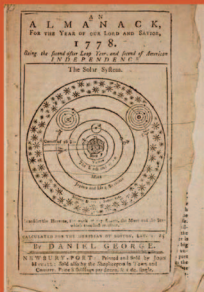


# A DIVINITY FOR ALL PERSUASIONS



*Almanacs and Early American Religious Life*

T. J. TOMLIN

# *A Divinity for All Persuasions*

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# A Divinity for All Persuasions

*Almanacs and Early American  
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T.J. TOMLIN

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*For Katrina*



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## *Introduction*

AN 1811 MASSACHUSETTS almanac included the story of “a certain divine, who was much given to meditation and study.” He spent so much time reading that his wife, who was more inclined toward “company and conversation,” frequently complained. She decided to get his attention by ordering a female servant to run and tell him that pigs had gotten into the garden. When this failed, she told him that cows had broken into the nursery, continuing her efforts with a series of fabricated accidents. Frustrated by repeatedly being called out of his study “merely to be laughed at,” the minister began ignoring his wife’s summons. One day, exasperated, she “flew into the study and told him she wished she was a book.” Delivering the story’s punch line, the minister replied that if so, “he wished it to be an almanac.”<sup>1</sup>

There is more than one way to interpret the minister’s response and get the joke. Perhaps he wanted a new wife every year. Or maybe he wanted a companion who, like an almanac, was concise and straightforward. Both interpretations offer avenues of analysis regarding gender, marriage, and the use of “the minister” in early American humor.

I am interested in something more obvious: the minister read almanacs. He was comfortable referencing one as a part of his daily life and, presumably, the long hours in his study included time with these very ordinary books. At least this aspect of the story was not far-fetched. Ministers purchased and used numerous almanacs now held at The Library Company of Philadelphia and The American Antiquarian Society.<sup>2</sup> This book is an extended effort to explain the anecdote’s assumption that religion and almanacs were amiably interwoven in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In a larger sense, it uses print to examine the religious significance of popular culture. It argues that early American religious life is best characterized by the pan-Protestant sensibility articulated in its most ubiquitous genre.

The almanac was early America's most affordable and widespread form of print. At its core, it was a calendar and an astrologically based medical handbook. Poetry, essays, moral axioms, and anecdotes filled the non-calendar pages. Other than a Bible and perhaps a few sermons and schoolbooks, an almanac was the only printed item most people owned before 1820. Almanac-makers carefully and successfully chose content that would appeal to the broadest possible audience.<sup>3</sup> As one almanac-maker informed his readers in 1767, "I have made a very special regard, not only to the correctness of my calculations, but also to the subject-matter of entertainment, and have filled my vacant pages with such things as I apprehend would be most useful and most agreeable to the public."<sup>4</sup> Almanac-makers were astute arbiters of popular opinion.

Although they outnumbered all other printed sources combined in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, almanacs are still associated with folksy quaintness more often than they are treated as essential elements of early American culture. The newspaper has escaped this fate primarily because its status as a serious source of information has only increased since the eighteenth century. The almanac's status moved the opposite direction after 1820. Unable to withstand competition from a deluge of new forms of popular print and adulterated by large publishing companies, late nineteenth-century almanacs became caricatures of their predecessors.<sup>5</sup>

Those scholars who have recognized the importance of early American almanacs have made two conclusions about their religious content. Historians of the book have marveled at almanac distribution patterns and sales figures but have not explored the content that fueled its popularity. They have also portrayed the almanac as secular flotsam floating successfully atop a sea of religious books. Even Marion Stowell and Thomas Horrocks, both of whom have shrewdly explicated the wider cultural importance of almanacs, use the word "secular" to describe them.<sup>6</sup> Historians of American religion, on the other hand, have concluded that the almanac's popularity is best understood as proof that the "occult" was alive and well in early America.<sup>7</sup>

Both the context of the printing industry and the content of almanacs support a different conclusion. Catering to consumer demand by drawing on the religious works available in their shop or their own familiarity with religious idioms, almanac-makers placed a distilled Protestant vernacular at the center of America's most popular genre.<sup>8</sup> By disseminating a recognizable collection of Protestant concepts regarding God's existence, divine

revelation, the human condition, and the afterlife, almanacs played an unparalleled role in reinforcing what Carla Pestana has called British North America's "shared religious culture."<sup>9</sup> This shared culture fostered a distinctly pan-Protestant sensibility—an emotional, intellectual, and moral predisposition.<sup>10</sup> While sensibilities do not attend church, plow fields, or care for sick family members, they reflect a culture's collective attempt to make sense of these and many other experiences.

