for the status quo).[6] In Canadian churches, which in the nineteenth century were always more comfortable with tradition as a religious authority than Americans, there was always less panic over Deism and proportionately less reliance on reason in the expression of theology.[7]

Again, Holifield shows that students of Jonathan Edwards like Joseph Bellamy and Samuel Hopkins magnified the category of virtue as part of their reasonable, commonsense theologies, but not as Edwards had magnified virtue as part of his Augustinian, revelation-based, ethical particularism. Certainly *the way* reason was used by Hopkins and Bellamy tells us a great deal about the specific questions they were trying to answer in their own times and places, just as Edwards's use tells us about the particular concerns of his own era. In both cases, the particular uses of reason are more interesting than the common commitment to put reason to use. Early in the book Holifield notes shrewdly that "new language reshapes old thoughts" (47). Equally, it seems to me, new circumstances, new problems, new competition, and new ideological alliances reshape old language. To note that American theologians turned commonly to a language of reason tells us much about the course of theology in America. To note that American theologians used reason in different ways at different times, and differently from their peers not in America, may tell us even more.

But I want to end where I began. For its prodigies of intellectual synthesis, for its infinite patience with a huge array of theologians who often had little patience with each other, for its excellent index, for doing with theology what Elizabeth Flower and Murray Murphey did so splendidly with philosophy,[8] and most of all for treating the language of the American theologians on its own terms, *Theology in America* is simply and unequivocally a triumph.

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Theology Matters (Or Used To)

One day last spring I visited my haircutter Johnsie at the sprightly hour of 9 o'clock on a Monday morning. Settling into the chair, I looked forward to thirty minutes of quiet relaxation before confronting the week. "May I ask you a personal question," she ventured. "Sure," I said, expecting a query about Duke's upcoming football misfortunes. But I should have known better, for I soon remembered that Johnsie was a serious Christian of Baptist persuasion. "Tell me," she asked, "what do you *really* think about free will versus predestination?" My first instinct was to say, "I try not to, especially at 9 on a Monday morning." But if at that point I had carefully read Brooks Holifield's masterful book, I would have known at least three things. First, there are a lot of self-educated theologians outside the classroom. Second, many of those persons have thought long and hard about issues that matter. And third, I had no excuse for not possessing a ready answer to Johnsie's

6. See J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832* (2nd ed., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 324–48.
7. See Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).
8. Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphey, *A History of Philosophy in America*, 2 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1977).

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question. The freedom of the will was one of scores of ponderables that were debated with intelligence and vigor in academic and nonacademic settings on both sides of the Atlantic until the middle nineteenth century, and in many quarters continue to be debated today. They formed the staples of America's cultural heritage.

In this essay I seek briefly to examine four issues—four cornerstones—on which Holifield's work is built. They might be summarized as craft, argument, choices, and lessons.

First, craft. How did Holifield go about doing what he did? It may be an exaggeration to say that the method creates the data, but that graduate school chestnut carries a measure of truth. The word about craft that immediately comes to mind—and the one I expect most often to see in other reviews—is *erudition*. Holifield's reading is vast in its breadth, precise in its grasp, and intimidating in its rigor. I know of few works in American religious history that parallel—and none that exceeds—the learning that this one displays, relentlessly, even unforgivingly, paragraph after paragraph, chapter after chapter. Though Holifield carefully cites the secondary writers who informed his thinking, the book staggers under the weight of hundreds of references to primary texts, originating on both sides of the Atlantic, mighty in girth, ponderous in density.

Additional words about craft that come to mind are *clarity* and *nuance*. Each sentence is constructed with meticulous, lapidary precision. The prose is mercifully free of jargon, theological and otherwise. Nothing is foregrounded, prioritized, or imbricated. No interests are negotiated, instrumentalized, or ruptured. The volume stands as an almost textbook-perfect witness to the force and transparency of the English language cleanly rendered in the declarative simple past tense. Such clarity invites nuance. The book offers few bold assertions but plenty of "accents," "tones," "attitudes," "impulses," and "tempers." Holifield not only pays attention to change over time, as most historians do, but also to backtracking, zigzagging, and circling around as all historians should but many fail to do. Gradations of meaning are parsed as thin as one ever is likely to see in a work billed as historical rather than philosophical or semantic in aim. In Holifield's pages the recurrent motor of change is debate. His subjects persistently feint left and sprint right, not on their own, not because their inner lights suggested that might be the right thing to do, but in response to the challenge of resisting voices.

