

BOOK ONE

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RICHARD MATHER  
(1596-1669)

HISTORY



# I

## *The Founder*



The question "who am I?" is often in the mouths of men in the twentieth century. Uncertain of their values, men today feel rootless and lament their inability to locate themselves by fixed points in the world. A part of their plight, they recognize, lies within themselves: they distrust themselves, their ideas, their motives, and their impulses. But the world is suspect too: it offers no stability, only change, unthinking and, what is worse, unfeeling change. Ransack it for meaning as they will, they discover that the world will not answer the question of their identity. And so they continue to search and to suffer. At their most desperate, they resemble Saul Bellow's Gene Henderson, who listened to an unsuppressible voice in his heart saying only "I want, I want, I want!"

Puritans did not ask the question of the moderns, "who am I?" but they seem to have endured a similar anxiety. Like men today, they were fascinated by their own mental states; and this absorption with themselves yielded great uneasiness. But the resemblance is superficial. Modern men yearn to find themselves, they search for values, and they want to discover how to live. Puritans shared none of these concerns. They knew who they

were; man, after all, was elaborately described in Scripture, and the scholastic psychology and Reformed theology also told them much about themselves. Nor were values unclear—the word in the modern connotation would have bewildered them—God’s will shone in the Scriptures. In fact they had at hand in the body of belief we call Puritanism an explicit philosophy covering all aspects of human existence. This philosophy defined man’s place in the world with absolute clarity: it told him who he was and what he might become; and it told him what God expected of him. But if man’s fate was clear, the fate of individuals was not. In its doctrines of predestination and election, Puritanism offered a man the assurance that his future had been decided. But it gave him no infallible indication of the nature of the decision. All he could know with absolute certainty was that God in His justice had predestined some men for salvation and others for damnation.

Predestination summed up a set of ideas conventionally identified with the Christian inheritance. In the form of Calvinism that permeated New England’s culture, predestination took its meaning in the context of the relationship of God and man. God was sovereign and omnipotent: man was dependent and helpless, sunk in original sin. The Puritan knew that it had not always been so: God created Adam in His image, endowed him with free will, and charged him to live within the covenant of works. With Adam’s fall, free will was lost and man was left without power, his fate locked in an iron determinism: whether he would live eternally or burn forever was decided not by himself, by his own merit, or anything he did or could do, but rather by the pleasure of God—almost, Richard Mather once observed—“as if by lot.”<sup>1</sup>

And how was he, a totally helpless creature, expected to respond to this universe that took its decisions about his eternal state as easily as a man casts dice? With the most strenuous efforts to secure from God the grace that could save his soul. The paradox is obvious: the creed the community lived by, the ministers that preached to it, the books and tracts that came from its presses, all told the Puritan “you are helplessly and hopelessly sunk in sin, your will is corrupt, your understanding impaired, your emotions base, but though only God can save you, you must strive after the grace that will bring eternal peace, you must exert yourself to all your capacity.” We have difficulty

comprehending a creed that tells a man he is without power and then exhorts him to use all his power to save himself. We can refuse to consider such a situation as a description of reality; men in seventeenth-century New England could not. But some of them too found the doctrine paradoxical and responded by saying that they could do nothing for themselves. Their repetition of the doctrine of human depravity had a hopeless and desperate ring to it—yes, we admit our guilt, but we are helpless, they said, we cannot rescue ourselves; only God can give us saving grace.

