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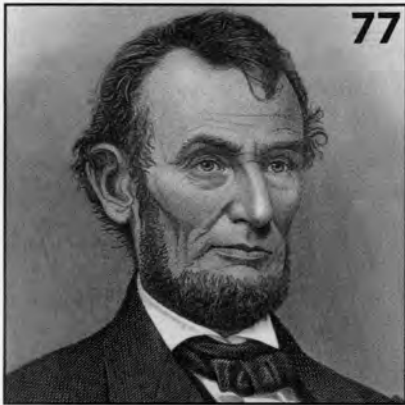
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Lincoln's God

by Mark Noll



Controversy has swirled over the question of Abraham Lincoln's religion almost since the day of his death. To bring some clarity to that question, this essay exploits some of the outstanding recent scholarship that has separated the mythic from the factual in Lincoln's endlessly fascinating life. It suggests that Lincoln's faith evolved over the course of his adult life from something resembling skepticism to something closer to orthodoxy, yet without ever falling neatly into conventional categories. The constant elements of his religion were a remarkable familiarity with the Bible, a strong commitment to reason, and an even stronger belief in the workings of Providence (but often a mysterious Providence).

Abraham Lincoln was shot on Good Friday, April 14, 1865. He died the next day. Four days later, at the lecture held annually in Concord, Massachusetts, to commemorate the start of the American Revolution, Ralph Waldo Emerson sketched a mystical apotheosis for Lincoln of the sort that soon became canonical:

There is a serene Providence which rules the fate of nations, which makes little account of time, little of one generation or race, makes no account of disasters, conquers alike by what is called defeat or by what is called victory, thrusts aside enemy and obstruction, crushes everything immoral as inhuman, and obtains the ultimate triumph of the best race by the sacrifice of everything which resists the moral laws of

the world. It makes its own instruments, creates the man for the time, trains him in poverty, inspires his genius, and arms him for his task.¹

In Emerson's account, soon repeated by many others to this day, Lincoln was the one whom Providence—or fate, or God, or fortune—had supplied to the United States in its hour of greatest need; he was the one whom higher powers guided as he led the nation through bloody trial toward its destiny as a beacon light of liberty to the world.

Yet even as this grand myth of corporate salvation took shape, with Lincoln as the main agent of divine will, other eulogizers turned to address not so much the transcendent meaning of Lincoln but the engagement by Lincoln himself with the transcendent. So it was that before the Lincoln funeral train reached

Springfield, Illinois, on May 3, the “Battle of the Biographers” had begun. That battle too has not ceased to this day; in it the question of Lincoln's religion has always been a central puzzle.²

One of the first biographies rushed into print came from the pen of Josiah Holland, editor of a Republican newspaper in Springfield, Massachusetts, whose memorial address, like Emerson's on April 19, encouraged a Boston publisher to commission a full life. Holland traveled to Illinois in May of that same year and spoke to some who knew Lincoln. The biography was out the next year and almost immediately sold 80,000 copies. Holland, a pious person himself, acknowledged that Lincoln had never joined a church. He nonetheless portrayed Lincoln as a serious Christian, who had been reared in the faith by an “angel mother,” and who had testified persuasively in both Illinois and Washington to faith in Christ.

Dr. Noll is the Carolyn and Fred McManis Professor of Christian Thought, History Department, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. This article has been revised slightly from a lecture sponsored by the Reynolds Trust and presented at the Center for the Study of Religion, Princeton University, April 22, 2003. Copyright 2004 Presbyterian Historical Society.

Holland stressed particularly that Lincoln's religion had been deepened by a reliance on God called forth by the terrible crises of his presidency. He also suggested that the shock of death—at home of two young sons, and then of tens of thousands in the Civil War—had driven Lincoln to deeper dependence on God. In describing Lincoln's personal faith, Holland drew especially on an interview with Newton Bateman, who had served as the Illinois superintendent of education during Lincoln's last years in Springfield. According to what Bateman told Holland in May 1865, the superintendent had enjoyed an extensive conversation with Lincoln in October 1860, which dealt mostly with religion. As Bateman recalled this conversation, Lincoln said

I know there is a God, and that He hates injustice and slavery. I see the storm coming, and I know that His hand is in it. If He has a place and work for me—and I think he has—I believe I am ready. I am nothing, but truth is everything. I know I am right because I know that liberty is right, for Christ teaches it, and Christ is God. I have told them that a house divided against itself cannot stand, and Christ and reason say the same; and they will find it so. [Senator] Douglas don't care whether slavery is voted up or voted down, but God cares, and humanity cares, and I care; and with God's help I shall not fail. I may not see the end; but it will come, and I shall be vindicated; and these men will find that they have not read their Bibles aright.

When Bateman responded that he did not think that Lincoln's Springfield friends knew he held such views, Lincoln supposedly replied, "I am obliged to appear different to them; but I think more on these subjects than upon all others, and I have done so for years; and I am willing that you should know it."³

A year after Holland's biography came the first of many books repeating his picture of a pious president—Z. A. Mudge's *The Forest Boy* from the American Sunday School Union. Although it went so far as to criticize Lincoln for never making a public profession of his faith, this book, like so many to follow, likewise portrayed him as an individual of deep, orthodox Christian belief.

