

Lincoln's Spirituality

How could a simple individual with little education in his upbringing affect so powerfully the fate of a nation? We have seen the far-reaching capacities of Lincoln as a lawyer, politician, orator, writer, and educator. Behind all of these stood Lincoln the moral figure, Lincoln whose perception of spiritual matters towered beyond anyone of his time in America, save the likes of the Transcendentalists. One would not normally expect such an individual to work within the halls of government.

Part of Lincoln's make-up and capacities was announced in his father and mother, though this would just be a pale shadow of things to come. Certain psychic capacities were present in either one of them. Thomas Lincoln had a recurring dream of the woman he would marry and how he would meet her, until the dream came true.¹ Lincoln affirmed similarities in relation to his mother: "Visions are not uncommon to me. Nor were they uncommon to that blessed mother of mine. ... She often spoke of things that would happen [and] even foretold her early death ... just when she would die."²

Lincoln's Psychic Abilities

Lincoln himself had a certain prescience of things to come. To his friend Joshua Speed he declared: "I always did have strong tendency to mysticism. ... I have had so many evidences of God's direction, so many instances when I have been controlled by some other power than my own will, that I cannot doubt this power comes from above."³ More specifically to Ward Hill Lamon, Lincoln claimed that "he did not recollect the time when he did not believe that he would at some day be a future president."⁴

Lincoln's abilities had matured under adversity. The mother had died when Lincoln was nine, his only brother while in infancy. His sister died in childbirth when he was eighteen, and Ann Rutledge in the middle of their courtship, leaving Lincoln, twenty-six, in a state of almost suicidal despair. Additionally at age ten Lincoln suffered a horse's kick on his forehead. He laid unconscious until he was discovered, and survived without apparent permanent damage. One is left to wonder if some spiritual faculty was awakened from such an unusually intense experience.

Other small examples attest to Lincoln's psychic faculties. One night the president entered the War Department in panic, and asked the operator to get

¹ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 35.

² Lloyd Ostendorf and Walter Olesky, editors, *Lincoln's Unknown Private Life, an Oral History by His Black Housekeeper Mariah Vance, 1850-60*, 158, quoted in Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 35.

³ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 27.

⁴ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 38.

in touch with the Union commanders, because he was convinced that the Confederates were about to cut through Federal lines. When the operator asked how he knew that, he replied "My God, man! I saw it", meaning in a dream. The operator checked that the information was true.⁵

Lincoln's spirituality was no doubt accelerated in facing the trials of the nation, the fragile mental health of his wife Mary Todd, and the tragic early deaths of his sons Eddie and Willie. This was a continuous trial by fire that tempered the man's resilience and deepened his spiritual temper.

Already in 1860 Lincoln had what we could call a doppelgänger experience. The story was retold by his bodyguard Ward Hill Lamon, his secretary John Hay, and Noah Brooks, a journalist and personal friend to the president:

Opposite to where I lay was a bureau with a swinging glass upon it, and looking in that glass, I saw myself reflected nearly at full length, but my face, I noticed, had two separate and distinct images, the tip of the nose of one being about three inches from the tip of the other. I was a little bothered. ... I noticed that one of the faces was paler—say, five shades—than the other. ... I told my wife about it; she thought it was a sign that I was to be elected to a second term in office, and that the paleness was an omen that I should not see life through the second term. A few days after, I tried the experiment again, when sure enough, the thing came back again; but I never succeeded in bringing the ghost back after that.⁶

The experience was preceded by intense stress and great fatigue, which is a current condition for heautoscopy, or seeing one's body from a distance.

The premonition was reaffirmed in Lincoln's last dream. In it he first heard people sobbing, but the mourners were invisible. Then he arrived at the White House's East Room, where he saw a catafalque on which rested a corpse. Upon asking who was resting there, he was told "the president."⁷ Later he belittled the dream to assuage those around him. But he had spoken of his early death to others, such as Herndon, Ward Hill Lamon, or Harriet Beecher Stowe.⁸

After Willie's death Lincoln was often seen with a Bible in his hand. He apparently devoted more of his attention to the reality of eternal life, and to the life of prayer. Mary Lincoln expressed to W. Herndon that she thought her husband had had a religious experience following Willie's death.⁹ Some time after Willie's departure, he started to have the feeling that Willie was around.