The rejoinder to such complaints reveals remarkable—though limited—psychological insight: to be sure, Puritan ministers replied, you are helpless. But sinners always ignore the dreadful truths about themselves. “Sinners,” Increase Mather once noted in a great sermon, are not only “wicked,” they are “unreasonable. Ask them why they don’t reform their Lives, why don’t you Turn over a new leaf, and amend your ways and your doings, they will answer, God does not give me Grace. I can’t Convert my self and God does not Convert me. Thus do they insinuate as if God were in fault, and the blame of their Unconversion to be imputed unto him.” Increase Mather, as clearly as any Puritan preacher, saw the weakness in these protestations. Of course, he agreed, it is true that “Sinners cannot Convert themselves, [but] their *Cannot* is a wilful *Cannot*. *They will not come*. It is not said they could not (though they could not of themselves come to Christ) but that they *would* not come.” This explanation which emphasizes the willfulness of the refusal is reminiscent of the Freudian theory of neurosis. The Freudian analogue holds that what makes it difficult to cure the neurotic of his sickness is his attachment to it, his willful (to use the seventeenth-century term) clinging to his neurosis and all its unhealthy gratifications. And why do men will not to convert? “If it were in the power of a Sinner to Convert himself, he would not do it: For he hates Conversion. It is an abomination to fools to depart from evil. . . . Their hearts are in Love, and in League with their Lusts, yea they hate to be *turned* from them.”<sup>2</sup>

Forcing the sinner to recognize his complicity in his inability to act had the effect of subduing the will, robbing it of its arrogance and power. You cannot act, the minister says, because you will not; your inability, your sin is deliberately chosen. The

intention of this preaching was achieved when humility was induced; the sinner was in despair; he looked at himself honestly and saw only depravity. In this state of diminished will, he was at last ripe for conversion. He, or his heart, that is, his psyche or will, was now an empty vessel; its corruption had been drained away; and once emptied, the vessel of the heart might be filled with the saving grace of the Lord. He had endured, in modern terms, a crisis of identity. When his ego loss had reached the point where he was reduced to desperation, he experienced the new birth and became a new man as his personality attained a fresh integration, the components of the new birth being implied, of course, by the Calvinist version of Christianity.

This experience, and the explanations of it offered by theology, reinforced a bent towards self-awareness in men eager to determine whether or not they were of the elect. Puritanism achieved the same result in yet another way—by explicitly demanding a self-consciousness that made a man aware of his emotions and sensitive to his attitudes towards his own behavior. It accomplished this by describing in elaborate detail the disposition of a godly mind. Sin, it taught, might be incurred as surely by attitudes as by actions. In the process of performing his religious duties a man might sin if his feelings were not properly engaged. Prayer, for example, was commanded of every Christian; but prayer without inward strain, even agony, is mere “lip-labour,” a formality that offends God.<sup>3</sup> Prayer for spiritual blessings without faith that those blessings will be granted implies a doubt of God’s power and is equivalent to unbelief. Ordinary life, too, must be lived in a Christian habit of mind. A man getting his living in a lawful calling, though staying within the limits imposed by the State, might nevertheless violate divine imperatives by overvaluing the creatures, as Puritans termed excessive esteem for the things of this world. The “manner of performances,” Increase Mather once said, was the crucial thing in fulfilling the duties imposed by God.<sup>4</sup>

Puritanism thus bred a deep concern about a state of mind. The norms of good thought and feeling were clear, and every Puritan felt the need for effort to bring his consciousness into harmony with these norms. Doing what he must was another matter and much of his anxiety arose in the attempt to live according to God’s stringent requirements. The most familiar

figure among Puritans is the tormented soul, constantly examining his every thought and action, now convinced that hell awaits him, now lunging after the straw of hope that he is saved, and then once more falling into despair. He wants to believe, he tries, he fails, he succeeds, he fails—always on the cycle of alternating moods.

The sources of Puritan anxiety then were vastly different from those of modern anxiety. Puritan anxiety in a peculiar sense was a conscious uneasiness, deliberately imposed or at least clearly seen and accepted by its sufferers. It rose from the objective world; it was, paradoxically, reasoned anxiety, and there lay its difference from modern anxiety which is neurotic and which has its sources in the irrational and the abnormal.

