Kennedy's "The first American Evangelical: A short life of Cotton Mather" (Book Review)

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At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Boston Puritan Cotton Mather (1663–1728) was the most prolific writer in colonial America. Ministering at a time when one could still be an expert in numerous fields, Mather was not only a master biblical theologian, he was also a well-known medical doctor, historian, political theorist, astronomer, missiologist, and social reformer. His (very limited) involvement with the Salem Witch Trials forever tainted his reputation in the eyes of modern observers. That, coupled with the fact that he has always stood in the shadow of Jonathan Edwards, has generally relegated him to obscurity. Happily, this situation is changing as scholars are reexamining Mather: his massive biblical commentary, the ten-volume *Biblia Americana*, is currently being published by Baker Academic, and an extensive, critical biography by Reiner Smolinski is due from Yale in 2016. Rick Kennedy’s short biography well-complements this reassessment providing readers with a brief, easily-accessible biography of Mather’s life and times.

Kennedy, professor of history at Point Loma Nazarene University, portrays Mather as “the First American Evangelical,” one whose life was radically submitted to Scripture and devoted to the spread of the gospel through preaching, extensive writing, political advocacy, and social concern. His life in its many facets foreshadows the ethos of the later evangelicalism. “What Cotton lived and preached, and what people rallied to, was a religiously zealous lifestyle lived in the light of a radically communicative God” (p. xii).

As an intellectual writer, Mather was aware that intellectuals of his day were abandoning the communicative God of traditional Christianity and opting for more of a remote deity who governed the world by mathematical laws. In his response, Mather offered an alternative theory of knowledge that he believed undercut the naturalistic assumptions of early modern thought. Epistemology, he argued, should not be grounded in rationalism, mathematics, and logic. It rather should be rooted in a jurisprudential form of social reasoning which underscores the “network of trust between God, angels, and humans throughout history” p. (111). Such “Christian reasonableness” (as opposed to secular rationalism) is open to the methods and discoveries of modern science but retains its prior allegiance to Scripture and its inherent supernaturalism (pp. 108–16). Mather’s epistemology allowed him to engage modern thought from the vantage-point of a committed believer in Scripture, an agenda Kennedy call’s Mather’s “biblical enlightenment.”
Kennedy portrays Mather’s extensive ministerial and intellectual achievements in the context of a narrative filled with dramatic contrasts. Mather knew the triumphs of overcoming stuttering, yet suffered deep rejection when he was denied the presidency of Harvard. He knew the joys of a large family yet sadly lost his first two wives and thirteen of his fifteen children to illness. He knew both wealth early in life and poverty in old age. As a pastor his people loved him, but threatened to split his church when they could not get along. The biography is a joy to read; it exposes readers to the pulse of life in colonial Boston, and inspires Christians with a zeal for God and fidelity to his Word. I highly recommend it.

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“...[T]here are power dynamics, personal histories, and cultural clashes stemming from whiteness and all it encompasses that work against young people of color in traditional classrooms. This book highlights them, provides a framework for looking at them, and offers ways to address them in the course of improving the education of urban youth of color.” (p.16) Emdin compares the struggles of neo-indigenous urban youth with the struggles and injustices of indigenous students of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, and other similar stories. His basic premise is that teachers should know and respect the different home cultures of their students, recognizing their strengths and intelligences, rather than try to Americanize them or shove them into the mold of educated white society. The book is full of examples and ways to carry this concept into the classroom. This is a well written and engaging book, and the concepts talked about would be useful to any cross cultural teacher, whether in an urban setting or a mission setting (although the specifics might differ). Christopher Emdin is an associate professor at Teacher’s College, Columbia University, where he serves as associate director of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education. He writes “drawing on his own experience of feeling undervalued and invisible in science classrooms as a young man of color” (back cover).

Reviewer
Rebecca H. Givens, University of Alabama