Fundamental structures of American printing reinforced popular print's role in American religious life. Almanacs were printed within an industry driven by religious titles from its inception.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the act of reading had long entailed a call to individual transformation, whether through the Bible, primers, catechisms, or sermons. Almanacs were not immune from these influences. Producers, consumers, and the genre they shaped reflected the pervasive presence of religion in the business of print. Almanacs should be interpreted first and foremost in this wider literary context. With this in mind, it is nearly impossible to describe or even conceive of their content as either secular or occult. Like Bibles, sermons, and schoolbooks, almanacs carried religious knowledge to their readers.

While I argue that readers not only shared but shaped the almanac's religious content, both they and the genre's compilers were influenced by two complementary intellectual movements: Latitudinarianism and the new science. In the wake of England's tumultuous Civil War, a group of Anglican leaders associated with Cambridge, St. Andrews, and Aberdeen universities sought to reinvigorate the Church of England by overcoming longstanding divisions between its "High Church" and "Puritan" factions. Reeling from regicide and dismayed by the spread of Quakerism and other sects, English Latitudinarians promoted reason, moderation, and unity around Protestant essentials and morality. Far from an obscure strand of Anglicanism, Latitudinarianism spread quickly and had wide appeal in every region of British North America. The sermons of Archbishop John Tillotson, the movement's most popular proponent, were bestsellers across eighteenth-century America. Anglican priests regularly emulated his style and content in their own sermons. Even in comparatively conservative New England, spearheaded by the influential tutor and later president John Leverett, Harvard's curriculum and many Congregational churches in the region became increasingly Latitudinarian after 1680. The movement's emphasis on morality as the surest sign of authentic religion left an enduring imprint on American religious life. Not



coincidentally, the second intellectual movement influencing early America's pan-Protestant sensibility expanded alongside Latitudinarianism after the Restoration of the English monarchy in 1660. Despite their numerous disagreements, the natural philosophers behind this new science put forth both a predictable, fascinating universe and an equally well-ordered understanding of the human being. Both, they argued, had been created by a self-disclosing creator. Especially through the work of English natural philosophers associated with the Royal Society of London, also established in 1660, the new science convinced early Americans that they could use their faculties to understand the world, themselves, and divine revelation.<sup>12</sup> While these two intellectual movements shaped early America's pan-Protestant sensibility, neither had an unfiltered influence. Early Americans embraced Latitudinarianism's emphasis on reason and morality while jettisoning its connection to the Church of England or any other church. They also came to terms with and accepted the new science slowly and selectively.

Two additional historical developments helped solidify pan-Protestantism. The first was a growing solidarity among Anglophonic Protestants between 1688 and the 1760s. Influenced by the rise of British nationalism after the Glorious Revolution, fueled by the military and missionary threat posed by French and Spanish Catholicism, and intensified by their participation in an expanding transatlantic economy, eighteenth-century Americans increasingly perceived their interests as interconnected with other British Protestants throughout the Atlantic world.<sup>13</sup> The notion of British Protestantism as a denominationally transferable designation encouraged early Americans to center in on a smaller set of shared "essential" religious doctrines. A second historical development occurred alongside the creation of British Protestantism and eventually displaced it: the ideal and practice of American religious liberty. Though implemented inconsistently and constrained by colonial, state, and regional contexts, the idea that America and especially the United States was and even should be religiously heterogeneous buttressed pan-Protestant unity.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps inspired by the habitual borrowing characteristic of early American printing, I have taken this book's title from a 1724 newspaper advertisement. When Samuel Keimer opened his Philadelphia bookshop, he promoted his wares and intent with a claim that in his store, customers would find "A choice Parcel of curious and valuable books, consisting of Poetry, Philosophy, History, Mathematicks, and Divinity of All Perswasions."<sup>15</sup> By "divinity," Keimer meant theology, which filled genres ranging

from formal treatises to sermons and devotional literature. He hoped that religious practitioners of “All Perswasions” would discover and, maybe even more importantly, purchase something from his shop. The ecumenicalism of both Keimer’s inventory and his appeal to potential customers illustrates more than just the importance of “religious” titles to the business of early American print. It indicates a crucial consequence of the broader, vexed, history of American religious pluralism. The truth is that Keimer did not need to, and likely he did not even hope to, appeal to all religious persuasions; Philadelphia’s overwhelmingly Protestant population would be more than enough. If he could reach a large cross-section of these consumers, Keimer would make a substantial profit. This, I suggest, was the central aim and practice of other printers and almanac-makers. They succeeded. As a result, early America was suffused with a “divinity” for all Protestant persuasions. Although Keimer’s advertisement suggested his intention to sell a disparate variety of religious titles, something far more profound took place. As he and other producers appealed to a demanding, discriminating clientele, they placed their consumers’ pan-Protestant divinity at the center of early American popular culture.