What surprises one is that this anxiety did not often produce morbidity among the Puritans. Children who had been taught, almost as soon as they left their mothers' breasts, that they reeked of sin, continued in this belief and tormented themselves over their inner condition but still grew into adults who worked productively, married, reared children and lived useful lives by any standard. As a young man, Michael Wigglesworth, who earned fame through the apocalyptic poem *The Day of Doom*, not only worried constantly over his own but over his neighbors' souls. As a tutor at Harvard, the innocent play of students reminded him of the torments of Hell, and he resolved to suppress their Sabbath evening activities, which he saw as "mad mirth." Wigglesworth did not shed these concerns with his youth, as far as one can tell. Rather he obtained a forum for expressing his opinions of them when he became a minister. But no one minded; his prying into his neighbors' lives was not resented; and his preoccupation with sin seemed—and was—perfectly normal in the seventeenth century. His life contained spheres other than the pastoral: he married—not once—but three times. The last time at age seventy-four he took his servant-girl to be his wife; she gave him his last child.<sup>5</sup>

The records of these lives suggest that morbidity did not occur more often because of what seemed the restrictive side of Puritanism generated tremendous energy and compelled its release. Beyond any question man was depraved. By nature he loved only himself; he should try to love his fellows and to love God. He lusted after the things of this world, but he should love the world

with weaned affections and concentrate on God. His model for living existed in his sinful makeup, but he should seek to conform to Christ. The imperative which Puritans most insisted upon was that as helpless as man was, he should act, and act according to divine prescriptions. The total self had to be enlisted in God's cause. Every life must be lived with this requirement in mind; inwardly and outwardly men were to conform to Christ in "our soules, our bodies, our understanding, will, memorie, affections, and all we have to the service of God, in the generall calling of a Christian, and in the particular callings in which hee hath placed us." <sup>6</sup>

Probably no Puritan understood these injunctions in exactly the way any other Puritan did. From these differences in understanding came differences in styles of life. The more literally the command "live with the self fixed on God" was taken, the greater religious intensity life had.

The three distinguished Mathers of the seventeenth century—Richard, his son Increase, and his, Cotton—all took this injunction to heart as a standard of life. And none confined intensity to inner experience. Their general callings as Christians affected everything they did and thought and felt, but their particular callings as ministers were hardly less important. In fact the two cannot be separated, for the voice of God was clearly heard in both.

These three men lived passionate lives, but their determination to get the best out of themselves for the glory of God did not rest on untutored enthusiasm. All three respected ideas and knowledge; all three proved themselves as scholars as well as ministers. Perhaps in the long history of their service to New England, their ideas about the conduct of life influenced their society more than anything they did. Yet, most of their contemporaries seem to have been as impressed by the sustained example of their religious devotion. And a few sensed what was significant in all three Mathers—their desire to fuse piety and intellect, to pursue ideas with the heart as well as with the mind, and to bring their thinking constantly to bear on their love of God.

Inevitably they did not all love God in the same way and inevitably they chose, or were forced to choose, different ways of expressing their love of God's glory. Inevitably they differed in their abilities to sustain the union of mind and spirit. And in-



evitably because their faith was deep and because they strove so mightily in God's service, their differences reflected in most ways the intellectual development of three generations of clerical intellectuals in New England.

This development, which includes much of the intellectual history of Puritanism, is usually taken to parallel the transformation of Puritan into Yankee, a process that sees piety replaced by secular values. Surely the process of secularization of society began in the seventeenth century as business and the market, farms and fields, and styles of life separated from the meeting-house, assumed an increasing importance. The State gave ground, too, as internal diversity and external imperatives forced the abandonment of an official policy of intolerance. And while these changes occurred, children were born and reared who experienced distress, incomprehension, and indifference at their inability to recapitulate in their lives the religious psychology of their fathers.

But just as surely as it began, this process was not completed. Standing apart from it, though not unaffected by it, were Puritan laymen and divines, who continued to maintain that life must be shaped by the necessity of advancing God's glory and who persisted in measuring every alteration in society against what they could conceive of as its effects on the true religion. These men did not—as much of the written history of Puritanism has it—accommodate or rationalize the gradual decline of religious faith. Those who hold that they did describe them as unself-conscious Arminians, subtle exponents of the free will of man, who encouraged the drift from the Calvinist creed by preaching a covenant legalism. Such preaching did occur within the Congregational churches of New England, though it is significant that the group commonly taken to be the most worldly in New England, the merchants trading overseas, found their way into the Church of England, an institution far more committed than the Congregational churches to the power of human abilities. A more prevalent preaching upheld the old creed, however. This preaching represented a largely clerical culture increasingly at variance with the chief dispositions of society in New England.

