"Of One Blood"?
The Theological Framework of Slavery in the Writings of Cotton Mather

Eduardo Gonzalez
Boston College

I would like to begin with an analogy—one that initially may seem bizarre and thoroughly unrelated to the early modern Atlantic world, but which nonetheless can offer a fruitful point of entry into our readings for today.[1] In a recent issue of the journal *Science*, researchers working at the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and cultural linguistics published the results of a study demonstrating that widely used AI technologies reflect the biases toward race and gender that characterize the sources of such intelligence—namely, human beings.[2] This group of researchers focused on a method of developing AI known as *machine learning*, a process by which computers are able to learn "by discovering patterns in existing data"[3] (e.g., in "large bodies of English-language text"[4] that are available online). As such, this approach to how technologies acquire intelligence is fundamentally different from that of directly programming technologies with specific instructions.

The study shows that applying this adaptive method of machine learning to human language results in AI technologies that, rather than simply reproducing formal dictionary definitions of terms, function by integrating the broader *cultural semantic range* of terms, which includes the various social biases that are deeply embedded in everyday language. For example,

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[1] This paper was originally prepared for a meeting of the Partnership of Historic Bostons at the Massachusetts Historical Society in May 2017. The discussion at the meeting was based on selected writings by Richard Baxter, Morgan Godwyn, Samuel Sewall, and Cotton Mather. Language reflecting the ad hoc nature of the presentation has been preserved throughout the paper.

[2] Aylin Caliskan, Joanna J. Bryson, and Arvind Narayanan, "Semantics Derived Automatically from Language Corpora Contain Human-Like Biases," *Science* 356, no. 6334 (April 14, 2017): 183-186.

[3] Ibid., 183.

[4] Anthony G. Greenwald, "An AI Stereotype Catcher: An Artificial Intelligence Method Identifies Implicit Human Biases Such as Gender Stereotypes," *Science* 356, no. 6334 (April 14, 2017): 133.

the researchers noted a significantly "greater association of racial white than racial black with pleasant."[5] Put differently, when machines acquire implicitly racist human data, machines will yield implicitly racist intelligence. In a similar manner, when theology stems from a social location marked by anti-blackness and complicity in racialized forms of domination, that theology will bear the imprint of racist ideology in ways that may remain unrecognizable to the theologian who produced it. As with artificial intelligence, the lexicon and thematic orientation of a given theology exhibit features of the institutional and cultural forces that are operative in the life of the theologian.

The usefulness of this analogy, however, is not limited simply to restating in contemporary terms the truism that human subjectivity (and therefore all reflective activity) is profoundly shaped by its social and cultural context. Unlike most areas of human reflection, theologians face not only the risks of reproducing unrecognized value judgments at the level of thinking, but also—and here is the second link to artificial intelligence—the risk of attributing non-human origins to those biases. That is, since the fundamental questions with which theology is constantly wrestling include transcendence, revelation, divine presence, and so forth, theology constantly remains susceptible to a process whereby what originates in the human person is morphed into something the human person views as having *received* from outside, as it were. This occurs, for instance, when conceptual models that authorize or reinforce historically contingent power relations (e.g., slavery and colonial violence) are reconfigured as having a source beyond history, namely, God.

As one of the many themes in our readings for today that exemplify these points, let's consider Cotton Mather's understanding of providence. In Mather's writings, the concept of

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[5] Ibid., 134.

providence—which can be broadly defined as the active guidance of history according to God's will—can be recognized as generally having a threefold function: (1) to identify an event as somehow reflective of God's favor or will; (2) to identify an event as somehow reflective of God's negative judgment (oftentimes in the form of punishment); and (3) to identify an event as indirectly reflective of God's will by perceiving in a corresponding event the belligerent reaction of evil forces.