My conclusions are based on a close reading of just under 2,000 almanacs from across British North America and the early United States between 1730 and 1820. Most were printed in the major printing centers (Boston, Philadelphia, Charleston, New York) or areas surrounding them (Worcester, New Haven, Germantown, Williamsburg, Richmond, Baltimore). I include both the best-selling and most widely distributed almanacs by almanac-makers such as Nathaniel Ames, Benjamin Franklin, Titan Leeds, Isaiah Thomas, Benjamin Banneker, and Robert Andrews and lesser-known or shorter-running titles such as Samuel Bullard’s Boston-based almanac from the 1780s and 1790s and Benjamin Bates’s early nineteenth-century *Virginia and North Carolina Almanack*. I have supplemented printed almanac content with readers’ annotations, business records, and correspondence among the printers and compilers who produced almanacs.

The fairly limited number of printers and printing centers during these years combined with an impressive distribution system to create a genre that, in spite of local and regional variations, was remarkably consistent in its structure and content. Conventions of the trade had become sacrosanct by the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Innovations that strayed too far from consumers’ expectations entailed potentially devastating financial risk. When Nathan Bowen of Marblehead, Massachusetts,

issued his 1737 almanac, he printed a series of riddles, promising readers a free almanac the following year if they could solve one. Combined with a poor set of astronomical calculations, this gimmick lost Bowen at least one attentive customer. A Boston sea captain named Joseph Prince, who had used Bowen's almanac for the first time in 1737, likely captured the opinion of many consumers when he wrote the following observation on the almanac's first full page: "The Allmenick this year is but a por tol [poor tool] I fear" (Fig. 0.1).<sup>16</sup> In 1738, Prince returned to using Nathaniel Ames's almanac for his diary, as he had done in the past. Unable to appeal to consumers, Nathan Bowen issued only one more almanac before turning to other business pursuits.<sup>17</sup>

This book is intentionally situated in a well-trodden period of American religious history most famous for its two "Awakenings." Denominational life in America was unquestionably transformed between 1730 and 1820. These were the years in which upstart, sometimes very young movements such as the Methodists along with "New Light" Presbyterians and Baptists numerically overtook Congregationalists and Anglicans. In the past 25 years, historians have devoted considerable attention to tracing the causes, effects, and dynamics of this shift, disagreeing sharply over what took place. One interpretation posits that religion in this period, influenced by the egalitarian rhetoric of the American Revolution, was "democratized."<sup>18</sup> Just as colonists had recently separated themselves from British authority, in this view, common religion replaced elite religion in a recognizably "American" story. Another interpretation contends that far from embodying the leveling impulses of an expanding population, the winning movements were successful because they rearticulated longstanding hierarchies of racial, sexual, and political power.<sup>19</sup>

As with the secular/occult divide, here too I have found that almanacs offer something new. The primary sources historians have relied on to write the history of American religious life between 1730 and 1820 have come mostly from within religious communities or from among their adherents. Because they were composed by a group of printers and almanac-makers well attuned to public opinion and unaffiliated with specific denominations, almanacs provide a unique vantage point from which to view the contours of American religion during this critical period.

Early America's most popular genre has much to tell us about eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century religious life. Stepping outside of church-based sources such as sermons, clerical letters, and membership figures offers new perspectives on America's religious past. The