To William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner in Springfield for 21 years, these portraits were a very



Abraham Lincoln (Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

bad joke. Spurred into action especially by what he considered Holland's effete, Eastern whitewash, Herndon ransacked his own memory and began to interview others who had known Lincoln as a boy in Indiana, a young man in New Salem, or a respected lawyer in Springfield. Through many ups and downs in his own later life, Herndon pursued reminiscences of Lincoln almost until his own death in 1891. By December 1866, however, Herndon had secured enough material to begin a series of lectures in Springfield. One of his central purposes was to set straight the record on Lincoln's religion. His challenge to Holland and Holland's pious imitators was electrifying. Far from being a man of heartfelt Christian piety, Herndon maintained that Lincoln was at best a Deist who, though perhaps believing in some kind of general god, had no time for the conventional beliefs or practices of churchly faith.⁴

Herndon was convinced that close-up observations validated his conclusions beyond the shadow of a doubt. Had he not spent many Sunday mornings in his office with Lincoln (and often Lincoln's boys), while Mary Lincoln went by herself to the local Presbyterian church? Had not these mornings been devoted entirely to nonreligious pursuits—

talking law, swapping tales, and doing as much damage control as possible as the Lincoln boys (never reproved by their father) wrecked havoc upon the books, papers, and furnishings of their office? Moreover, had not Herndon himself seen—and had confirmed by the testimony of judges, lawyers, clerks, and clients—how Lincoln lived on Illinois' 8th Judicial Circuit? On the circuit Lincoln had all the time in the world for telling stories (not all of them repeatable in mixed company), studying the law or Euclid, arranging and arguing cases. But he had never (or all-but-never) talked about or visibly practiced the Christian faith. Many of Lincoln's Illinois colleagues shared Herndon's research. One of them, Ward Hill Lamon, wrote a biography that made full use of Herndon's collections. Lamon maintained that the secret of Lincoln's melancholy lay precisely in the absence of faith. "The fatal misfortune of his life," wrote Lamon, "was the influence of New Salem ... which enlisted him on the side of unbelief."⁵

Lamon's reference to Lincoln's early life in the village of New Salem was especially telling in light of what Herndon had been told by informants who knew Lincoln during his years there (1831–1837). According to them, Lincoln read and promoted the infidel works of Tom Paine, the Comte de Volney, and Voltaire. He scoffed openly at such orthodox Christian doctrines as the Virgin Birth and Life Everlasting. He wrote an essay on the universal salvation of all and perhaps another one on the *unreliability* of the Bible. (Herndon was told that Lincoln's friends destroyed the essay—or essays—in order to protect his political future.) In a word, from what Herndon had been told about the years before he knew Lincoln personally, and then from what Herndon had himself witnessed as Lincoln's long-time law partner, the picture of the pious Lincoln was a fabrication pure and simple.

And so the battle was on. It has raged fiercely for more than a century. Even today, preachers for sermons near February 12, or personalities on Christian radio bemoaning the fall of the United States from earlier days of Christian conviction, retell the stories illustrating Lincoln's deep piety. Although their number is not as great, secularist naysayers who know their Herndon sometimes fire back. Both groups seem to feel that, if only Lincoln could be enlisted on their side—whether of evangelical faith or naturalistic rationalism—it would amount to a great victory in today's culture wars.

The purpose of this essay cannot be to solve all the important questions concerning Lincoln's personal faith. The subject is simply too complex. However, what can be done is, first, to sketch the recent developments in Lincoln research that have enabled a more accurate picture to emerge. Second, it is possible to use the best results from the best Lincoln scholarship to underscore some well-documented conclusions: for example, that Lincoln's beliefs changed over time from near-skepticism to something much closer to orthodox Christianity; that despite these changes, Lincoln's personal religion seemed always to be marked by strands of determinism, rationalism, scripturalism, and providentialism; and that key circumstances and key relationships in both Illinois and Washington exerted a marked influence in shaping Lincoln's faith. Finally, examination of the historical material puts us in position to speculate briefly about why the question of Lincoln's religion has been so contentious, and what that contention reveals about the place of religion in American public life, both then and now.

The Shape of Lincoln's Religion

Because of the painstaking work of a determined band of rigorously empirical Lincoln scholars, students today at the start of the twenty-first century have a clearer grasp of the facts of Lincoln's life than was possible during his own lifetime and for more than a century after his death. Since early in the twentieth century, when the labors of an avid Lincoln collector, William Barton, led the way, professional scholars and amateur historians have carried out a noble series of careful inquiries in the effort to differentiate myth from history. The path for biographers who hoped to integrate a reliable picture of Lincoln's religion into more general accounts was marked out by Benjamin Thomas's still-fresh *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* from 1953, and it has been followed by a number of unusually convincing works by, among others, Michael Burlingame, Phillip Paludan, Douglas Wilson, Allen Guelzo, Ronald White, William Lee Miller, and Richard Carwardine.⁶ Carefully discerning work featuring Lincoln's faith began with Barton's own *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (1920), was advanced by the scholarship of William Wolf and David Hein, and has now come to fruition in a recently published monograph by Stewart Winger.⁷ The best Lincoln