These three general functions of Mather's providential framework can be recognized in his reflections on slavery. Regarding the first function (i.e., providence as the historical manifestation of God's positive will), the basic premise of each of Mather's discourses on slaveholders is that their possession of slaves is the direct result of providence. This is the fundamental presupposition for everything Mather has to say about slavery. As he reminds fellow slave owners in *The Negro Christianized* (1706), "It is come to pass by the *Providence* of God, without which there comes nothing to pass, that Poor Negroes are cast under your Government and Protection."[6] Mather leaves no room for doubt regarding his understanding of African slavery as a manifestation of God's will. The various problems that Mather identifies in relation to slavery concern not its legitimacy as an institution but rather certain practices that deviate from his vision of what Christian slavery should look like. Thus Mather records in his diary his "many" prayers for God's blessing in the form of "good" slaves in particular (September 1696), and describes the day he received his slave Onesimus as a gift from members of his congregation as "a mighty Smile of Heaven upon my Family" (December 1706).[7]

Central to Mather's understanding of the providential purpose for owning slaves is the opportunity for owners to perform what he presents as the "greatest kindness that can be done to

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[6] Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 2 (unless otherwise noted, all emphasis is in the original).
[7] Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather* I, 554, 579.

any" person and describes as "the noblest Work, that ever was undertaken among the Children of men"—namely, the conversion of their slaves.[8] The task of providing slaves with Christian instruction is the key criterion in Mather's evaluation of a given slaveholder's practice. He frames the ownership of African slaves as primarily, albeit not exclusively, investing the slaveholder with a grave responsibility for their souls. As he writes in *The Negro Christianized*, "A *Prophet* of God, might without putting any *Disguise* upon the matter, thus represent it, God has brought a *Servant* unto thee, and said, *Keep that Soul, Teach it, and Help it, that it may not be lost*; *if thou use no means to save that Soul, thy soul shall certainly smart for it*."[9]

Indeed, Mather's emphasis on the importance of saving the souls of African slaves leads him to insist that a certain kind of slavery is most reprehensible and destructive, and that everything possible must be done to eradicate it. This other slavery that he vehemently opposes does not involve visible, corporeal masters; rather, it involves an idolatrous enslavement to "Invisible Masters," and yields eternal consequences.[10] As Mather describes it to African slaves in his earlier work titled *A Good Master well Served* (1696), "Tis possible your Service, to the Houses where you Sojourn, may for some things be Irksome Enough unto you; Oh! but you are in another Service, that would be a Million times more Irksome, if you were not stark *Dead in Trespasses & Sins*…Wretched Servants!...I tell you, a Turkish, or a Spanish Slavery, is not a thousandth part so miserable, as the Accursed Slavery of your Souls, to the Invisible Destroyers of your Souls."[11] It is this kind of slavery (i.e., that of the soul) that troubles Mather, and the various critiques he offers regarding the temporary slavery of African bodies ultimately amount to the argument that negligent owners are perpetuating spiritual slavery. Simply put, the material

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[8] Mather, *Negro Christianized*, 12, 1; cf. 6.
[9] Ibid., 11.
[10] Mather, *A Good Master well Served*, 22.
[11] Ibid., 23.

slavery of the African body is viewed as providing the conditions for the African soul to attain eternal freedom.

Mather's position on this issue shares much in common with English Puritan Richard Baxter's view of slavery, with which Mather was quite familiar. Baxter similarly addresses slaveholders in his *Christian Directory* (1673): "Remember that they [i.e., slaves] have immortal souls, and are equally capable of salvation with yourselves."[12] Like Mather, he discusses the owner's duty to evangelize slaves, describing them as "the guardians of their souls" and offering the following warning: "Those therefore that keep their negroes and slaves from hearing God's Word, and from becoming Christians, because by the law they shall then be either made free, or they shall lose part of their service, do openly profess rebellion against God, and contempt of Christ the Redeemer of souls, and a contempt of the souls of men, and indeed they declare, that their worldly profit is their treasure and their God."[13] Mather will follow in Baxter's footsteps with his suggestion that ostensibly Christian slaveholders who neglect the Christian instruction of their slaves have in fact renounced their own Christian identity and capitulated before the lure of wealth.[14] This accusation of idolatry in both Baxter and Mather is directed toward owners who they consider to be distorting slavery by disregarding its Christian orientation, which is asserted to be the main purpose for owning slaves. Baxter expresses this point clearly in his concluding direction to slave owners: "Make it your chief end in buying and using slaves, to win them to Christ, and save their souls. Do not only endeavour it on the by, when you have first consulted your own commodity, but make this more of your end, than your commodity itself."[15]