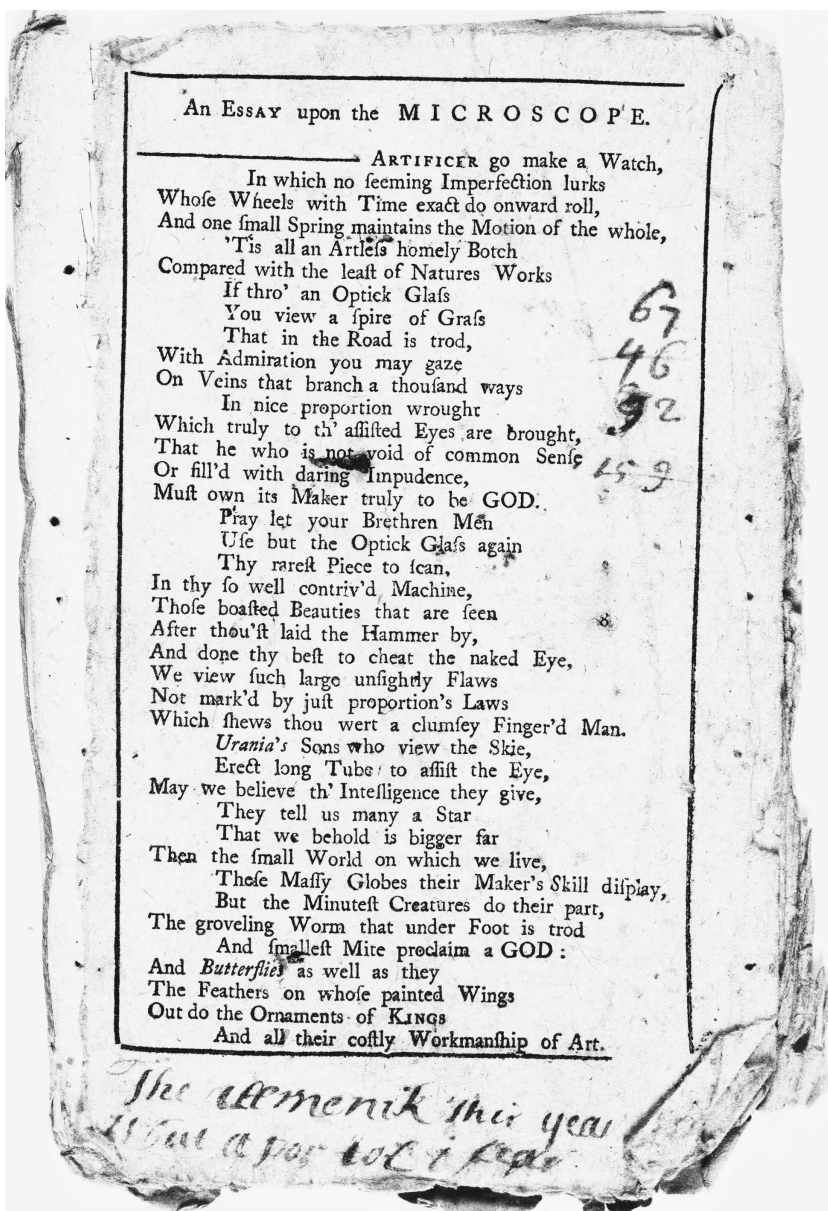


FIGURE 0.1 Boston ship captain Thomas Prince made his opinion of Nathaniel Bowen's 1737 *New England Diary* clear in this annotation: "The Allmenik this year is but a por tol [poor tool] I fear." Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society

religious content of almanacs suggests that a distinct current of American religious life was unaffected by and unconcerned with dramatic changes in church membership. Almanacs offered a coherent yet flexible alternative, eschewing denominationally specific doctrinal issues in favor of a shared core. This was both a shrewd business decision and a reflection of consumer demand. Attuned to public taste, printers and almanac-makers disseminated a widely shared version of Protestantism they knew would sell. In the process, they placed early America's prevailing religious sensibility at the center of its most popular form of print.

PART ONE

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*An Annual Friend*



## I

---

# *Almanacs*

EARLY AMERICA WAS crowded with almanacs. In 1639, an almanac became the second item printed in British North America. By the second half of the seventeenth century, it had become a fixture of everyday life across British North America. In his 1683 almanac, Cotton Mather remarked that “such an anniversary composure comes into almost as many hands as the best of books [the Bible].”<sup>1</sup> His assessment only became more accurate as sales and distribution increased throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By 1793, a Maine almanac-maker concluded that almanacs reached more hands than the Bible. Even though they were only useful for one year at a time, the author argued that “general utility” of almanacs was “greater than any other annual publication whatever.” He continued, “I will venture to say that no pamphlet nor book, not excepting the bible itself, is so thoroughly examined as these annual productions.”<sup>2</sup> Like the Bibles to which they were compared, almanacs delivered meaningful religious content to a broad eighteenth-century readership. Unlike Bibles, almanacs were responsive to and informed by their readers’ opinions, making them an unusually fruitful source with which to examine British North American culture.

Almanacs were calendars surrounded by a variety of additional content. By the eighteenth century, the almanac’s basic format included a title page, a preface, 12 calendar pages, and a concluding set of pages containing a variety of literary and practical material.<sup>3</sup> After the title page, authors used a preface to thank readers for their continued support and defend against the accusations of their competitors. Prefaces also showcased an author’s personality, giving almanacs both a brand name and a unique identity.

The central section of an almanac, the calendar pages, contained far more than the days of the month. Here readers would find poetry, weather predictions, holidays, maxims, and detailed astrological guidance ranging from the rudimentary, such as the time of the sun’s rising and setting,