scholarship, which forages widely for sources while testing those sources rigorously, has both stimulated and been undergirded by great labors of documentary verification. The carefully assembled *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (1953) led on eventually to Merrill D. Peterson's discerning *Lincoln in American Memory* (1994) and then to the great modern breakthroughs in Lincoln scholarship: *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (1996), compiled by Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher, who patiently graded thousands of Lincoln's reported statements according to their degree of reliability; *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay's Interviews and Essays* (1996), edited by Michael Burlingame, which published for the first time the notes that Lincoln's Washington secretary gathered for his own biography; and *Herndon's Informants* (1998), edited by Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis, which likewise for the first time sifted, assessed, and published the interviews, letters, and conversations that Herndon collected for his own Lincoln studies.⁸ Because of the discriminating rigor with which especially the *Collected Works* and these last three archival projects were prepared, students of Lincoln now enjoy a much surer documentary record than exists for any other major figure in American history.

The result from all this unusually thorough scholarship is that many questions about Lincoln's religious faith can now be answered with great certainty. Yet, ironically, the better the scholarship has become, the more difficult some basic questions about Lincoln's life and religion still remain.

In the first instance, rock-solid documentary evidence and well-validated eye-witness accounts have verified the following facts, at least as far as historical facts can be verified.

- Lincoln was exposed to Calvinistic Baptist preaching as a child and to a clamor of competing Protestant preachers during his years in New Salem. In a strange way, he seems to have both absorbed and been repelled by these early influences.
- In New Salem, Lincoln expressed heretical religious beliefs, perhaps a thorough skepticism. At the very least he affirmed the universal salvation of all people, which represented a serious heresy by Protestant (or Catholic) standards of the time; at the most he may have written and spoken about the Bible and conventional

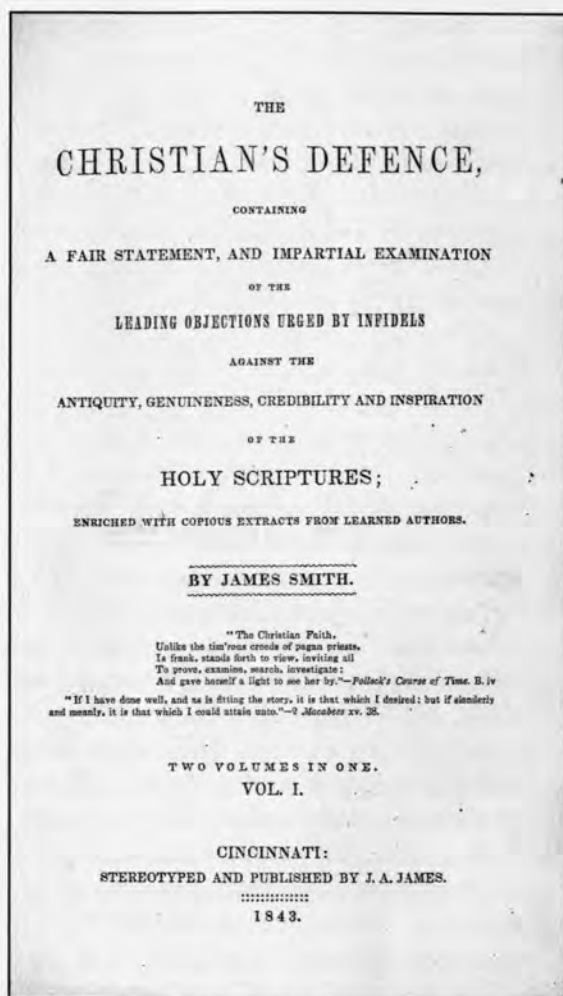
Christianity with all-out scorn. Witnesses reliably reported some continued expression of such skeptical views during Lincoln's early years in Springfield, where he removed in 1837. But at some relatively early point in his time at Springfield, Lincoln began to keep his religious opinions to himself, though considerable dispute exists as to why he did so—whether from a desire not to offend more orthodox clients and voters or from an actual change of heart.

- In 1846, and for the only time in his life, Lincoln wrote about his faith directly when supporters of his opponent in a race for Congress, the Methodist circuit-rider Peter Cartwright, accused him of infidelity. The handbill that Lincoln produced in response, which was not rediscovered until the 1940s, contained these carefully chosen, noncommittal words: "That I am not a member of any Christian Church, is true; but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular."⁹
- After the death of his sons (Eddie, nearly age four, in 1850; Willie, age eleven, in 1862), Lincoln was comforted by two Old School Presbyterian ministers. Both James Smith in Springfield and Phineas D. Gurley in Washington probably read more into Lincoln's behavior than was actually there, but both were also probably on solid ground when they testified that, after these traumatic experiences, they witnessed a deepening of Lincoln's faith.
- Lincoln's relationship with Smith has been the subject of controversy. Smith, a native Scot who had come into the Old School Presbyterian Church after service as a Cumberland Presbyterian, arrived as pastor of Springfield's First Presbyterian Church in 1849. After conducting the funeral for young Eddie Lincoln the next year, Smith continued to see the family. In 1852 Mary Todd Lincoln made a profession of faith and joined Smith's church, and the Lincolns regularly rented a pew thereafter. Smith was also the author of a substantial work of Christian apologetics, first published in 1843, whose title well explains its purpose: *The Christian's Defence, containing a Fair Statement, and Impartial Examination of the Leading*



James Smith, author of *The Christian's Defence*... (RG 414, PHS, Philadelphia).

