

Abraham Lincoln’s God

Historians and biographers have long puzzled over the question of Lincoln’s religion. Was he a Christian, an atheist, a deist, or as some of his contemporaries maintained, a closeted Jew? Equally important is the question of why this even matters. But evidently it does matter, as attested to by the ever growing list of books on his theological outlook in the massive Lincoln bibliography. (There are now over 15,000 books on our sixteenth president.) The confusion is—and has long been—rampant, with people weighing in on all sides of the debate with confident assertions that Lincoln “clearly” or “obviously” was “secretly” a member of this or that sect. No firm consensus has emerged, or is likely to.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that Lincoln often spoke in terms that were deliberately designed to appeal to his listeners’ understanding. And in nineteenth century America, most of Lincoln’s audiences were very religious people. Hence, he often used imagery derived from Holy Scripture, knowing that Americans could grasp and make better sense of complicated moral arguments which were laced with Biblical imagery. Many Americans read the King James Bible daily, and their world-views were shaped by biblical parables. So it seemed natural to appeal to his auditors’ sensibilities by quoting Proverbs, or the Gospels. The problem for the Lincoln scholar, however, is that he did not believe most of what the Good Book had to say, at least not in any literal sense. Mary Lincoln herself acknowledged that her husband was not a “technical Christian.” This was Mary’s somewhat awkward (and embarrassed) way of saying that he did not believe in the Christian afterlife, scoffed at the whole concept of miracles, did not have his children baptized, and rejected (with a profoundly powerful sense of disgust) the doctrine of The Atonement. His law partner, William Herndon, who worked cheek by jowl with Abe for some fifteen plus years, and therefore could be considered a valid source of information on his friend’s religious views, maintained that Lincoln did not accept any of the crucial, basic tenets of Christianity. Rather, Herndon felt, Lincoln was far more of a “rationalist-

Pantheist” than a Protestant believer. Yet literally hundreds of northern clergymen insisted that Lincoln was one of their own, many going so far as to assert that Lincoln privately told them that he had “accepted Christ as his Savior,” or that he had secretly been baptized, but chose not to publicize his conversion. Those testimonials were wishful thinking. It is highly unlikely that Lincoln ever said anything of the kind. It is revealing that his oldest son, Robert, later said that his father *never* spoke to him of any kind of conversion experience. It even defies common sense to theorize that Lincoln had secretly converted but chose not to divulge this fact to his largely Protestant voters when such a revelation would only have boosted his standing with the electorate. (And Lincoln never took his eye off the ball when it came to assessing his re-election chances.)

Equally misleading are those who confidently claim Lincoln for atheism. It is true that a young Lincoln often spoke brashly in the language of a non-believer, but it is anachronistic to translate his sophomoric reflections into out-and-out atheism. Atheism, as we know the term, was extremely rare in early America; it is more of a twentieth century concept than anything found in rural, ante bellum Illinois. It would be more accurate to describe the young Lincoln as a radical skeptic, or agnostic, than an atheist.

Many Jews who had dealings with Lincoln suspected that he harbored secret leanings toward *their* faith. Some maintained that “Father Abraham” told them—strictly confidentially, of course—that he was of their “tribe,” and that his forefathers were “Israelites.” A few even went so far as to describe Lincoln’s facial features as proof that he was Jewish. According to this far-fetched theory, Lincoln said that he descended from medieval Jews living in England before they were expelled from that country in the 13th century. To say this is unlikely would be an understatement.

So is there anything we can say with certainty about Lincoln’s religious outlook? I think we can be sure that whatever he believed over the course of his early life, he underwent a significant transformation during his last three years. The shock of the appalling consequences of the war, the deaths in battle of several of his

close friends, and above all the sudden and premature death of his beloved son Willie, shook him to the core, and propelled him to a radically different spiritual outlook on life. In today's talk we will explore this shift, and try to explain how it affected his understanding of the conflict and possibly shaped his plans for postwar reconstruction of a shattered America.