⁵ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 185.

⁶ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 75–77.

⁷ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 229–30.

⁸ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 231.

⁹ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 119.

To Chase he confided, "Ever since Willie's death, I catch myself involuntarily talking to him, as if he were with me, and I feel that he is."¹⁰

Lincoln's Christianity

Lincoln's natural perceptions were enhanced by a deep interest in matters of faith. Historian James Garfield Randall reflects the opinion of this author when he states, "Surely, among successful American politicians, Lincoln is unique in the way he breathed the spirit of Christ while disregarding the letter of Christian doctrine."¹¹ Historian Nathaniel Stephenson adds, "His religion continues to resist intellectual formulation."

In no unusual way for the time he lived in, the Bible was probably the only book that the Lincolns owned. His mother, Nancy Hanks, though most likely illiterate, could recite portions of it as she did her chores. Frontier preachers' sermons were Lincoln's introduction to public speaking; he loved to imitate their fire and brimstone style.

Lincoln soon acquired a sufficient grasp of the Bible to be able to write a parody of the stories of the patriarchs called *The Chronicles of Reuben* in which he mocked the Grigsby Brothers, his rivals. Only after his arrival at Springfield was Lincoln exposed to more intellectually sophisticated pastors, who would have access to and interest in the scientific knowledge of the time. His first inquiries evolved from reading Thomas Payne's *Age of Reason*, and Count of Volney's *Ruins of Empire*. These probably forged new insights and questions, and shaped his critical thinking capacities. Lincoln made it a point to be able to re-create inwardly all of their thinking.

As a result of the above, according to Herndon, "he prepared an extended essay—called by many, a book—in which he made an argument against Christianity, striving to prove that the Bible was not inspired, and therefore not God's revelation, and that Jesus Christ was not the son of God."¹² His employer took the book away from Lincoln and flung it into the stove. He wanted to preserve Lincoln's political future, since these were very charged topics for the time that could have led Lincoln's entourage to see him as a heretic of sorts. His political future could in effect have stood compromised.¹³

It is interesting to note that these events may have been associated with a time of inner battle, as it seems confirmed by the witness of Mrs. Rankin at whose house in Petersburg Lincoln occasionally stayed. She reported Lincoln's words taken down by her son:

Those days of trouble found me tossed amid a sea of questionings. They piled upon me. ... Through all I groped my way until I found a stronger

¹⁰ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 121.

¹¹ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 192.

¹² William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln*, 45.

¹³ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 47.

and higher grasp of thought, one that reached beyond this life with a clearness and satisfaction I had never known before. The Scriptures unfolded before me with a deeper and more logical appeal, through these new experiences, than anything else I could find to turn to, or even before had found in them. I do not claim that all my doubts were removed then, or since that time have been swept away. They are not. ... I doubt the possibility, or propriety, of settling the religion of Jesus Christ in the models of man-made creeds and dogmas.¹⁴

It seems an important maturation of an independent and completely personal approach to Christianity was maturing in Lincoln's soul. The tenor of what he stated in the following years certainly bears weight to this experience.

The above transformation may have deepened at the death of Little Eddie in 1850. At the time Lincoln read very carefully the 600-page book *The Christian's Defense* by Reverend James Smith. He heartily related to the author, who had been an unbeliever and had a deep knowledge of the works of Payne and Volney, as well as others, whom he now refuted. Through his work Lincoln further bridged the distance between reason and faith, which is what the author attempted. The following was reported by Lincoln's brother-in-law, Ninian W. Edwards: "I have been reading a work by Dr. Smith on the evidences of Christianity, and have heard him preach and converse on the subject and am now convinced of the truth of the Christian religion." Lincoln went even further in attempting to reconcile scientific and religious thinking by reading Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, whose successive, revised editions incorporated the newest scientific discoveries. One of Lincoln's major interests lay in the topic of evolution.¹⁵

Influence of Scriptures

No president has ever had a better grasp of the Bible than Lincoln. And no one has made more direct or indirect references to it in his addresses and papers. This happened even in things scientific such as his "First Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions" of 1858, with many references to Genesis and Exodus.¹⁶ The Second Inaugural Address alone contains four direct quotations from Genesis, Psalms, and Matthew, and other allusions to scriptural teaching.