The Mathers—particularly Increase and Cotton—felt the gradual divergence of religious and secular life with great acuteness. Their responses came out of their hearts and minds. As they

watched their society move from what they considered the true road to God's glory, they suffered and resisted and sought the means to bring it back. They were not reactionaries or even conservatives—the words have no value in this context—for they attempted to contain within their thought what they considered the best in the new science and social organization. They proved remarkably resourceful in discovering “unessentials” in religion and Church polity which, they said, ought to be sacrificed to rally men to the Lord's cause. And in the end they both compromised and still held fast.

All this cost Increase and Cotton much. Yet their piety, which was only slightly more intense than most of their ministerial colleagues, had probably increased over that of the founders. Certainly it had assumed more extravagant forms and had carried them into rapturous dreams of the next world. These changes reached their highest expression in the mind and heart of Cotton Mather. Within him the old balance had collapsed in favor of the spirit. The society in which he died, the society of the Franklins, the *Courant*, the Hell-Fire Club, and much more that he despised, may have been as “reasonable” as it claimed and as he for a brief time acknowledged. But that sort of reasonableness he learned could not be incorporated into the spirit to which he finally gave himself. At the end of his life then, he had given over the synthesis of piety and intellect which had so distinguished his grandfather's era. And in the process he had transformed the life of passionate commitment, and contributed to the alteration of Puritanism itself.

The founder of the family in America, Richard Mather, established this pattern of passionate commitment. Increase and Cotton Mather felt his moral authority and commented on it throughout their lives. Had they wished to escape it they could not have done so, for what gave Richard's example its compulsive power was, of course, the fact that it measured up to the highest Puritan ideals. Richard embodied as fully as any man among the fathers of New England the reasoned intensity all Puritans held before themselves as a model for living.

Richard Mather was born in a substantial, timbered house in 1596 in the village of Lowton, not far from Liverpool in Winwick Parish in Lancashire. Richard's father, Thomas, seems to have

been a yeoman whose family had lived in Lowton for several generations. His mother, Margarite, must have come from yeoman stock, and she too traced her family back over several generations of Lowton stock. Thomas and Margarite were probably not Puritans for they once considered apprenticing Richard to Catholic merchants. Neither were they wealthy but they resolved to give their son an education and sent him off to grammar school in nearby Winwick.<sup>7</sup>

Lowton boys usually did not get much schooling. Their parents were poor and the longer a boy stayed at his books, the longer his father had to feed and clothe him without any return. Richard studied with a Mr. Horrocke who, if he observed the conventions of most schoolmasters, expected his charges to read and write English almost immediately after beginning school, if indeed they had not come with such skills, and who spent most of his time exercising them in Latin and Greek. Latin came first and remained the center of the curriculum. Lily's *Grammar*, a book first authorized under Henry VIII and continued by Elizabeth, furnished the text. Boys memorized the rules of grammar, translated Latin into English and then turned their versions back into Latin, wrote themes in Latin and acted out Latin plays and spoke dialogues. As their facility in Latin increased, the scholars turned a part of their attention to Greek grammar. There the favorite text was the New Testament.<sup>8</sup>

This regimen did not permit much variety, and masters did not encourage their students to develop their capacities for originality, especially since the prevailing view held that in boys as in all men these capacities were depraved. Masters who grew tired of their lives and their charges sometimes became more exacting, and they sometimes accompanied their increasing demands with increasing punishments.<sup>9</sup>

Mr. Horrocke may have been such a master. In any case his scholars discovered that as he laid on the grammar he also laid on the rod. Resenting harsh treatment and hoping to escape it, Richard appealed to his father to take him out of the school. But Thomas Mather, indulgent as he was in other ways, refused and contented himself with a talk with the master in which he evidently appealed for less severity.<sup>10</sup>

