious Intention of *living unto God*." Whether Mather's vitalist sensibilities were broadly representative or exceptional among late New England Puritans and whether they support W. R. Ward's contention that vitalism characterized the early evangelical "thought-world" are questions opened to further study.