The president was so versed in Bible knowledge that he could rebut scriptural quotes with his own quotes from the Bible. From what we saw above, Lincoln may have come to regard the Bible as a scientific work of a higher order, though this was most likely only an intuition.

Tokens of Lincoln's deference to the Bible appear here and there. In response to a gift of an ancient bound Bible, he said: "In regard to this great

¹⁴ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 52.

¹⁵ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 86-87.

¹⁶ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 132.

book, I have but to say, it is the best gift God has given to man. All the good Savior gave to the world was communicated through this book. But for it we could not know right from wrong. All things most desirable for man's welfare, here and hereafter, are to be found portrayed in it."¹⁷

Secretary of the Treasury L. E. Chittenden recorded in his *Recollections* what Lincoln communicated to him: "We have to believe many things that we do not comprehend. The Bible is the only one that claims to be God's book—to comprise his law—his history. It contains an immense amount of evidence of its authenticity. ... Now, let us treat the Bible fairly. If we had a witness on the stand whose general story we knew was true, we would believe him when he asserted facts of which we had no other evidence. We ought to treat the Bible with equal fairness."¹⁸ To Speed, a self-proclaimed skeptic, who found Lincoln reading the Bible, Lincoln commented, "You are wrong, Speed; take all this Book upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a happier and better person."¹⁹

Despite all of the above, Lincoln's Christianity was completely devoid of dogma. He claimed the Bible's authority over that of any denomination. His not being member of any denomination came at a political price.

In 1941 what appears to have been one of Lincoln's printed pamphlets was discovered. In it Lincoln defended his religious choices to protect his political career. Excerpts of it are very revealing of threads that continued lifelong: "That I am not a member of any Christian Church, is true; but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures. ..." To this he added, "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."²⁰

To Mrs. Rankin Lincoln expressed his reservations about denominational creeds. He added that he would only join a church that made Christ's law of love to God and neighbor the sole condition of membership. Similarly, he avowed to Congressman Henry Deming in 1865: "When any church will inscribe over its altar as its sole qualification for membership the Savior's condensed statement of the substance of both the law and Gospel, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself—that Church will I join with all my heart and soul."²¹ In the absence of that, the Bible remained Lincoln's ultimate authority.

The interest in the Bible as a source of truths and insights was accompanied with a prayer life that grew over the years and deepened Lincoln's

¹⁷ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 135.

¹⁸ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 136.

¹⁹ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 86.

²⁰ William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, 73.

²¹ William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, 75.

"mysticism." To Rebecca Pomeroy, nurse to Willie and Tad, speaking to Lincoln about the prayers offered to him, Lincoln expressed his happiness at hearing the news and restated his need for support through prayer. On the occasion of the first inaugural, Mary Todd reported that Lincoln often retired and prayed audibly for strength and guidance. John Nicolay, his secretary, heard him say that he prayed, and that his prayer meant asking God to understand His purposes, rather than His granting of human wishes.

To General Sickles, who asked the president about his state of mind before the battle of Gettysburg, Lincoln replied:

Well, I will tell you how it was. ... Oppressed by the gravity of our affairs, I went to my room one day, and I locked the door, and got down on my knees before Almighty God, and prayed to Him mightily for victory at Gettysburg. ... And I then and there made a solemn vow to Almighty God, that if He would stand by our boys at Gettysburg, I would stand by Him. And after that (I don't know how it was, and I can't explain it), soon a sweet comfort crept into my soul that God Almighty had taken the whole business into His own hands and that things would go all right at Gettysburg. And that is why I had no fears about you.²²

And further, to his friend Noah Brooks he confided, "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go."²³

The examples given above could be multiplied by others. What is of greatest interest for spiritual seekers are Lincoln's fine balancing between faith and reason. To abolitionist clergy questioning him about abolition, Lincoln revealed his way of proceeding in balancing the requests of spirit and of reason: "Unless I am more deceived in myself than I often am, it is my earnest desire to know the will of Providence in this matter. And, if I can learn what it is, I will do it! These are not however, the days of miracles, and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect direct revelation. I must study the plain, physical facts of the case, ascertain what is possible and learn what appears to be wise and right."²⁴ Interestingly this was said in early September 1862, when the president was thinking about the Emancipation Proclamation. In this, as in other matters, Lincoln was showing that prayer did not replace "cold, calculated, unimpassioned reason." It complemented it. Only after weighing at length the pros and cons did the president deliberate that there were more imponderables and that his reason could be illuminated by a higher perspective upon receiving guidance from the spirit. The spirit would affirm or rectify all the hard and necessary foot work.