And then there is wit. I must be honest here. I would not describe the book as a side splitter. And David Lodge probably does not need to worry about market share. But the attentive reader will find *Theology in America* sparkling with one-liners that make clear that theologians of times past were not as dreary a lot as most of our students think. Nathaniel Emmons was a "plump man with a squeaky voice who wore three-cornered hats and breeches long after they went out of style, but his congregation held on to him for fifty-five years" (145). Samuel Hopkins "regarded his sermons as 'low and miserable,' and observers agreed" (136). Edwardeans, Arminians, and Old Calvinists "had no fundamental difference about reason and revelation, though they believed that they did" (128). And Ebenezer Gay "avoided trouble because he developed equivocation into a fine art" (129). Closely related to Holifield's wit is his eye for the telling detail. Tom Paine, we learn, had been a corset maker (163). Roger Williams did not want the unregenerate to receive the Lord's Supper from his hands. Indeed, he did not want the unregenerate even

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to hear his sermons (51). Like a skillful artist, Holifield knows when to shift paints—when to soften the primary colors of theological history with the pastels of real life.

These points about craft bring us to the second cornerstone of the edifice, argument. At the outset Holifield tells us that six themes mark the book. First, from the early seventeenth century to the eve of the Civil War, Christian theology in America displayed an insistent quest for reasonableness. To be sure, the definition of reasonableness changed from hand to hand and from era to era. But no one discounted it, including Methodist enthusiasts, Mormon supernaturalists, and Transcendentalist intuitionists. Remarkably few individuals self-consciously invoked paradox, and no one, as far as I can see, rested content with ineffable illumination, much less anything like faith warranted by ignorance.

The most common form of reasonableness in the period under examination was evidentialism. The latter consisted of the external testimony of miracle in nature and prophecy in history, plus the internal testimony of harmony in the Bible and infallibility in the plan of salvation. The last third of the book addresses the thinkers who had trouble with this kind of straight-up evidentialism—Lutherans, Transcendentalists, Bushnellians, and Anglo-Catholics, among others—yet even they found themselves responding to an evidentialist agenda established by others.

Reasonableness fostered five additional themes that proved almost as perennial and pervasive. They included practicality and ethics as the touchstones of truth; the disproportionate influence of the Calvinist tradition; the ancient Christian and premodern European context of most serious theological conversations; the role of institutions—especially denominations—in providing the vocabulary, motivation, and context of debate; and, finally, the productive tension between academic theologians and self-educated ones.

Besides these six self-announced themes, I see in Holifield's pages at least four more. One is the pervasiveness of the congregational context of American theological reflection. Nearly 90 percent of the individuals he analyzes spent all or most of their lives in the parish. Though Holifield does not explicitly say so, his materials suggest that the press of weekly pastoral responsibilities—preaching, marrying, burying, and consoling—energized, not deflected, serious reflection on the great mysteries. Another theme is the remarkable—some would say dogged—conservatism of almost all of the groups he analyzes, Unitarians, Universalists, Transcendentalists, and Shakers included. Even the most radical, it seemed, spent a lot of time and energy trying to find new ways to do old things. Eventually, of course, incremental changes bore a cumulative effect. But in Holifield's rendering, the path from Edwards's Stockbridge to Emerson's Concord was neither straight nor short, and more than a few pilgrims found themselves circling back for sustenance and bearings. Still another theme that Holifield notes but does not highlight is in a sense the reverse of the one I just mentioned. Attempts to preserve the past frequently produced unexpected and sometimes dramatic changes. Irony spikes the story from beginning to end. "Like most forms of conscious conservatism," he dryly tells us, "the clerical allegiance to the past subtly altered the shape of the tradition that the clergy were trying to defend" (57).

And finally we see tragedy. The dilemma of slavery, assayed in a closing elegiac chapter, undid the American Christian theological tradition as surely as all of the king's horses and all of the king's men of biblical criticism,

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evolutionary science, and urban industrial squalor put together. If men and women of reason, who spoke a broadly Calvinist vocabulary, and shared a common European heritage, and worked within linked denominational families, and drew on related seminary constituencies, could not find a way to discuss, let alone resolve, the most wrenching crisis in the nation's history, what hope remained for a coherent Christian witness in the modern world?

Over the course of nearly six hundred densely packed pages these six or ten (or more) themes play off each other like recurrent chords in a symphony. Admittedly, one might raise questions about tonalities and emphases. One might reasonably ask, for example, whether it was the Calvinist violinists, as Holifield argues, or the Wesleyan trumpeters, as Timothy L. Smith used to insist, who really led the orchestra. Or one might urge that the distant notes registered by ancient Christian and contemporary European theologians were lost in the din of American republicanism and swashbuckling individualism. But to fuss too much about the exact mix and proportion of the sounds is to miss the power of the whole. The cumulative effect of Holifield's composition is as intellectually compelling as it is aesthetically rewarding.