Objections Urged by Infidels Against the Antiquity, Genuineness, Credibility and Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures; Enriched with Copious Extracts from Learned Authors. It was a brickbat of a book, eventually available in two volumes and a densely packed one-volume edition. It offered conventional, but closely argued “proofs” for the reliability and authority of scripture against David Hume, Tom Paine, Charles Olmstead, and other skeptics. Multiple witnesses confirm that Lincoln read at least some of the book.¹⁰ Its detailed arguments were painstakingly logical in the way that Lincoln himself, at least much of the time, pursued his own political and moral reasoning. In early 1867 Smith wrote a long letter to Herndon, which expressed his displeasure at Herndon’s published account of the Lincoln’s marital strife. That letter included brief comments about Lincoln’s religion, including the claim that Lincoln had read and appreciated Smith’s long book: “To the arguments [concerning scripture] Mr. Lincoln gave a most patient, impartial and Searching investigation. To use his own language ‘he examined



James Smith’s “substantial work of Christian apologetics” (PHS, Philadelphia).

the Arguments as a lawyer who is anxious to reach the truth investigates testimony.’ The result was the announcement by himself that the argument in favor of the Divine Authority and inspiration of the Scripture was unanswerable.”¹¹ In the margin of this letter Herndon scribbled his opinion: “Foolish ... Knows nothing of Lincoln. Smith gave Lincoln a book of his. Lincoln never condescended to write his name in it.”¹² The truth about Lincoln’s indebtedness to Smith’s closely reasoned apologetics is probably somewhat closer to Smith’s affirmation than to Herndon’s denial, but only because Smith phrased so cautiously what it was that Lincoln actually affirmed.

- In Washington, especially after the death of Willie, Lincoln regularly attended Gurley’s New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. He may even have attended the mid-week prayer

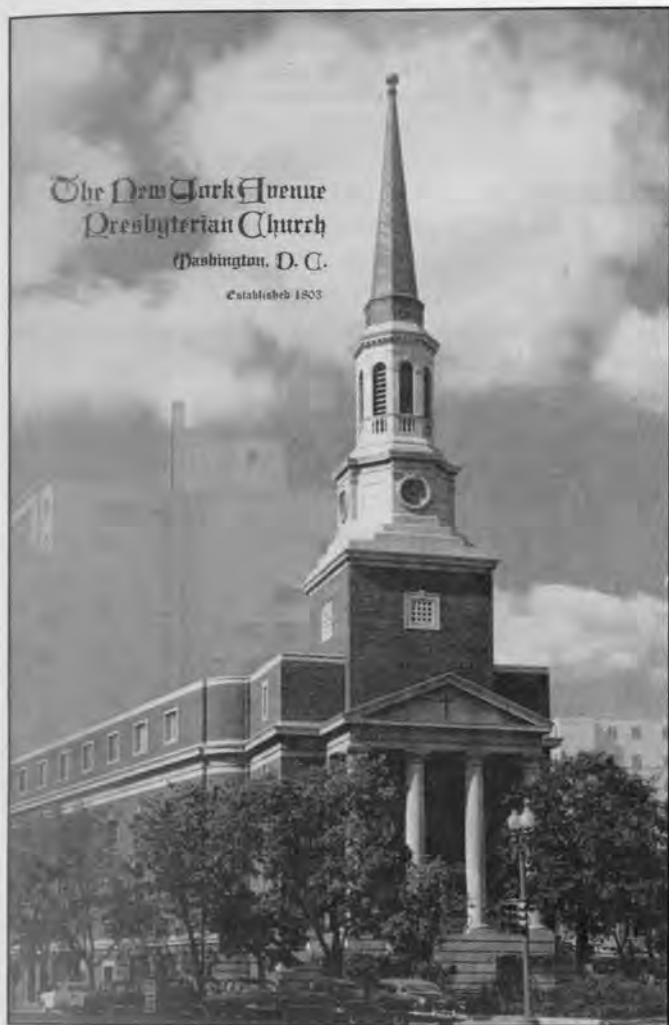
service (though, if he did so, he remained in a side room out of view of the congregation).