Mather and Baxter agree with one another insofar as the importance of evangelizing

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[12] Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, 212.
[13] Ibid., 213.
[14] Mather, *Negro Christianized*, 4-8, 11, 16.
[15] Baxter, *Christian Directory*, 220.

slaves is concerned; however, Mather departs from Baxter in terms of *how* slavery and conversion are related. For instance, Baxter, who embraces a hierarchical distinction between communal love among Christians and Christian love of non-Christians, understands the former as superior in practice to the latter, writing that "good and real Christians must be used with more love and brotherly tenderness than others."[16] Baxter then proposes that this superiority of Christian communal love become a way of luring converts, a perk of conversion, as it were. As a way of "saving…their souls," he writes, "infidels…should be invited to Christianity by fit encouragements: and so…they should know that if they will turn Christians, they shall have more privileges and emoluments than the enemies of truth and piety shall have."[17] This leads Baxter to conclude that it is "well done of princes who make laws that infidel-slaves shall be freemen, when they are duly Christened."[18] Freedom from slavery, as one of the advantages of Christian communal life, provides a considerable incentive for slaves to become Christian.

Although Mather considers the temporary slavery of the African body as a means to undo the eternal slavery of the African soul, he explicitly rejects the idea that the slave's conversion also results in freedom from material slavery. In fact, on this point Mather positions himself at quite a distance from Baxter. Mather not only suggests that becoming a Christian is fully compatible with remaining a slave (which would suffice as a significant disagreement with Baxter), but also that becoming a Christian actually *improves* the nature of the slave's service to the slaveholder.[19] He assures owners of their unaffected property in *The Negro Christianized*: "Tho' they [i.e., African slaves] remain your *Servants*, yet they are become the *Children* of God. Tho' they are to enjoy no *Earthly Goods*, but the small Allowance that your Justice and Bounty

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[16] Ibid., 217.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Mather, *Negro Christianized*, 12-13.

shall see proper for them, yet they are become *Heirs* of God, and *Joint-Heirs* with the Lord Jesus Christ. Tho' they are your *Vassals*, and must with a profound subjection wait upon you, yet the *Angels* of God now take them under their Guardianship." Mather then proceeds to describe the future heavenly scene when such slaves will be heard constantly praising God for having been brought under the ownership of "pious *Masters*."[20]

Like Baxter, Mather maintains an important distinction between the privileges enjoyed by the Christian community and by non-Christians; it is worth noting, however, that when Mather addresses the meaning of this distinction in relation to slaves, he does so in the context of refuting the idea that baptism entitles the slave to social freedom. Essentially, Mather's strategy here is to reconcile this distinction with his own position on slavery by *spiritualizing* the equality and exceptional privileges to be enjoyed by Christians. African slaves who become Christian, then, "should enjoy those *comfortable circumstances* with us, which are due to them, not only as the *Children of Adam*, but also as our *Brethren*, on the same level with us in the expectations of a blessed Immortality, thro' the *Second Adam*."[21] The distinctive Christian equality to be shared by slaves and slaveholders resides in taking anticipatory delight in the assurance of eternity. Baptism, according to Mather, produces communal equality by affecting the eschatological—not the social—condition of slaves.[22]

While it is perhaps tempting to consider the theological basis for such comments to be an eschatological reduction of soteriology,[23] it is important to remember that his understanding of redemption (although ostensibly otherworldly and ahistorical) remains inseparable from the preservation of forms of social domination. Rather than understanding material slavery as a

