A Divinity for All Persuasions: Almanacs and Early American Religious Life

T. J. TOMLIN
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232 pp.

In the introduction to *A Divinity for All Persuasions: Almanacs and Early American Religious Life*, historian T. J. Tomlin mentions that his work draws upon "a close reading of just under 2,000 almanacs from across British North American and the early United States between 1730 and 1820" (5), from holdings at the Library Company of Philadelphia, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Virginia Historical Society (ix). Tomlin's work could be hailed for this labor alone, as the exhaustively footnoted book recovers and renders vibrantly provocative the well-known but little-read form of the almanac. Although the almanac is unread now, with the notable exception of Poor Richard's aphorisms collected in Benjamin Franklin's "The Way to Wealth" (1758), Tomlin points out that not only did the almanac saturate the early American print market, it was the one book that seemingly everyone read, causing Cotton Mather to lament that it "comes into almost as many hands as the best of books [the Bible]" (11). Or possibly Mather was celebrating this fact, for Tomlin points out that in addition to his myriad other religious projects, Mather also published an almanac. Ever attuned to his audience's spiritual wants and needs, Mather saw his brief foray into the almanac form as an attempt to bring Puritan doctrine into the everyday lives of the New England colonists. Like Mather, Tomlin asserts that the almanac was a part of the larger religious world of early America, and uses this idea to interrogate an archive of these almanacs that is daunting in its volume and perplexing in its variety. What he finds reflected in these critically underutilized sources is not the intra-Puritan competition recorded by the clerical elite, or even the scholarly debate over doctrinal differences often grafted back onto this period; instead, he "came to see that pan-Protestantism . . . sat at the center of early American religious life" (158). Tomlin argues that between the years 1730 and 1820 the form of the genre and the demands of the market prompted almanacs to unify readers around a set of pan-Protestant beliefs that formed a generalized Protestant vernacular. Drawing on his thorough archival research, Tomlin finds in the almanac a genre whose popularity and diffusion both

grew from and helped produce a universal religious life that bubbled below the surface of the sectarian divides.

Tomlin begins by familiarizing readers with the early American almanac in two chapters that describe its production, content, and use. The almanac was an "Annual Friend"—to use Tomlin's title for this part of the book—that represented a lucrative source of sales for printers who depended on the yearly publication of the cheaply printed sixteen- to forty-eight-page pamphlet, containing "calendars surrounded by a variety of additional content" (11), including "poetry, essays, stories, and anecdotes" (12) known by scholars as "filler." While publications such as Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* and the *Farmer's Almanac* are the most recognizable, numerous local variations saturated the market, causing one printer to remark, "no pamphlet or book, not excepting the bible itself, is so thoroughly examined as these annual productions" (11), and Tomlin to suggest that "by 1800 there were enough almanacs being printed in the United States to place one in every household" (16). These steady sellers—as David Hall calls them—made up the backbone of many printers' trade, and there was a fierce competition to capture the largest share of the market. For each almanac "a calculator (also known as a philomath), an author (or compiler), and a printer" (18) came together to produce a product that "had the appearance of an assorted, fragmented collection of poems, weather predictions, essays, anecdotes, maxims, and medical advice" (27). Tomlin's great strength is his willingness to consider as important each aspect of the almanac, examining the work's filler, calendar, illustrations, and at times even marginalia in his construction of the form's ideological content.

Tomlin first takes up the almanac's use of astrology—"the almanac's most-recognizable and least-understood component" (30)—and contextualizes it within eighteenth-century understandings thereof that distinguished between natural and judicial forms, the former of which "consisted of astral influences on material objects, including . . . human health," while the latter made "predictions regarding social and political events and . . . individual concerns" (30). Rather than dismissing the almanac's astrological basis as occult, or simply ignoring it as unimportant, Tomlin contextualizes the almanac with the eighteenth century's subtle distinctions between approved and impermissible types of astrology, and demonstrates how the almanac's astrological underpinnings were part of—and not counter to—the interrelated world constructed by Enlightenment sci-

ence. The astronomical calculations of the philomaths described the influence of the stars on agriculture and the human body, locating the individual within the natural world in a way consistent with Protestantism and in keeping with the new science ushered in after the Restoration, while rejecting judicial astrology's attempts to predict future events as, to quote one almanac, "nothing else but a way of cheating ignorant people" (33). More than simply a calendar, the early American's almanac was a tool for interpreting his or her relationship within the expanded universe of Enlightenment teaching, one reaching from the book in the reader's hand to new understandings of the universe.

