Altruism and the Administration of the Universe: Kirtley Fletcher Mather on Science and Values

Edward Davis
Messiah University, tDavis@messiah.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/bio_ed

Part of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons, and the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
https://mosaic.messiah.edu/bio_ed/187
Altruism and the Administration of the Universe:

Kirtley Fletcher Mather (1888-1978) on Science and Values
Introduction: Preliminaries

• This paper is an edited version of “Altruism and the Administration of the Universe: Kirtley Fletcher Mather on Science and Values.” *Zygon* 46.3 (Sept 2011): 517-35

• To request a copy, please speak to me after the session
Introduction: Preliminaries

- My work on Mather is part of a larger project about the religious lives and beliefs of several prominent American scientists from the period between the wars.
- Members of the group all contributed to a series of tracts on “Science and Religion,” published between 1922 and 1931 by the American Institute of Sacred Literature, an arm of the University of Chicago Divinity School.
Introduction: Preliminaries

• Similar studies of four other scientists have already been published—physicists Robert Andrews Millikan (Caltech), Michael Idvorsky Pupin (Columbia) & Arthur Holly Compton (Chicago), and naturalist Samuel Christian Schmucker (West Chester State Normal School)

• The project as a whole was summarized in a short article in American Scientist (May-June 2005)
Introduction: Preliminaries


- I am now completing the final product: an annotated edition of all 10 of the AISL pamphlets on “Science and Religion,” including a lengthy introduction
Introduction: Kirtley Mather

http://farm6.static.flickr.com/5192/5857269353_d442591414.jpg

• Mather’s activities and writings over a period of six decades advanced the mutual relevance of religion and science for the modern age
Introduction: Kirtley Mather
Kirtley Mather: Family & Education

www.masshist.org/database/images/mather1.gif
Woodcut attributed to John Foster (ca. 1665), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

- A direct descendant of Richard Mather (father of Increase Mather & grandfather of Cotton Mather), Kirtley Mather was born in Chicago on February 18, 1888
- Awarded a full scholarship for his first year at the University of Chicago
- Studied with physical geographer Wallace Walter Atwood
Kirtley Mather: Family & Education

http://www.beloit.edu/reason/images/242041.png
Thomas Chrowder Chamberlin (unknown date)

- Thomas Chrowder Chamberlin (1843-1928) influenced Mather profoundly
- Mather later said that a portrait of Chamberlin “is the only picture of any individual that hangs over my desk in my study at home”
- “man’s future career is chiefly a matter of his own making. We may, then, rationally regard the study of the earth’s existing resources, as well as the development of man’s capacities to use them in making the most of himself, as one of the potential factors in his own destiny” (Science, 1924)
Kirtley Mather: Family & Education

• Hyde Park Baptist Church, a very liberal congregation; many members were faculty at the U of Chicago, including William Rainey Harper, George Burman Foster, Gerald Birney Smith, Shailer Mathews—and (later) Arthur Holly Compton
Kirtley Mather: Family & Education

http://pics.librarything.com/picsizes/08/3a/083a2d6a4ae3ba8637577744167434b41716b42.jpg
from Walter Rauschenbusch, *Dare We Be Christians* (1914)

- A Baptist minister, theologian Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), was instrumental in founding the Social Gospel movement.
- Mather must have encountered the Social Gospel as part of his involvement with the Baptists on the South Side of Chicago.
Kirtley Mather: Family & Education

- Mather described theologian Shailer Mathews as one of “my mother’s heroes. Occasionally he offered a special course on Sunday mornings, for students in the Arts and Sciences, on the study of the Bible. At Mother’s suggestion, I took that course during a quarter in 1906 or 1907. His approach was that of a ‘modernist’ rather than a ‘fundamentalist’ and I found it highly informative and fascinating.”
The Administration of the Universe

Mather sat through from Chamberlin’s course on “Principles and Theories of Geology” three times

