

Lincoln, Religion and Politics

What better approach to completely grasp history than through the comprehension of the lives of the individuals who made it, particularly those who left an imprint of good influence on mankind. This argument alone is sufficient to justify an interest in the life of Lincoln. This interest has been and continues to be unique in the sense that it is a matter of American as well as international concern in the vital significance of his whole life; whether it be his character, his romances and marriage, his politics, or his private life. It is evidenced by the voluminous amount of material that has appeared since his death.

It is fair to expect that this material can flee in numerous, divergent, and sometimes opposite directions. It had been particularly the case concerning his religious beliefs. The matter of his religious faith is still an undecided issue and a perennial question. So far, biographers' allegations on the matter have been inconclusive.

The question arises from the conflicting evidence on the matter from different periods of his life. In every aspect of his life, the myth-making theories were in accordance with the desire of the people to make a national hero in every phase of his life. He had been portrayed as an ardent reader of the Bible when young, an "infidel" when young-adult, and an *unconsciously* faithful Christian later in his life. None of these depictions can be completely true.

One of the reasons behind this enduring debate is the incoherence that prevails over these interpretations; the subject comprises several opposing witnesses. Lincoln himself barely made any public statement on the matter. His close friends describe him as a "theist" at most and more than often they had tried to keep this representation intact to "humanize" him and treat Lincoln as a president, a politician, and a practicing lawyer but his public speeches on ceremonial occasions infused with a religious lexicon, although used in a detached manner, as well as the passing of acts and proclamations which changed the American religious pattern have granted him the status of a Christian martyr, a career and a life marked by "spiritual growth".

1. Statement of the problem. The purpose of this research is to study the relationship of Lincoln's religious views in the context of his political career in general, in particular his time as member of the House of Representatives, his run for the Illinois legislature in 1843 and 1846, his campaign for a seat in the Senate, and the duration of his presidential mandate. I would be conducted to investigate the political, social, and religious factors and pressures which influenced the process of decision making and the numerous acts and proclamations passed between 1860 and 1865 and how the American people, past and present, perceive the nation's religious fate and Lincoln's contribution to it. Most importantly, the research's aim is to examine Lincoln's reaction and response to these environmental influences, and thus try to capture his religious thoughts through the process.

2. The importance of the study.

Benjamin P. Thomas observed:

Extreme eulogists of Lincoln sometimes go so far as to compare their hero with Jesus Christ; and while some realists may scoff, there is a valid comparison, in one respect at least, and it goes far to explain why books continue to be written about Lincoln and why they will continue to be written. For both Christ and Lincoln symbolize great vibrant, living-forces--the one Christianity, the other Democracy--and so long as these forces remain vital there will be no cessation of interest in either man.* Thomas, PP, p. 309.

The object of this research and the choice of this quote is not to study the relationship between Lincoln and Christianity, especially since a great amount of research have been conducted on the subject to demonstrate through various arguments that Lincoln had been *unconsciously* a Christian since Lincoln never considered himself a Christian and never was a church member. What is important to emphasize in this quote is the term *realists* who may scoff at the comparison that many Lincoln biographers make of their hero to Jesus Christ. This is where a line is drawn. In order to approach the subject with a realistic and practical method and thereupon fuel the debate over Lincoln's religious views, one has to ingrain a

political perspective. The results of the study are expected and hoped to steer the discussion away from the recurring Christian Lincoln interpretations. In addition to this, we sense from Lincoln an indifference to religion as a dogma and organization but a complete awareness of the existential human condition. In that sense, the relevance of this study to American religion and politics involves a consideration of Lincoln's concepts concerning God, human and nation destiny, as well as religion's place and importance in American politics.

3. The scope of this modest research is limited. A religious and political biography of Lincoln is not the plan of this dissertation. However, the experiences of his life, as they relate to religion, will be treated. But only the non-personal realities will be studied; it includes the entire social environment with which he came into contact. For the sake of conciseness and relevance, the early phases of Lincoln's life would not be treated here. The thesis will be substantiated with reasonable evidence that the Christian aspects of Lincoln's religious and ethical character were not dependent, primarily, upon the influences of organized Christianity in the nineteenth century. A critical exposition of the theological and ethical characteristics of his cabinet members would be of equal importance. All in all, the scope of the investigation will include a presentation of the circumstances and the instances in which the political Lincoln encountered delicate religious situations.

4. Review of literature in the field and methodology. Each decade brings forth additional Lincoln literature more often than not presenting new perspectives of study and modern interpretations of the character as seen through the eyes of the fourth or fifth generation that followed his death. Restrictions of time and page number renders it impossible to investigate into the abundant books and essays written about Lincoln. For this reason, only a dozen writers in the field, those who achieved national and international prominence, will constitute the bibliography of secondary sources essential for this research.

Among these authors are: Holland, Lamon, Herndon, Weik, Tarbell, Barton, Beveridge, Morgenthau, Randall, Wills, and Warren.

Literature has depicted his faith as orthodox or unorthodox. The aim of this research is neither. Its main goal is to evaluate the relationship between the political Lincoln and The dominant moods of his religiosity.

Plenty attention should be given to Lincoln's own statements and writings concerning religion; these shall be analyzed, weighed, and put into private and public context to fully comprehend the nature of his religious beliefs. Among the selected primary source elements are: the Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity, The Young Men's Lyceum Speech, the First and Second Inaugural Address, the Proclamation of Emancipation, as well as private and public letters.

Instead of confronting the "disturbing problem" of Lincoln's refusal to join a denominational branch of Christianity while living in the midst of an organized Christian community, some modern scholars, in an attempt to comply with the standards of historical evidence, have tried to comprehend the nature of his beliefs by investigating his personal and professional relationships with the more religious contemporaries he came into contact with, such as his team of advisers or his campaign opponents. An investigation into his cabinet members' religious fervor could therefore shed some light on the type of individuals Lincoln had to cope with, which in turn could explain, through examples, the political expediency theory many modern scholars put forward during Lincolnian debates.

Plan

Chapter 1 : Religion During his Early Political Career. An already mature vision of how religion should be apprehended in the political arena.

Part 1 : Skepticism and religious self-righteousness resentment

Primary material:

- Young Men's Lyceum speech

Part 2 : Taking political standings on religious grounds, a threat to democracy

Primary material:

- Meditation on the Divine Will

Part 3 : The place of religion in the political debate

Primary material:

- Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity

Chapter 2 : Lincoln and the Radical Republicans. Political expediency or religious conviction?

Part 1 : Religious fervor in the Cabinet

Support:

- "In God We Trust"
- Religious references
- Thanks and Prayers Observances

Part 2: Religious substance and significance

Support:

- The Bible, a source for literary ironies
- Lincoln's true religious moods

Chapter 3 : A negative vein. How Lincoln replied to religious demands.

Part 1 : Securing religious democracy

support:

- Quakers and Mormons
- Higher Law Doctrine

Part 2 : The purposes of God and the purposes of Lincoln

Primary material:

- His late speeches