Focusing next on the almanac's filler, the three chapters of the second part of the book use these diverse snatches of poetry, brief essays, and pithy sayings to weave a coherent picture of the almanacs' construction of pan-Protestant principles. In a chapter about almanacs' surprising preoccupation with death, Tomlin points out how the form's cyclical nature and its focus on annual rhythms helps explain a morbid curiosity with human demise, before describing how the depiction of the afterlife painted therein sidestepped theological questions in favor of a bland portrayal of "the soul as eternally disembodied but continuing to live in community with friends and family" (74). Tomlin argues that the almanac reflected the integration of death into the regular cycles of early American life, and that such a generalized depiction of a universal approach to life's end paved the way for death's sentimentalization in the nineteenth century.

In the next two chapters Tomlin makes his strongest case for how the almanac created a common Protestant vernacular, turning first to its construction of authority as drawn from human reason, the natural world, and the Bible. In an implicit argument for understanding the Enlightenment as a gradual transition as opposed to a sharp break, Tomlin points out the almanac's long tradition of enshrining reason as the master of the passions, as well as its consistency in suggesting that the natural world was equal to the Bible as a source for God's revelation. Tomlin is careful to demonstrate how such valorizations of the divine as revealed in creation were fully within Protestant teachings and not reflective of Deism's rejection of revelation, and he argues persuasively for how the almanac's integration of Enlightenment science into a Protestant understanding of natural revelation was "a critical means by which this synthesis between Protestantism and the Enlightenment became available to ordinary men

and women" (89). When the almanacs deal explicitly with religion they undertake a similar project of universalization, stripping the calendar of all but the most important Protestant holy days, and employing a general morality that used the golden rule of "Do as you would be done unto" as "the most specific and important plumb line with which to assess true religion" (106). Generic though such a construction might seem, the almanacs were still "unabashedly Protestant" (110) in their basis in saving grace and the power of faith and their insistence upon "the unique and potentially life-altering work of Jesus in the atonement" (113). In sifting his large archive, Tomlin brings coherence out of the chaos while noting that claims to universalism have distinctly Protestant contours.

In the two chapters of the book's third and final part Tomlin turns his attention to those groups implicitly or explicitly excluded by the almanac's pan-Protestantism, and answers some of the questions about the comprehensiveness of the almanac's embrace that his first two parts raise. Positing that "early America's widespread anti-Catholicism was . . . essential to the formation and maintenance of a British and later an American identity" (128), Tomlin explains how almanacs used stories of corrupt priests and embarrassingly naïve parishioners as easy sources of humor, as well as how the perceived authoritarianism of George III brought comparisons to the pope. The latter's infallibility was regularly lampooned, and Tomlin points out how almanacs were ready to attack specific tenets of Catholicism while ignoring any subtleties of Protestant doctrine. Tomlin attributes this overt hostility to Catholicism's continued threat to Protestantism, which "simultaneously challenged pan-Protestantism's core tenets and British North America's very existence" (140), whereas non-Christians such as Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and American Indians were viewed as curiosities as likely to be figured as examples of universal piety or morality as to be depicted negatively. However, like Catholicism, atheism was reviled as a threat to the order and revelation that pan-Protestantism found in the natural world. Demeaning Catholicism on one hand, while rejecting the beliefs of the Deists on the other, the almanacs' Protestant vernacular was built as much on common opposition as enumeration of shared principles. As Tomlin points out in closing, it is only through the examination of the mass of popular print that the power of this vaguely defined though pervasive pan-Protestantism reveals itself, combating the related ideas that the history of American religious life is one of interdenominational strife, and

that religion is best understood in relation to churches. Instead, Tomlin proposes, we should turn to that text most available to early Americans, be they man or woman, preacher or pauper.

The remarkable breadth of Tomlin's reading is the book's greatest strength, though the focus on the almanac writ large also means that less attention is paid to some of the subtle differences among almanacs. The book does mark some gradations of difference, for instance pointing to the more Anglican nature of almanacs produced in the South, and discussing how almanacs represented the religious enthusiasms of the First Great Awakening. But often the thesis of the uniformity of the almanac's pan-Protestant sensibilities overwhelms these distinctions, while also opening new paths of study that attend to such nuances. For instance, what might be uncovered by a detailed study of a single long-running almanac? Might such an investigation reveal an evolution in Tomlin's pan-Protestantism, or a link between the two Great Awakenings? And how does the market-driven universalism of the almanacs fit within the social and political ideas of a printer's larger trade? In making relevant an aspect of the early American print sphere that was previously almost invisible in its ubiquity, Tomlin has opened the door for an expansion of theories about the role of print in the construction of community—thinking that has heretofore rested largely on the newspaper and the novel. Most interesting might be the implications of Tomlin's study for theories of the nation, something that the book suggests in a gesture toward Benedict Anderson. These implications bear further examination for how the construction of a pan-Protestant sensibility accords with Anderson's thesis in *Imagined Communities* or runs counter to local productions of community, as depicted by Trish Loughran's insightful challenge to Anderson in *The Republic in Print*. By persuasively arguing for the utility of including the almanac in studies of early American religious life, this book expands the print sphere to a larger segment of the early American population, opening interesting questions about how such an expanded audience might perceive itself.