“I began to comprehend more fully his rubric, ‘The administration of the universe’ – a term that I later used, with due acknowledgment to him”
The Administration of the Universe

http://farm3.staticflickr.com/2754/5857269201_377ac9a804.jpg
Photo by Bachrach (1947), Science Service, Records, 1920s-1970s, Smithsonian Institution Archives, SIA Acc. 90-105 [SIA2008-5930]

• According to Mather, Chamberlin used it to mean “that the universe is under some kind of administrative regulation, whatever the administrative power may be. It implies only one thing about the nature of the administration: that it is unitary; administration not administrations. Significantly, administration is not spelled with a capital A in ordinary usage; nor is there any suggestion that administrator is an appropriate synonym.”
The Administration of the Universe

• “the administrative directive toward orderly organization of increasingly complex systems transcends the urge for survival.”

• “the conclusion seems clear that evolution has resulted in progress toward the attainment of ‘the good, the true, and the beautiful’” —Mather, *The Permissive Universe* (1986)
Vernon Kellogg, *Headquarters Nights* (1917)

The Administration of the Universe
Mather in the San Juan Mountains, Colorado (1912), from Kennard Bork, Cracking Rocks and Defending Democracy (1994)

• “Underneath the ancient warfare between theology and science there is an unvoiced, but very real, fear that in the last analysis the doctrine of the survival of the fittest in the struggle for existence is diametrically opposed to the conception of the brotherhood of man; that evolution according to Darwin and [Hugo] Devries and [August] Weissmann is the antithesis of Christianity according to Christ and John and Paul” — “Parables from Paleontology,” Atlantic Monthly (1918)
The Administration of the Universe
Mather lecturing on geology at Harvard (1934), from Kennard Bork, *Cracking Rocks and Defending Democracy* (1994)

- One might very well conclude from natural history “that no good thing could ever come from out this welter of selfishness and greed, of worldly lusts and brute rivalry.”
- Once the higher mammals appeared, however, “The triumph of intelligence, agility, and brainpower over brute strength, massive bulk, and sluggish mentality was complete.”
The Administration of the Universe

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/philosophy/news/archive/creative-evolution/bergson1.jpg
Henri Bergson (unknown date)

• Mather’s optimism derived partly from the French philosopher Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution (1907):

• “in the evolution of life, just as in the evolution of human societies and of individual destinies, the greatest successes have been for those who have accepted the heaviest risks”
The Administration of the Universe

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/philosophy/news/archive/creative-evolution/bergson1.jpg

Rembrandt, Head of Christ (ca. 1650), State Museum, Berlin

• In order to take “the next great upward step in the progress of life,” Mather said, we must develop “race-consciousness and love. The type of the new variety of the human species was presented to us nineteen hundred years ago.” (1918)

• “the Christian has assumed that Jesus of Nazareth displayed the true character of the Administration of the Universe” (1928)
The Administration of the Universe

Mather, *Enough and to Spare* (1944)

- “the data now available point unmistakably” to the following conclusion:
- “There is enough and to spare to provide every human being likely to appear on the face of the earth with all that is required to make life comfortable, at least for several thousand years to come” —Mather, “The Natural History of Righteousness,” *The Crozer Quarterly* (1939)
Kirtley Mather’s Significance


• Mather served as President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1951 and President of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1957 to 1961
Kirtley Mather’s Significance
Kirtley Mather’s Significance

L: Ralph Burhoe and Ralph Fuchs with first issue of Zygon (1966), from James Gilbert, Redeeming Culture (1997)
R: Mather with Harlow Shapley (May 1956), from Kennard Bork, Cracking Rocks and Defending Democracy (1994)
Kirtley Mather’s Significance

- The late Stephen Jay Gould shared Mather’s emphasis on cooperation rather than competition in evolution
- Gould: Mather was “perhaps the finest man I have ever known”
- “one of those rare men ‘of enlarged curiosity’ (a description applied by Josiah Wedgewood to Charles Darwin) who grace our planet from time to time and who try to integrate the many compartments of our too-specialized world into a coherent vision of life worth living”