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 17.
[22] Eschatology is broadly understood as the area of theology that concerns the end times.
[23] Soteriology is the area of theology that concerns the meaning and nature of salvation.

merely transitional phase in the process of evangelizing African slaves, Mather considers it to be a condition that only deepens and becomes more fully realized when slaves convert. It is for this reason that he describes Christian slaves as "more *Serviceable*, and Obedient," and seeks to persuade owners to instruct their slaves by mentioning that doing so would "render them exceeding *Dutiful* unto their *Masters*, exceeding *Patient* under their *Masters*, exceeding faithful in their Business, and afraid of speaking or doing any thing that may justly displease you."[24] Baxter's earlier proposal that material freedom serve as an incentive for slaves to become Christian is now entirely inverted by Mather into a vision of an enriched and more efficient form of slavery as an incentive for owners to evangelize their slaves.

Mather's position on the effect of Christianity on slaves more closely resembles that of Anglican minister Morgan Godwyn. In *The Negro's and Indians Advocate* (1680), Godwyn had launched a sustained critique of Barbadian slaveholders, whom he described as depriving their slaves of their natural right to religious practice. Among the positive arguments that Godwyn makes for allowing the slaves to exercise this right is the role of Christianity in cultivating virtue.[25] Similar to Mather, he suggests that since every owner wants their slaves to have good qualities, and religion is (according to Godwyn) the most effective way to develop virtue, then owners who deprive slaves of religion are "enemies" to their "own great interest."[26] Godwyn takes this argument one step further when he writes, "The benefit [of slaves converting to Christianity] *is least to the Slave*, tho he gain *Heaven* thereby; whilst his Master…doth in this World also reap *the desired fruit of his Servant's FIDELITY*."[27] That is, the slave's conversion is more advantageous to the owner than to the slave who converts, since the owner enjoys both

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[24] Mather, *Negro Christianized*, 13.
[25] Morgan Godwyn, *The Negro's and Indians Advocate*, 74.
[26] Ibid., 74-75.
[27] Ibid., 75.

worldly and heavenly rewards.

Evangelization of African slaves is not only the summit of generosity for Cotton Mather, it is also the *only* option for slaveholders who seek to make their slaves happy. The range of possibility for the owner who wishes to act compassionately toward the slave is confined to the African's status in the world to come, since (as Mather maintains) the slave's condition in this world is immutable. As he writes in *The Negro Christianized*, "It cannot be otherwise! The State of your *Negroes* in this World, must be low, and mean, and abject; a State of Servitude. No *Great Things* in this World, can be done for them. Something then, let there be done, towards their welfare in the *World to Come*."[28]

Mather's insistence on the slaveholder's continued ownership of the converted slave is premised on the legitimacy of the initial claim to ownership that resulted from the purchase of that slave. This point brings into view what is perhaps the most fundamental difference between Mather and Baxter on the problem of slavery. Baxter's aforementioned emphasis on the priority of converting slaves must be understood in light of his distinction between permissible and prohibited kinds of slavery. In short, aside from consensual slavery, Baxter mentions three legitimate kinds of coercive slavery: punitive slavery, restorative slavery (as compensation for stolen goods), and war captives.[29] The presupposition of Baxter's remarks on the various issues surrounding the treatment and instruction of slaves is that such slaves can be accounted for in terms of one of these four "permissible" kinds of slavery. This is made clear in Baxter's response to the practice of purchasing African slaves "of such as we have just cause to believe did steal them by piracy, or…of those that have no power to sell them," instead of acquiring them "by their own consent, or by the consent of those that had power to sell them," or as "captives in a

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[28] Mather, *Negro Christianized*, 12-13.
[29] Baxter, *Christian Directory*, 216, 217-218.

lawful war": the purchase of such slaves (with the intention to keep them enslaved) is the "heinous sin" of the buyers, and "undoubtedly they are presently bound to deliver them."[30] In other words, the very claim to ownership is illegitimate and the slave must be set free. Baxter rules out the options of reselling the slave to someone else or returning the slave to the original dealer, emphasizing the buyer's guilt and responsibility for restoring the African's wrongfully deprived freedom.[31]