- At the same time, Lincoln did not practice what in the twentieth century might be called a “Christian lifestyle.” Philip Schaff, the Swiss-born historian who lived his adult life in the United States, in 1865 traveled to Europe where he presented lectures of considerable subtlety on the meaning of the Civil War. Schaff, who admired Lincoln greatly, especially for the providential themes of the Second Inaugural Address, nonetheless was obviously troubled by the circumstances of Lincoln’s death. His comments are worth quoting at length, both for their insight into contemporary European opinion and for what they reveal about Lincoln. According to Schaff, “the pious folk in America were upset that Abraham Lincoln was shot in a theater, the pious of Germany that he was shot on Good Friday in a theater.” In Europe only infidels neglected observation of Good Friday, while in America the godly still associated theaters with licentiousness, secular frivolity, and prostitution. Schaff’s regret took in both perspectives: “In any event the place and time of the tragedy is very regrettable.” Then came Schaff’s rationalization: “But it is important to recognize that Lincoln went to the theater unwillingly on that noteworthy 14th of April and simply because he was expected by the people; in addition he probably did not even know that it was Good Friday because the Presbyterians, to whom he belongs, as also the Puritans, Methodists, and Baptists, do not celebrate this day and the church festivals of any sort.” But Schaff was convinced that “Lincoln would certainly never have gone to the theater on Sunday, even if theatrical performances took place on Sunday in the United States, which is not the case.” Europeans, according to Schaff, needed to keep this mitigating explanation in mind, “even if we must also unwillingly admit that it darkens slightly the nimbus of the patriotic martyrdom of this otherwise so honorable and god-fearing man.”¹³
- Throughout his White House years, Lincoln remained cautious about conventional religious practices. Yet it does seem that he eventually came to value prayer. On more than one

occasion he seems to have told the story of the Quaker women who were discussing the outcome of the war. “I think,” said the first, “Jefferson [Davis] will succeed.” The second asked, “Why does thee think so?” The reply came, “Because Jefferson is a praying man.” “And so is Abraham a praying man,” was the immediate rejoinder. “Yes,” said the first, “but the Lord will think Abraham is only joking.”¹⁴ The joke was poignant, because it reflected a truth. Many instances are recorded in diaries and letters written before Lincoln’s death where the president either allowed White House visitors to pray with him or actually solicited their prayers. There are also several accounts, though less securely based and usually written down after 1865, that record Lincoln himself praying.

Such matters are about as factual as any such matters are ever likely to be. On the other side are stories that, to the extent it is ever possible to judge the historicity of a purported event, are bogus.

- Ann Rutledge did not lend Lincoln her mother’s Bible, nor did he circle verses from the Song of Solomon in it referring to the fairness of “my love.” (The story, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1928, came from a medium who supposedly was in communication with both Lincoln and Rutledge.)
- Lincoln almost certainly was not converted in a Methodist camp meeting in 1839, as was first claimed publicly in 1897 by the organizer of the meeting, the Reverend James F. Jacques (or Jaquess).¹⁵
- From the other side of the theological spectrum, Lincoln almost certainly did not write to a certain Judge J. A. Wakefield during his White House years to affirm, “My earlier views of the unsoundness of the Christian scheme of salvation and the human origin of the scriptures, have become clearer and stronger with advancing years and I see no reason for thinking *I shall ever change them.*” This “document” was first produced in 1924 by Joseph Lewis at the annual banquet of New York’s Freethinkers Society. The judgment of Merrill Peterson is authoritative: “If Lincoln ever wrote such a letter, it has not been produced, nor is J. A. Wakefield known to Lincoln’s *Collected Works.*”¹⁶



New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC, ca. 1956 (KS file, PHS, Philadelphia).



Phineas D. Gurley, ca. 1867 (RG 414, PHS, Philadelphia).

accepted ever since. Barton wrote that he had seen variations on this story, although usually not as elaborate, in newspapers from mid-1865, but none of them included a specific citation. His own judgment was severe: "Mr. Oldroyd has endeavored to learn for me in what paper he found it and on whose authority it rests, but without result. He does not remember where he found it. It is inherently improbable, and rests on no adequate testimony. It ought to be wholly disregarded."¹⁷

The situation for Lincoln's religion, however, resembles the situation for other facets of his private life. Once solidly verified quotations and narratives have been separated from the almost certainly spurious, there remains a vast array of embellished incidents. These stories are the puzzlers. Many of them can be verified up to a point, but they also contain unlikely or unverified details. Here are a few:

- In 1883, a dedicated collector of Lincolniana, Osborn H. Oldroyd, published a book of reminiscences that included an oft-quoted testimony to Lincoln's personal faith. Oldroyd wrote that he had taken the words from a newspaper, which in turn was relying on the purported testimony of a Lincoln acquaintance sometime in 1864 or early 1865. The quotation ran, "When I left Springfield I asked the people to pray for me. I was not a Christian. When I buried my son, the severest trial of my life, I was not a Christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ. Yes, I do love Jesus." No corroborative evidence has ever been found to legitimate this utterance as authentic. Barton, who himself believed that Lincoln had a substantially orthodox faith, offered an opinion in 1920 that serious Lincoln students have

- Lincoln almost certainly spoke about religion with Newton Bateman, Illinois Superintendent of Public Instruction, in the months between his election in November 1860 and his departure from Springfield in February 1861. Yet the story of a fully orthodox profession of faith that Bateman supplied Josiah Holland in the summer of 1865 was too good to be true. When challenged by Herndon about the veracity of his account, Bateman twisted and turned, but in the end conceded that he embellished what the president-elect had said.
- It is a fact that Lincoln enjoyed good relations with Gurley and that Gurley spoke with con-

viction about Lincoln's general trust in God in the two memorial sermons that he preached after the assassination. Yet the story that Lincoln had arranged to join the New York Avenue Church upon public profession of faith has never been securely documented.

