

BOOK REVIEWS

A Divinity for All Persuasions: Almanacs and Early American Religious Life. By T. J. TOMLIN. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 220 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$78.)

Scholars of early American history commonly note that most families of that time were likely to own only two books, if they were privileged to own books at all: a Bible and an almanac. Almanacs were stitched pamphlets, published annually, that offered readers a one-stop resource for purposes of practical living, entertainment, and moral education. Each included a calendar, times of sunrise and sunset, notices of astrological events, and sundry poetry, pious tales, jokes, recipes, and medical and agricultural advice. Despite their prevalence, almanacs remain early America's most understudied form of print media. In *A Divinity for All Persuasions*, T. J. Tomlin remedies this neglect with an immensely useful and comprehensive analysis of the genre, focusing on almanacs published in British North America between 1730 and 1820.

In *A Divinity for All Persuasions*, Tomlin argues that almanacs were infused with "pan-Protestantism," a set of core religious doctrines and dispositions held in common by the majority of early Americans (3). Tomlin directs this argument to book historians and to American religious historians: the former have overlooked the almanac's deep religious dimensions, while the latter have exaggerated the period's sectarianism. The almanac offers a vantage for recognizing that everyday Americans were more religious, and shared far more religious commonalities, than scholars have heretofore acknowledged. Dependent on small profit margins, almanac makers were highly attuned to consumer demand. Almanacs thus offer a privileged window into early America's "collective religious sensibility" (119).

"Pan-Protestantism" is a capacious term. At times Tomlin describes it as nearly equivalent to the taken-for-granted mentality of the long eighteenth century, so omnipresent as to be unremarkable and unquestioned. Thematic chapters demonstrate how this pervasive, generic Protestantism was defined by, among other things, an interest in astrology consonant with Protestant natural philosophy; a concern for death, the afterlife, and eternal judgment; and appeals to the religious authorities of reason, the natural world, and the Bible. In chapter five, however, Tomlin escalates the stakes of his argument. Here he advances what we might call a "strong" pan-Protestantism: more than just a given worldview, it was in fact a "radical vision" and a "clearly articulated stream of thought" animated by a spirit

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of religious liberty and the principles of “inclusion, unity, and openness” (101–2). Protestants saw that they differed on denominational particulars, but, believing that they were more united than divided, they enthusiastically supported religious liberty.

Despite its emphasis on inclusion and unity, *A Divinity for All Persuasions* also examines pan-Protestantism’s exclusions. In two closing chapters, Tomlin reveals how the authorial eye of the almanac gazed with equal parts horror and fascination upon Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and atheists. Tomlin argues that this posture toward religious others worked dialectically to shore up pan-Protestant identity.

Yet Tomlin leaves largely unexamined those Protestants excluded from the pan-Protestant consensus. For instance, he presents pan-Protestantism as rigidly orthodox. In his account, almanac makers distanced themselves from those corners of astrology deriving from folk traditions that historians have labeled “occult” (which nonetheless long coexisted syncretically with Protestant Christianity). Pan-Protestantism also appears to have overlapped with the old-light religious establishment, keeping itself aloof from the hotter sort of Protestantism ascendant in this period. It seems that few if any almanac makers identified as Methodists or Baptists. Of evangelicalism and revivalism, Tomlin says only that almanacs were “unaffected by these developments in American church life” and that almanacs condemned religious enthusiasm as a perversion (98, 117). Ultimately it remains unclear whether almanacs represented a true Protestant groundswell or might be viewed more accurately as a product of an elite Protestant hegemony. Using Tomlin’s evidence, almanacs might also be read as representations of a certain image of Protestantism curated by those respectable, old-light laymen who controlled the means of production in early America. Some discussion of the tensions and internal limits of “pan-Protestantism,” as well as more evidence of almanacs’ reception, would have been welcome additions to this compelling study.

A significant contribution to early American religious and book history, *A Divinity for All Persuasions* is historiographically ambitious, intensively researched, and well written. It deserves to be read as the authoritative book on the subject of early American almanacs.

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Holy Nation: The Transatlantic Quaker Ministry in an Age of Revolution. By SARAH CRABTREE. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. 276 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$45.)

In *Holy Nation*, Sarah Crabtree charts the beliefs and values of the Religious Society of Friends during the age of revolution. She focuses particularly on the intersection of religion with the politics of nation and empire throughout the Atlantic world. Crabtree argues that Quakers embraced and appropriated the