²² William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, 125.

²³ William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, 125.

²⁴ William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, 22.

Of all instances in which the above applies, the circumstances leading to the formulation of the Emancipation Proclamation and Lincoln's resolution to announce it are well documented. The president took a long time debating, envisioning, and then acting when the moment felt just right. Only when he could discern the will of God could he act with firmness. Fulfilling the will of God also meant affirming the decisions he had taken by virtue of his own judgment, only now made stronger, not denying self-responsibility.

Lincoln's Understanding of Christian Doctrine

Lincoln most often referred to Christ as "Savior" and "Lord." And he believed that His deed was ultimately meant for the redemption of all, which, arguably would have excluded him from any church of the time. Isaac Cogdal, with whom Lincoln talked on the matter in 1859, states that "[Lincoln] understood punishment for sin to be a Bible doctrine; that the punishment was parental in its object, aim, and design, and intended for the good of the offender; hence it must cease when justice is satisfied."²⁵ The same is confirmed by Jonathan Harnett, a Lincoln associate and business man, regarding a conversation in Lincoln's office: "[Lincoln] left no room to doubt or question his soundness on the atonement of Christ, and salvation finally of all men. ... The Saviour of all; and the supreme Ruler, he could not be with one out of the fold; all must come in with his understanding of the doctrine taught in the scriptures."²⁶

All of the above explains both why Lincoln was deeply Christian, and why he could not belong to a church. His was a much wider, more encompassing view of Christianity, more reminiscent of Saint Paul's theology than of any denominational creed of his time. In light of all of this, it is not surprising to know that in his last carriage ride Lincoln had expressed to Mary that the city he most wanted to see was Jerusalem.²⁷

In conjunction with his personal spiritual growth, Lincoln underwent a progressive understanding of the spiritual striving of the nation. It touched first on the matter of slavery, then on the understanding of its root economic causes that allied North and South in a deeper complicity. It finally led to an understanding of the reasons for the Civil War.

At the time of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lincoln came out of his political hibernation and started speaking against slavery from a Biblical perspective, decrying that slave-owners were defying the injunction "in the sweat of thy face shall thou eat bread" while also doing so from the perspective of the Declaration of Independence's claim of the equality of all men. The reference to "the sweat of thy brow" returned in the Cincinnati speech of September 17, 1859: "As labor is the common burthen of our race, so the effort of some to

²⁵ William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, 104.

²⁶ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 106.

²⁷ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 234.

shift their share of the burthen on to the shoulders of others, is the great, durable curse of the race. Originally a curse for transgression upon the whole race, when, as by slavery, it is concentrated on a party only, it becomes the double-refined curse of God upon His creatures." More and more Lincoln came to see slavery as a defiance of God's justice and contradiction of His will. Therefore he felt the nation was subject to God's judgment. And he understood that the judgment fell on both sides, since slavery was a national, not just a sectional evil.

Lincoln saw the Civil War as God's judgment meted out upon the nation for not putting slavery on the way of extinction, as many of the Founders had intended. The clinging to slavery was a "built-in contradiction to the law of its life."²⁸ This metaphysical view did not deny the historical, psychological, social, and political factors in the equation; it superseded all of them.

Lincoln conceived that the war would continue "until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toll shall be sunk" (Second Inaugural Address). In parallel to his personal views of salvation, here too Lincoln saw this punishment as regenerative, intended for the renewal of an America further dedicated to the freedom of all its people.

The could president see the Civil War above the factions. In a letter to Albert Hodges, editor of the Frankfort (KY) *Commonwealth*, he stated, "If God wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North, as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God."²⁹

In Lincoln's views God guided the consciousness of men, so that their actions would be a response to His guidance. And He was overruling those deeds that were at cross-purposes with his guidance. America was in his perception "the almost chosen people." In Buffalo on the way to the White House he had said, "For the ability to perform it [his work as president] I must trust in that Supreme Being who has never forsaken this favored land, though the instrumentality of this great and intelligent people."³⁰

Rededicating the Nation: A Transcendentalist President?