- It is probably true that the former Catholic priest Charles Chiniquy prayed with Lincoln in the White House on June 10, 1864, for the two were acquainted from Springfield, and Chiniquy's presence in Washington can be verified. But it stretches the imagination that Lincoln professed to Chiniquy a fully orthodox faith, as Chiniquy's memoir, *Fifty Years in the Church of Rome* (1886) claims. And it beggars belief that Lincoln would have agreed with the former priest in viewing the Civil War as resulting, as Chiniquy quoted Lincoln as saying, from "the intrigues and emissaries of the Pope."¹⁸
- There are many other such incidents, most of them the product of late reminiscences. What they show is Lincoln's respect for God, his eagerness to commit the Civil War to divine rule, and his own personal sense of living under the authority of divine Providence. What they do not show is a clear-cut profession of orthodox faith.

If later interpreters insist on seeing only *either* an evangelical Lincoln *or* an infidel Lincoln, the Lincoln who was really there remains invisible. The mature Lincoln of the last Springfield years and Washington appears to have been seriously religious, certainly immersed in the scriptures, and not unfriendly to Christ, but he was also not a born-again believer or a committed Christian in modern senses of the terms. Once modern conceptions of what it means to be a "believer" or "unbeliever" are set aside, it is possible actually to hear the nuanced testimony of those who knew Lincoln best—like his wife who said shortly after Lincoln's death that he was "a religious man always" but not "a technical Christian."¹⁹

Still, well-sifted documentary evidence offers a baseline of solid historical conclusions. In the first instance, Lincoln's personal belief certainly seems to have evolved over time. However much he took in from the faith of his own family of regular and separate Baptist Calvinists, he clearly embraced advanced views during his years in New Salem. But clear-cut infidel, skeptical, or Painite convic-

tions did not last long. By the time Lincoln married in 1842, his religion had become a much more private affair. Later in the 1850s and especially during his years as president, he seems to have moved closer to orthodoxy. Thus, on the subject of "Lincoln's religion," it makes a considerable difference when and under what circumstances Lincoln made any particular affirmation of religious belief or unbelief.

Yet if Lincoln's religion changed over time, there were also several important continuities. One was his familiarity with the Bible, which began as a youth and continued as he read and quoted scripture to the last. His first major public speech, the Lyceum Address of 1838, ended by quoting Matthew 16:18.²⁰ In the choice of metaphor for his critical speech on "a house divided" from June 1858, with Stephen Douglas in the great debates later that same year, at cabinet meetings during the war, in order to correct others' misquotations, and in many private conversations, Lincoln often cited biblical phrases to make political or moral points. Often this quoting of the Bible was merely instrumental, as in the House Divided speech. But more frequently in his last years, the quotations were not only integral to what he wanted to say, but also made a distinctly religious contribution to his remarks, as illustrated most clearly in the incomparable words of the Second Inaugural Address that quote from Psalm 19: "Yet, if God wills that [slavery] continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether' [Ps. 19:9]."²¹ On September 7, 1864, Lincoln responded to a group of African-Americans who had presented him with a copy of the Bible with what appears to be his own mature judgment: "All the good the Saviour gave to the world was communicated through this book. But for it we could not know right from wrong."²²

If Lincoln's knowledge of the Bible stood him in good stead with an American populace among whom the Bible was far and away the best known single book, so also did his commitment to the powers of reason commend him to central values of antebellum intellectual culture. Lincoln's appeal to "Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason," which he made in one of his early

public speeches, remained a principal theme his life long.²³ More romantic and affectional themes later modified this all-out rationalism, but Lincoln nonetheless remained committed to the necessity of reason and its power to clarify conundrums, explicate problems, and convince open-minded listeners of the truth.

Even more consistent than his rationalism, however, was Lincoln's belief that human affairs and the business of the world were ruled by higher powers. How he defined those higher powers changed over time, but belief that they controlled the affairs of people and nations never wavered. The predestinarian Calvinism of the Separate Baptist preachers he heard as a young man, and that may have been inculcated with gentle effect by his mother, his step-mother, and later the mother of his friend Joshua Speed, did give way to an Enlightenment fatalism during his New Salem years. Lincoln's defensive handbill of 1846, in which he fended off charges by a political opponent of infidelity, indicated how formally similar those systems of Calvinist and Enlightenment determinism were:

It is true that in early life I was inclined to believe in what I understand is called the "Doctrine of Necessity"—that is, that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control; and I have sometimes (with one, two or three, but never publicly) tried to maintain this opinion in argument. The habit of arguing thus however, I have, entirely left off for more than five years. And I add here, I have always understood this same opinion to be held by several of the Christian denominations.²⁴

Only once in his life did Lincoln seem to move beyond belief in an overruling general Providence to action based on a specific special Providence, but it was a momentous occasion. In September 1862, after the battle of Antietam provided just enough good news for Lincoln to move against slavery in the Confederate states, he explained to his cabinet how he was confirmed in this decision. The account that follows is from notes made at the time by Secretary of Navy Gideon Welles:

he had made a vow, a covenant, that if God gave us the victory in the approaching battle, he would consider it an indication of divine

will and that it was his duty to move forward in the cause of emancipation. It might be thought strange that he had in this way submitted the disposal of matters when the way was not clear to his mind what he should do. God had decided this question in favor of the slaves. He was satisfied it was right, was confirmed and strengthened in his action by the vow and the results.²⁵