We come then to the third cornerstone of the edifice: choices. It is important to remember that Holifield *elected* to focus on classic theological texts that addressed the momentous questions named in the historic creeds and confessions of the Christian church. Those selections were eminently defensible, but they were not given in the stars, and they did not tumble to earth like sacred meteors. They were chosen. Other possibilities—other texts that addressed questions equally momentous but not named in the historic creeds and confessions—could have been emphasized. The most obvious example is hymns, but also devotional guides, spiritual autobiographies, and primary historical accounts. If Holifield had accentuated nonclassic texts of this latter sort (as he has in other publications), what would the picture look like?

I am not certain, but intriguing possibilities come to mind. Consider for example George Marsden's Jonathan Edwards, obsessively filling his letters home with trivial admonitions for each of his eleven children's health and safety. Or Bruce Mullins's Horace Bushnell, transformed by an ineffable morning vision of the inner meaning of the gospel. Or Louis Menand's Oliver Wendell Holmes, nearly killed at the battle of Ball's Bluff, determining from that point forward that men were slain less by swords flailing than by principles raging. Or William Hutchison's George Burman Foster, devastated by the loss of a son in World War I, demanding of God, like Jacob of old, tell me your name. Or Edith Blumhofer's Aimee Semple McPherson, on hearing God's call, brushing aside centuries of biblical proscription against women in ministry. Or not to put too fine a point on it, Holifield's own autobiographical reflection—published elsewhere—of once upon a time administering the Lord's Supper in a rural Arkansas community with Nehi grape soda when the communion steward ran out of grape juice.

The list could be extended but the point should be clear. If in this work Holifield had focused more on Edwards's *Personal Narrative* and less on his *Nature of True Virtue*, or more on Bushnell's *Nature and the Supernatural* and less on his "Dissertation on Language," or, for that matter, more Charles Wesley and less on Charles's big brother John, we might have received a very different book. Not necessarily a better book, but a very different one.

Holifield made other choices among a wide range of options, including the book's master interpretive framework. He places his story mainly in the long

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history of Christian thought, not the short history of U.S. social and cultural trends. Granted, he takes great care to situate almost all of the 282 North American authors he discusses in time and place. Typically he tells us exactly when and where they lived, what schools they attended, what books they read, what churches they served—or were kicked out of, and sometimes even who read their works or tried to appropriate their legacy later on. But the emphasis falls elsewhere, on the "great gulf streams" of Christian rather than American history. The book is aptly titled. It describes theology in America, not American theology. Mark Noll's *America's God*, which we examined in this forum last year, tells us more about the land of pilgrim's pride. Holifield's tells us more about Christianity. And that is the rub. All authors have to make choices. The difference is that the superior ones, including the two we are privileged to honor in these two forums, have proved that they knew exactly what they were doing when they did it—and why.

The final cornerstone is lessons taught. Briefly asked, what instruction might those who till other fields take from Holifield's work? I touched on some of those lessons at the outset, where I spoke of Holifield's erudition, clarity, nuance, wit, and eye. But one additional lesson seems so important it merits separate treatment. It stems from a distinction that William R. Hutchison advances in his new book, *Religious Pluralism in America*. That distinction is the difference between judgment and evaluation. Though Hutchison does not elaborate the point, I take him to mean something like this. Judgment is saying that particular historical actors should have known better and therefore acted differently. Evaluation, on the other hand, is acknowledging that some events surely made the world a worse or better place, but the actors themselves need to be assessed in terms of *their* light and circumstance, not ours. The difference between the two postures is significant. The former trades on willingness to stand tall and make a call. The latter draws on that rare, almost indefinable, quality of insight that bespeaks the seasoning of years and, as Holifield himself wrote in a different context, "a way of living in the world before God with a sense of humility, care for the neighbor, and responsibility."

Holifield's achievement stands as a testament to what it means to write history free of judgment but rich with evaluation. His pageant teems with views most of today's readers will find distasteful if not abhorrent. One thinks for example of Samuel Hopkins's call for Christians to be willing to be damned if it served God's glory. Or of James Henley Thornwell's spirited defense of the common humanity of blacks and whites even as he defended bondage for blacks alone. It would be easy to dismiss these figures—and numerous others—in the bright light of moral hindsight. But Holifield never does. Rather he goes to extraordinary lengths to resurrect the dead, however lovely or unlovely, and let them speak in all the pathos and beauty, frailty and power, of their strange yet wondrously still-relevant voices.

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Response to Critiques of *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War*

I am deeply grateful not only to Christine Heyrman, Mark Noll, and Grant Wacker but also to other critics of *Theology in America* who have taken the

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