Nowhere in Mather's writings on slavery does the legitimacy of the acquisition of African slaves ever come into question. As noted above, Mather was familiar with Baxter's discussion of slavery, and in *Theopolis Americana* (1710) he approvingly quotes a passage from "the Excellent BAXTER" that denounces the capturing and enslaving of innocent Africans as "One of the worst kinds of Thievery in the World."[32] This selection from Baxter contains a brief but strong condemnation of both the acquisition of African slaves as inhuman violence and the brutal commodification of those slaves by the owners who purchase them; as it appears in *A Christian Directory*, the passage precedes Baxter's injunction to free wrongfully enslaved Africans by just a few paragraphs. Although Baxter's text offers Mather a resounding opportunity to address the enormous injustices to be found at the foundation of the slave trade, Mather's commentary (which is even shorter than the passages he quotes from Baxter) remains consistent with the foregoing discussion. Noticeably avoiding the first of Baxter's condemnations, Mather focuses exclusively on the misuse of slaves and the need for owners to evangelize them. Indeed, his choice of words following the selection from Baxter, "When we have *Slaves* in our Houses,"[33] indicates that Baxter's categorical denunciation of stealing

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[30] Ibid., 218.
[31] Ibid., 218-219.
[32] Cotton Mather, *Theopolis Americana*, 15-16.
[33] Ibid., 16.

Africans and prescribed course of action for owners to rectify their "heinous sin" left Mather's

convictions unscathed. The challenge that Mather presents to slaveholders is for them to treat

slaves in such a way "that their *Slavery* may really be their *Happiness*."[34]

Mather's understanding of the task of the slaveholder provides a providential framework

for considering his interpretations of divine judgment—the second function of providence

mentioned above—as manifested through the conduct of African slaves. In 1716, for instance,

Mather described his slave Onesimus as becoming "useless" (possibly a play on the name

Onesimus, which in Greek means "useful") and difficult, and wrote that he planned to replace

Onesimus with another slave. However, Mather mentions that the process of replacing Onesimus

would require "much Prayer, much Humiliation," as well as repentance from what may have

"offended" God.[35] That is, Mather discerns providential significance in the behavior he

encounters in his slave Onesimus, whose actions are now considered to be revelatory of God's

negative will and call Mather to an act of repentance. Mather does not mention the possibility

that Onesimus might simply be profoundly unhappy with his condition of coercive labor and the

involuntary status of property. Rather, since Mather's providential lens would expect to see

"good" slaves as a result of God's blessing, the conduct of Onesimus is viewed as a message of

God's dissatisfaction with Mather. Moreover, Mather's perspective on slavery and providence

precludes the possibility that God's negative judgment concerns the practice of owning Africans.

It is inconceivable from the standpoint of Mather's theological model that the divine indignation

he perceives might result from his participation in the institution of slavery.

Another example of the second function of providence can be recognized in the enclosure

Mather sent along with his letter to Thomas Prince in 1723. Writing in response to an African

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather* II, 363.

slave who set fire to a house and other similar events, Mather mentions that "the Burning of the Town has been threatened" and he discerns in this threat the "voice of GOD crying to the City."[36] He proceeds to interpret the message of this divine voice as a solemn call to repentance and change in order that "such a Desolation, by those (or some other) Hands, may be prevented."[37] Specifically, the bodies of African slaves through which God had decided to cry out to the city lead Mather to consider the treatment of slaves as a significant part of the cause of God's negative judgment. By this, of course, Mather means simply that the most abusive forms of slaveholding and the tendency to neglect the evangelization of slaves cannot persist: "Are they [i.e., African slaves] always treated according to the Rules of Humanity?...Are they treated as those, that are of one Blood with us, and those that have Immortal Souls in them, and are not meer Beasts of Burden?"[38] His providential approach to slavery seems to prevent him from identifying this divine call to repentance that is articulated through black bodies as a call to repent from enslaving those black bodies. The field of Mather's evaluative vision stops at the condition *of* slaves, excluding a more fundamental probing of their condition *as* slaves. At the end of the enclosure Mather repeats the need for slaves to be "Dutiful…unto their Superiours" and "To be Patient in their Low and hard Conditions."[39]