A Divinity for All Persuasions is impressive in its careful archival research and persuasive in its argument. If the book engenders some theoretical questions that its strong materialism doesn't answer, its capacity to stimulate such conceptual questions is a testament to its ability to discover the complicated nature of this mundane form. Tomlin takes this often-overlooked piece of the print sphere seriously as an object of study, and

in so doing reveals the complex forces at work in this humble piece of the early American archive. The book will appeal to scholars interested in a richly textured understanding of early American print culture, especially those who find debates over theological nuance too elitist, and who are searching instead for some measure of the intellectual currents circulating in the tavern as opposed to the pulpit. In his painstaking archival research Tomlin uncovers a market-minded Protestant vernacular that circulated below clerical latitudinarianism and was distinct from an evangelicalism focused on the conversion experience, reminding us that reading the past must always be attentive to reading *in* the past, even the mundane and everyday consumption of the almanac.

JOHN DAVID MILES *Louisiana State University*

The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas: New Nations and a Transatlantic Discourse of Empire

ELISE BARTOSIK-VÉLEZ
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201 pp.

In this engaging book on Christopher Columbus's transatlantic legacy, Elise Bartosik-Vélez traces the appropriation of the figure of Columbus in the Spanish- and English-speaking worlds and explores how contrasting imperial ideologies provided an often-overlooked foundation for newly independent nation-states that emerged in the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the author's key arguments is that empire was understood and represented differently in North and South America, and therefore Columbus's legacy plays out differently for each continent. In the United States, where the idea of empire manifested itself as a desire for territorial expansion, certain rhetorical and historical leaps—what Bartosik-Vélez refers to as "the tortuousness of the constructed myth of Columbus in British America, the very visibility of the scaffolding on which the myth is built" (3)—were necessary in order to incorporate Columbus into a national narrative. In contrast, empire in Spanish America was related to the exercise of power over conquered territories and peoples, a process that included both "*translatio imperii*" and "*translatio studii*." Colum-

research focuses on the Atlantic world, particularly disability, print culture, and women's writing and cultural productions during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her book *The Capital of Charity: The Writing and Wages of Post-Revolutionary Atlantic Benevolence* (U P of New England, forthcoming) explores the emergence of the American nonprofit space as it was forged through mutually supportive relationships among literary production, benevolence, and maritime trade during an era of nascent capitalism.

JEFFREY GLOVER is an associate professor in the Department of English at Loyola University Chicago. He is the author of *Paper Sovereigns: Anglo-Native Treaties and the Law of Nations, 1604–1664* (U of Pennsylvania P, 2014) and coeditor, with Matt Cohen, of *Colonial Mediascapes: Sensory Worlds of the Early Americas* (U of Nebraska P, 2014).

PHILIP GOULD is Nicholas Brown Professor of Oratory and Belles Lettres and chair of English at Brown University. He is author of *Covenant and Republic: Historical Romance and the Politics of Puritanism* (Cambridge UP, 1996), *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the 18th Century Atlantic World* (Harvard UP, 2003), and, most recently, *Writing the Rebellion: Loyalists and the Literature of Politics in British America* (Oxford UP, 2013).

DAVID HOLLAND is associate professor of North American religious history at the Harvard Divinity School. He is the author of *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint* (Oxford UP, 2011). He is currently at work on a comparative study of Ellen White and Mary Baker Eddy, as well as an intellectual biography of Perry Miller.

MAEVE KANE is assistant professor of early American history at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Her manuscript in progress examines Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) women's use of clothing from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries to navigate the changing politics of race, gender, and civility, drawing on literary, archaeological, quantitative, and archival materials.

GEORGE MARSDEN has held teaching positions at Calvin College, Duke University, and the University of Notre Dame, where he is Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History Emeritus. His many books include *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, *The Soul of the American University*, and *Religion and American Culture*. His most recent work is *C. S. Lewis's Mere Christianity: A Biography* for Princeton University Press's series on Lives of Great Religious Books.

JOHN DAVID MILES is currently a professional-in-residence at Louisiana State University, where his time is split between the Department of English and Special Collections at Hill Memorial Library. His research focuses on how narratives about the past construct community in the present; he has written on Mary Rowlandson, the HBO series *Deadwood*, and Herman Melville. He is currently at work on a book manuscript titled "The Secular History of a Sacred Space" about the evolution of historical thought in colonial New England.