That same month Lincoln penned what has come to be called his "meditation upon the divine will" in which he expressed for his own eyes a profound but most untypical belief in Providence. It was profound for repudiating the vaunted powers of human free will that had become so common in antebellum religious and public speech. It was untypical because it contemplated the possibility that the United States—whether South or North—was *not* the central object of God's concern:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong. God can not be for, and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.²⁶

Later in the Second Inaugural Address Lincoln returned to this same theme, that understanding the providential meaning of the Civil War might be very difficult and not very reassuring. As he did so—and as a way of completing the circle of his own life's journey—he echoed opinions he had read in *The Kentucky Preceptor* a half-century before. That widely read handbook of Christian morality had affirmed that "Every occurrence in the universe is *Providential*.... But to select individual facts, as more directed by the hand of Providence than others, because we think



Lincoln on his death bed (Bc 95 Z992, courtesy of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania)

we see a particular good purpose answered by them, is an infallible inlet to error and superstition."²⁷ Now Lincoln in the Second Inaugural Address said, more eloquently and more boldly, much the same thing:

The Almighty has his own purposes. ... If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?²⁸

If the "meditation on the divine will" represented Lincoln's most profound personal reflection on divine Providence, then in his Second Inaugural Address were heard the most far-reaching reflections on Providence ever uttered by a major figure in American public life.

Reflections

But so what? What is accomplished by trying to strip away the myths that cling so closely to Lincoln's religion? What is gained if we come to the conclusion that Lincoln, who was never a Christian by any ordinary standard, was nonetheless the nation's most profound public theologian? And what possible relevance could there be for religion and public life today from the opinions of someone who knew almost nothing of the religious pluralism, the instant international communications, the global flow of people, goods, and services, the

massive expansion of higher education, the unprecedented scale of wealth, the unprecedented scale of poverty, or the unimaginable levels of human destruction that have characterized our own day?

The battle for Lincoln's soul goes on, of course, because of, in Miller's phrase, "the immense value he represents in the wars of culture."²⁹ He is an icon—the icon—for the pivotal event in American history. He is the defining figure of America's Golden Age, the critical spokesperson of its Age of Innocence. Enlisting him on a particular side in modern political, moral, economic, or religious debate is, thus, a very big deal indeed.

Well ... maybe. Fruitful use of Lincoln today might well begin by debating his legacy rather than simply honoring it. The various critiques that have been developed deserve attention because a critical moral assessment of what Lincoln did is essential for any meaningful appropriation of his legacy. Others have and are prosecuting that critical engagement, whether Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, who see in Lincoln's deep commitment to the Whig ideology of free labor the beginnings of a market-maddened devotion to capitalist gain that destroyed a far healthier, organic, cohesive, and moral political economy³⁰; of Harry Stout, who is asking if Lincoln's pursuit of total war did not run roughshod over just war considerations of *jus in bello* and so hasten the horrific assaults on basic human rights that have been so characteristic of modern wars; or several different voices who see in Lincoln's hesitancy about affirming full civil and social rights for citizens of every color a strong contribution to the nation's ongoing crisis over race³¹; or still others, who question other aspects of Lincoln's policy. In my view, such critiques demand to be taken much more seriously by the general public than it has ever been inclined to do. But it is also my view that, even if such critiques were pursued systematically, there would still remain a Lincoln legacy of signal importance for questions of religion and public life today.

For religious believers, Lincoln offers the challenge of one who while not identifying with any church took much more seriously, and at a deeper level, realities of faith and life that were supposed to define more conventional believers in their ordinary life of faith. American believers in Lincoln's day were a self-confident lot. Led especially by evangelical Protestants, who were a great majority on the ground, and who exerted an even more dominant influence on the religious public sphere,

conventional believers had mastered the secrets of the universe. Time after time they proclaimed that it was a “simple” matter to discover the will of God in the scriptures. Time after time, especially during the war, they identified with great assurance what God in his Providence was doing. The fact that interpretations of a “simple” Bible and interpretations of a manifest Providence had divided in two—that the northern God and the southern God seemed quite different—did not for the most part undermine the faith of learned theologians or ordinary believers. In their great confidence about knowing the mind of God, however, American believers forgot the lesson of *The Kentucky Preceptor*—absolute belief in Providence and an ability to specify what Providence is about are two very different things. Lincoln did not forget. In fact, he may have been driven away from the churches precisely because they made things so simple, because they made God so transparent.

Lincoln never stopped wrestling with God. Guelzo’s description of that wrestling, if perhaps slightly exaggerating the amount of angst present by his later years, sees the picture clearly: “none of the preachers and devout layfolk who wanted so badly to Christianize Lincoln in death ever penetrated to the real heart of Lincoln’s personal religious anguish, the deep sense of helplessness before a distant and implacable Judge who revealed himself only through crisis and death, whom Lincoln would have wanted to love if only the Judge had given him the grace to do the loving.”³² The purpose-driven energy and manifest simplicity of the Lord of the Universe, who in popular depiction looked, depending on perspective, like a busy Whig voluntarist or a rugged Jacksonian individualist, was a different God from the Being whom Lincoln faced. Conventional believers, then and now, might well learn from Lincoln to probe further into their own understanding of the deity. Following his lead, they might discover depths within their inherited faiths that, in equal measure, disconcert, awe, and delight. They might also discover a broader and deeper platform for the exercise of religion in public life.