Thomas Mather handled the interview tactfully and Richard continued in school with his standing unimpaired. Perhaps the

episode forced Horrocke to look more carefully at him, for a little later, when Thomas Mather was about to apprentice his son to Catholic merchants from Wales, it was Horrocke who interceded on the boy's behalf. The merchants were looking for "pregnant wits," and they had heard that young Richard Mather was a very bright youth.<sup>11</sup> Keeping his son in school was costly, and Thomas Mather thought that he could reduce his expenses by signing his son over to these merchants. At this point William Horrocke stepped in and reminded the parents that their son had considerable talent and should be kept in school. Besides, he pointed out, apprenticing Richard to these merchants assured that he would be "undone by Popish Education."<sup>12</sup> Horrocke's appeal turned the elder Mathers from their resolve, and their son continued in Mr. Horrocke's school until 1611, the year of his fifteenth birthday, when he left the school as the result of another friendly act of Master Horrocke. The schoolmaster, asked by citizens of nearby Toxteth Park to recommend someone who might conduct a grammar school for their children, named Richard Mather. Horrock's opinion carried weight; Richard Mather was given the job.<sup>13</sup>

Serving as a schoolmaster marked another decisive point in Richard Mather's life. From the scholar's dependency he moved, though still a boy, to the independence and responsibility of a master. He now had to exercise others in grammatical studies; he had to maintain discipline; and he had to give an accounting to the community. As far as we know, he did these things ably; yet there must have been considerable strain and exertion. He did not break down, but in 1614, three years after beginning, he experienced the agonizing and exhilarating crisis of conversion.<sup>14</sup>

It began simply enough. Mather was living with Edward Aspinwall and his family. He took his meals at the Aspinwall table and saw much of the household. Edward Aspinwall did not rule the household rigidly nor did he make unusual demands upon his boarder. Still, he and his family, in their quiet piety, exerted a subtle influence upon Richard. What impressed the boy most, he later recalled, was the difference between the spiritual condition of the Aspinwalls and his own. They evidently felt God's grace working in themselves; he did not, though he hoped to feel it. The Aspinwalls were not the only ones affecting his spiritual condition. In these years Richard was listening to the min-

ister of nearby Hyton, a Mr. Harrison, who was preaching the Pauline doctrine of the new birth. Richard was especially moved by Harrison's explication of the statement of Jesus that "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."<sup>15</sup> What he meant was simply that men had to experience regeneration. They could not be satisfied with knowing that their lives were moral or that intellectually they believed in Christ. They must feel the spirit in themselves; they must believe on Christ—as it was customarily phrased. They must accept Christ's sacrifice as payment for their sins and feel themselves joined to Him.

Feeling of this sort bewilder and perhaps frighten most men who experience them. For Richard they were most intense in his eighteenth year. He later described them in the language of birth—he felt, he said, "terrible pangs."<sup>16</sup> His misery arose in part from his feeling that he would not be saved; in his worst moments he avoided everyone, staying away from meals and nursing his sorrow and grief. Encouraging this process and perhaps ultimately helping him escape his despair was a book by William Perkins.

Born in 1558 Perkins had lived only until 1602, but in his brief life he became one of the two or three most important divines in the English Church. Perkins, like many preachers of his day, attempted to comprehend the mysterious working of grace in men. As he saw it, ordinary men were baffled by the problem of separating natural feeling from divine. Only God could save men, of course, and He drew only those He elected. But common sense told a man that he had some power over his own feelings and that these feelings were affected by impressions supplied by his senses. How could a man determine the origins of what exactly he was feeling—especially when God worked through his senses too, sending His grace as a passenger on the vehicle of a minister's words or shooting into a man's heart with the message of the Gospel. And a man might bring himself to believe—in a certain manner—that Christ died to save men, that Christ was the son of God, and that men required Christ's intercession for their salvation. Even reprobates might go this far—and farther: they might succeed in leading moral lives in the eyes of the world, though not in the eyes of God.<sup>17</sup>