The above view of national matters highlights the coherence of initiatives taken during the years of conflict. At the end of July of 1861, Lincoln appointed a national day of prayer and fasting, after the disaster of Bull Run. This was a call to recognize individual and national transgressions to the will of God. It said, among other things: "And whereas it is fit and becoming in all people, at all times, to acknowledge and revere the Supreme Government of God; to bow in humble submission to His chastisement; to confess and deplore their

²⁸ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 25.

²⁹ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 176.

³⁰ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 117.

sins and transgression in the full conviction that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom ... And whereas, when our beloved country, once, by the blessing of God, united, prosperous and happy, is now afflicted with faction and civil war, it is peculiarly fit for us to recognize the hand of God in this terrible visitation."³¹ And a month after the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln called for Sabbath observance in the armed forces. In this he was referring to precedent, as his reference to General Washington made it clear.

At the suggestion of Senator Harlan of Iowa, asking a day for national prayer and humiliation, Lincoln again called for a national day of fasting and prayer on April 30, 1863. It read in part: "We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. ... But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us. ... Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us."³² In the wake of the above steps, it was natural that the president should accept Sarah Hale's suggestion of a national Thanksgiving holiday. He did it in 1863, fixing the last Thursday of November date by proclamation, and legating the nation with an enduring and significant holiday.

At this point in his presidency Lincoln wanted to reach for a deeper understanding of the Civil War and the American soul. He wanted to understand it from the perspective of "God's will" and educate his fellow Americans about it. He wanted to see above partisan views of right and wrong. This approach was already announced by Lincoln in his last debate with Douglas in Alton. Lincoln took the high ground: "That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle."

In concluding it appears that not only did Lincoln aim at educating the nation toward a fuller understanding and implementation of its founding impulses. His aims stopped nothing short of spiritual regeneration. Lincoln was only entitled to accomplish this deed because his Christianity and spirituality were not those of any denomination or sect. They truly formed the more advanced, and at the same time more living, understanding of Christ that could be found in America at the time, if one excepts America's leading literary/philosophical authorities.

The young Lincoln seemed to be acting in his youthful education as one trying to recapture the seven liberal arts, dear to one of the School of Chartres. In his Lincoln incarnation, he reconstructed a bridge between reason and faith,

³¹ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 121.

³² William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 163.

much like Emerson, Thoreau, and all the American Transcendentalists. He used the pen and ideas much like they did. Had he not had to overcome an education deficit, and had he not identified with a political mission, we may remember him today as one of them.

What Steiner says of the most famous German Romantics also applies to the American Transcendentalists, their counterparts: "With them [the Romantics], thinking was entirely absorbed by poetic imagination."³³ Though writing official documents, Lincoln could not help but leave a deeply personal and artistic footprint. He could not help but speak through poetic imagination.

In Lincoln, as in the Transcendentalists or German Romantics, the soul is impelled to deny the prevalent materialistic worldview out of its inner strength. It wants to re-create the world out of itself through what Steiner called the "idea-experience" or "experienced idea." In Steiner's assessment, "In Goethe, Fichte and Schiller, the experienced idea—one could also say, the idea-experience—forces its way into the soul." It is this idea-experience that creates the solid ground for a worldview that sees the human being as perfect and as free as possible.³⁴

What lived in the German Romantics and American Transcendentalists in thinking or feeling found a deeper rooting in the will in Lincoln. Time after time we see him impelled to find a place in politics out of an objective cultural call coming from the land, so to speak. It's as if Lincoln thought, "If we don't act now, everything that is best of the American founding impulse, will be dead and buried." And to this he replied out of an instinctive elemental fashion, out of a deep inner connection with the coming Michaelic impulses that lived in him. He simply could not do otherwise, no matter what the odds.

³³ Rudolf Steiner, *The Riddles of Philosophy*, Chapter 6: "The Age of Kant and Goethe."

³⁴ Rudolf Steiner, *The Riddles of Philosophy*, Chapter 6: "The Age of Kant and Goethe."