What was missing immediately after Lincoln’s death in April 1865 and what has been mostly missing since in American public life is Lincoln’s unique blend of convictions:

- that the United States embodies lofty ideals of human dignity and capability;

- that these ideals express crucial aspects of ancient biblical wisdom and modern political experience;
- that these ideals are important for defining the United States as a nation but even more for showing how far as a nation we have fallen short of these ideals;
- that God’s judgment falls rightfully upon every one of us, for personal and national malfeasance alike;
- that national crises must be faced boldly and with careful reasoning, but must also be recognized as direct moral retribution because of how as a nation we sanction or tolerate abuses against humanity;
- that beyond all human guilt and goodness, all human achievement and corruption, it is God who rules over the affairs of people and nations;
- that important as the United States might be in the affairs of the world, the ways of God are always higher, deeper, and wider than any national purpose.

No one before Lincoln said such things so clearly. We have heard many leaders in politics and religion champion the ideals of the nation, but rarely with Lincoln’s clear sense that no party, no self-appointed guardians of the public good, no narrowly factional interest group, can fully embody the national ideals. We have had many call the nation to repentance, but few with the conviction that all stand guilty before God—even those who issue the call to repentance. We have had many who equate the United States with transcendent good, and, more recently, many who have identified it with root evil. But we have had precious few who, with Lincoln, have perceived how thoroughly the good and evil intermingle in our heritage, how completely our hope for the public future runs up against the legacies of private and corporate wrong.

In the end, Lincoln, a man of deep but unconventional religion, has much to teach believers who espouse more conventional faiths. A harsh upbringing, a melancholy disposition, a profound scriptural understanding of Providence, and an existential awareness of life’s transitory character gave Lincoln a grasp of reality such

as no figure in American public life has ever expressed so clearly or so well. If, as Emerson and many others thought, Lincoln had been raised by Providence for the crises of his hour,

so might believers today, even as they think hard and work hard for the public good, also pray that Providence would raise such leaders to meet the crises of our own day.³³ **P**

Notes

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Abraham Lincoln: Remarks at the Funeral Services Held in Concord, April 19, 1865," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols. bound in six (New York: W. H. Wise, 1926), 11:337–38.

² For outstanding treatment of that battle, with full attention to twentieth-century historical accounts, see Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 439–74. General information in these opening paragraphs is from this book and from Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). For this essay I have updated a few paragraphs that first appeared in "The Struggle for Lincoln's Soul," *Books & Culture*, Sept.–Oct. 1995, pp. 3, 5–7.

³ Quoted in Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 25.

⁴ See especially Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

⁵ Quoted in Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 79.

⁶ Michael Burlingame, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Phillip Shaw Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Douglas L. Wilson, *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Knopf, 1998); Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*; Ronald C. White, Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002); William Lee Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2002); and Richard J. Carwardine, *Lincoln* (London: Longman, 2003).

⁷ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1970); David C. Hein, "Abraham Lincoln's Theological Outlook" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1982), with related essays like David C. Hein, "The Calvinistic Tenor of Abraham Lincoln's Religious Thought," *Lincoln Herald* 85 (Winter 1983): 212–20; and Stewart Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003).

⁸ Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953); Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*; Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words*; Michael Burlingame, ed., *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay's Interviews and*

Essays (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996); and Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*.

⁹ *Collected Works*, 1:382.

¹⁰ For example, Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words*, 296.

¹¹ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 549.

¹² *Ibid.*, 547n1.

¹³ Philip Schaff, *Der Bürgerkrieg und das christliche Leben in Nord-Amerika* (Berlin: Wiegandt and Grieben, 1866), 67.

¹⁴ Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 227, emphasis in original.

¹⁷ William E. Barton, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: George H. Doran, 1920), 208n2.

¹⁸ Charles Chiniquy, *Fifty Years in the Church of Rome* (London: Robert Banks, 1909), 480.

¹⁹ Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 76.

²⁰ *Collected Works*, 1:115.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8:333.

²² *Ibid.*, 7:542.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1:115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:382.

²⁵ Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words*, 474.

²⁶ *Collected Works*, 5:403–404 (underscoring in original).

²⁷ Quoted from 1812 edition in Winger, *Lincoln, Religion*, 173.

²⁸ *Collected Works*, 8:333.

²⁹ Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues*, 85.

³⁰ As an anticipation of the forthcoming book by Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese on the world of the slave-owners, see Eugene D. Genovese, "Religion in the Collapse of the American Union," in *Religion and the American Civil War*, ed. Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 74–88.

³¹ As an anticipation of the forthcoming book by Harry S. Stout on the moral history of the Civil War, see Harry S. Stout, "'Baptism in Blood': The Civil War and the Creation of an American Civil Religion," *Books & Culture*, Jul.–Aug. 2003, pp. 16–17, 33–35.

³² For example, Michael Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³³ Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*, 446.