Perkins schooled ordinary Englishmen in these facts and explained to them how God's workings might be identified. He

made comprehensible what Richard Mather was experiencing and thereby aided in the completion of the process of conversion. Richard Mather later remembered that he had been extraordinarily affected by Perkins' caution about "how farre a Reprobate may go." The danger facing the sinner was that he would confuse his own efforts with God's and become complacent. If he fell into this trap, his chances for grace were slim.<sup>18</sup>

In several books which young Richard Mather may have read, Perkins reviewed these problems and analyzed experience in terms which troubled men were able to apply to themselves. Perkins told men that conversion did not change their substance, the stuff out of which they were made, nor did it give them new powers, or faculties of the soul, as the old language he employed put it. All conversion did was to renew what they already had; it restored a measure of the purity that Adam had possessed before his fall. Perkins likened the process to rebuilding an old house but with one difference: a house is restored piecemeal, a room at a time, a window first, and then a wall; but a man who receives grace has his whole being—his reason, his will, his affections, all his faculties—reconstructed at once, and simultaneously. And yet this restoration occurred over a time, and could be broken down into identifiable periods.<sup>19</sup>

Initially, a man might become sensible of his sin, feeling fear and terror in response to the accusations of his conscience. Such feelings are "no graces of God" but fruits of the law. But they do help "tame" a man's nature.<sup>20</sup> Anyone could achieve this much on his own, though God usually got things going. At this point a man may be likened to the breaking of dawn, Perkins said; the darkness remains, but there is light in the air. If the process is genuinely from God, the Holy Spirit next begins to work restraining the worst of the natural impulses and leading the person to moral behavior. A reprobate might proceed this far but no farther. The final step occurred when renewing grace was infused into the soul: the man was now Christ's, he had been born again.<sup>21</sup>

By itself Perkins' description, though enlightening, was scarcely comforting. The reader of one of Perkins' tracts would find little encouragement for feelings of ecstasy. Perkins told him that in the beginning he should be afraid and should feel guilt, but at the end he should not expect that raptures would follow. But in a sense Perkins did provide tests for determining

the validity of the process. Grace was "counterfeit" unless it grew, he said. The sinner should expect his faith to increase, and he should strive to see that it did. His very striving was evidence that his grace was genuine. Thus he should pray, listen to sermons, read the gospel, and examine himself—his impulses, his feelings of every sort, and his thoughts. He could expect to fail his God, and his own best intentions, at various times. How he responded to his failures gave further indication of the state of his soul. If he felt grief at his failure to grieve over his sins he should be reassured. If he sorrowed because his desires to close with God were weak, he should be encouraged. Complacency, or as Puritans customarily put it "security," was a great danger and suggested that the grace he claimed was fraudulent.<sup>22</sup>

During his conversion in 1614, Richard Mather required no help to avoid security. His heart was broken, and he craved the comfort that reaching the end of the conversion process conferred. Finally, after a prolonged period of misery, he began to feel that he was God's. He was never to feel secure, though he did enjoy the feeling of assurance, the feeling that he had been converted. Still, there were pangs of uncertainty; the last lengthy period of anxiety came after his arrival in New England and his acceptance of the Dorchester pulpit. Then for several years, he was troubled by doubts. He was characteristically quiet about his uneasiness, talking only to John Norton, the pastor of Ipswich, who gave him as much reassurance as he could.<sup>23</sup>

Mather continued to teach throughout the period of his conversion and remained in Toxteth Park as master until 1618, when on May 18 he matriculated in Brasenose College, Oxford. His stay was short, probably a little more than a year. It is impossible to say what lasting effect, if any, Oxford had on him. If he was placed with the freshman class, he received the beginnings of the liberal arts course with instruction in the *trivium* and *quadrivium*. Certain it is that he liked Oxford: several of his former students were there, and he enjoyed seeing them (though if they were juniors and seniors he must have had mixed feelings in greeting them); he admired the learned instructors and delighted in his studies. The only disturbing feature of Oxford life was the profaneness he encountered there. So perhaps, given his Puritan cast of mind, he was disposed to leave when he received the call from Toxteth Park to return as minister of the church. In