However, it is precisely through the disruption of African obedience to slaveholders that (according to Mather) the divine voice was crying out the language of judgment. This is no theological conundrum from the standpoint of Mather's theology, since those slaves through whom God was threatening the larger community would likely be numbered by him among those

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[36] Ibid., 686-687.
[37] Ibid., 687.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 688.

who remain "the *Vassals* of Satan" rather than "the *Children* of God."[40] In *The Negro Christianized* it is not the converted African slave that becomes an instrument of God's punishment for the sins of the owner, but rather the unconverted slave. Mather writes, "But many *Masters* whose *Negroes* have greatly vexed them, with miscarriages, may do well to examine, Whether Heaven be not chastising of them, for their failing in their Duty about their *Negroes*…Syrs, you may Read your *Sin* in the *Punishment*."[41]

It should come as no surprise, then, that the third function of the concept of providence (i.e., as an indicator of God's will by means of a contrast with the belligerent reaction of evil forces in the world) appears in Mather's work in relation to diabolical powers disruptive of slavery. Accordingly, in *A Good Master well Served*, Mather admonishes slaves to resist the evil of escaping from their owners. "If any one should Counsel you," he writes, "to Run away, from the Christian *Masters* in whose Houses you reside, he would be a *Wicked Counsellor*. A *Run away Servant*, is a Dishonest, and a Disgraced sort of a Creature, among all the Sober part of Mankind."[42] Mather's theological model enables him to frame the role of the runaway slave as directly oppositional to God's will. He proceeds to clarify this point: "They are not meer *Prisoners of War*, but by the Providence of God brought under further *Necessities* and *Obligations*; and yet they think of Turning *Fugitives*! The *Devil* is the *Driver* of those *Unfaithful Servants*, who *Unlawfully* Desert the Service, wherein the Good Hand of God has fixed them; and the Unavoidable Confusions whereunto all such *Run away Servants*, do generally *Run* themselves, would make one think, that none but the *Devil Driven* would attempt it!"[43] Mather's link between runaway slaves and Satan is presented as the theological corollary to his

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[40] Mather, *Negro Christianized*, 2.
[41] Ibid., 14.
[42] Mather, *Good Master well Served*, 23.
[43] Ibid., 24.

providential grounding of slavery. It is a most convenient theological model that allows a slaveholder to interpret the acquisition of slaves as a manifestation of God's providential design while discerning in the choices of runaway slaves not another instance of that providence (or even of God's negative judgment), but rather the active presence of that "invisible destroyer of souls," the Devil.

Similarly, Mather interprets the completion and publication of *The Negro Christianized* in 1706 in the context of spiritual warfare, expecting an imminent counterattack from Satan. In his diary Mather describes it as "a Work, which will enrage the Divel at such a rate, that I must expect, he will immediately fall upon me, with a Storm of more than ordinary Temptations; I must immediately be buffeted, in some singular manner, by that revengeful Adversary."[44] As such, it is not only the case for Mather that Christianity and slavery are perfectly compatible and that the former reinforces the latter, but also that his work to ensure their unity as Christian slavery in accordance with the divine will inevitably situates him in direct conflict with the essence of evil.

These brief remarks on Cotton Mather's use of the concept of providence focus on only one aspect, albeit a foundational one, of his theological reflections on slavery. The providential framework that Mather employs not only throughout his discourses on slavery but also in recording his own personal participation in the slave trade yields a cluster of themes that overlaps with our other readings for today, and raises many questions regarding how Mather relates to the larger theological conversation about slavery in the early modern Atlantic world. My hope is that this short presentation at the very least serves to highlight some of the issues at stake in this debate as a starting point for our conversation about these texts.

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[44] Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather* I, 564.