

The Religion of Abraham Lincoln.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN was the eighth President of the American Republic; eighth, when we count in historical order, but certainly not eighth in order of merit. Some enthusiasts would put him first. But against that must stand the claims of Washington and Thomas Jefferson (and possibly posterity will put Franklin Roosevelt in front of all). Lincoln had little opportunity of displaying constructive power. He saved the Union from disaster, but he did not live to heal the wounds the Civil War had made. We know he had plans, and unquestionably much bitterness would have been averted had he been spared to prevent the army of "carpet-baggers" from descending on the unhappy South. As it was, Booth's pistol-shot robbed America of one of its greatest sons, and it frustrated what might well have been the finest epoch in Lincoln's career as a statesman.

But if his claims to be the greatest of American Presidents can be disputed, few would deny that to the outside world he is the best known and probably the most revered. Washington was "the father of the nation," and Thomas Jefferson had constructive genius of a remarkable kind, but neither made the appeal to the universal human heart that we find in Lincoln.

There was such a homeliness in "our Abe", the story of his rise from the obscure poverty of the backwoods to fame and power at the White House was so romantic; the words he spoke, particularly at Gettysburg and in his Second Inaugural, were so simple and yet so profound, that people instinctively felt drawn out in trust and admiration towards him. He was a man of the people, and in him the common man felt that he found expression.

And yet it may be doubted whether this impression can always be justified. There are elements in Lincoln's character that cannot be included in an entirely simple synthesis. "Reticence degenerating at times into secretiveness is one of his fixed characteristics," says Professor Stephenson, and there are episodes in his life that are not easy of understanding. This may account for the feeling that in spite of all his greatness Lincoln does not command the utter allegiance of some. An interesting sidelight on this was an experience at Louisville, Kentucky, in 1939. A party of us were returning from Atlanta, and at Louisville we held a meeting at which several of our company spoke, one of them being R. L. Child, of Bristol, who proudly remarked that on that particular day on our way to Louisville we had visited the humble log cabin where Abraham

Lincoln was born. He then said something about the world's debt to Lincoln, and this stirred the Southern soul of Dr. Sampey, the President of the great Louisville Baptist Seminary, who had been appointed to express the good wishes of the Louisville people to the delegation. In the course of his remarks he referred to Lincoln. "A great man? Yes," he said; "but I reckon that General Robert E. Lee was a greater." There was behind this something deeper than the jealousy of the Southerner for the hero of the South. The remark was a pointer to the fact that Lincoln in character was something less direct and sincere than Lee, surely one of the finest Christian gentlemen that history speaks of.

It has been argued (notably by Edgar Lee Masters) that Lincoln was a good deal of an opportunist, a man without definite convictions who largely took his colour from his environment, and became to a large extent what political circumstances made him. Such an idea is obviously unjust, and it does not square with the facts. But it only serves to emphasize the point that Lincoln's character is not as simple as many people imagine.

We must not labour this fact too much, but undoubtedly there are episodes in Lincoln's career that are perplexing. These, however, may perhaps best be explained by the fact that his whole mental and spiritual development was slow. He could never, like some men, see in a flash where truth and duty lay; he had to examine the situation in all its bearings, and feel his way to the right conclusion. Once his mind was made up he never wavered, but in the process of reaching his decisions he was diffident of himself and leaned heavily on others, often to his own great disadvantage. This is very conspicuous in the early stages of his Presidential administration, when he often seemed to fumble, both in civil and military affairs. It was not until 1862, after nearly eighteen months of war, that Lincoln finally and firmly took the reins into his own hands, because it was not until then that he saw his way clearly, and resolved, whatever happened, to pursue his own course.

We see the same uncertainty when we come to deal with his religion. For long years he ruminated in silence, refusing to identify himself with anything positive; so much so that he was often misunderstood, and ideas were fathered upon him that were certainly unjust. It was only towards the end of his life that he began to speak out clearly. But his word, when it came, was the word of a prophet, and as such it has been received by the world.

Lincoln, interesting to note, had Baptist connections. His father, Thomas Lincoln (a somewhat shiftless character), settled after his marriage (1806) at Elizabethtown, which was a Baptist

stronghold. Baptist ideas were in the air, and apparently they sufficiently impressed Thomas Lincoln to make him feel that if he were to be anything in religion he must find his home among the Baptists. But with that casualness of mind that characterized him, he did not join a church. From Elizabethtown he wandered off into the remoter parts of Kentucky, and there he took to farming of a not too serious kind. It was at Sinking Spring Farm (near Hodgenville) that Abraham Lincoln was born in 1809. There was a Baptist Church some two miles away, and probably the Lincolns had a connection with it. Seven years later, when struggling with another farm (Knob Creek), Thomas Lincoln was baptized by William Downs, a minister of the "Separate Baptists." The same year saw him once more on the move with his family. He settled at Pigeon Creek, Indiana, and there he helped build the Baptist Church, a log hut 26 ft. by 30 ft. He prided himself on making the pulpit and window frames, but curiously (or characteristically) enough he did not join it until 1823, when he received his transfer.

For us the interest of all this lies in its connection with his famous son whose religious background, we can see, was Baptist, but Baptist of a somewhat sketchy kind. His father's slackness could hardly be considered a strong recommendation to a boy who in so many ways (as we know) differed from him. Moreover, preachers in these backwoods areas were hard to come by, and services were both occasional and to a growing boy rather uninspired. Abraham Lincoln must have attended church with reasonable frequency, however, because by his fifteenth year he had acquired quite a reputation as a pulpit mimic. To the great delight of his companions he used to repeat the sermons verbatim with an exaggerated emphasis on the preacher's voice and delivery.

But in Lincoln's case we have two facts to remember. First, he and his father never could hit it, and this affected his attitude to the Church. Secondly, and more important, he was naturally self-contained, and where it came to the deep things almost secretive, until he was perfectly sure that he knew where he was. "Abe," said his step-mother (his own mother died when he was nine) "had no particular religion—didn't think of that question at that time—if he ever did," and then she added (more sensibly, perhaps) "he never talked about it"; in the way of revealing his own inner thoughts, that is.

But gradually he drifted away from church connections, and his attitude led to a good deal of perplexity. It is plain that he disliked the popular theology of his time. Revival excitement (such as the backwoods villages loved) left him unmoved or annoyed, while hell-fire sermons only made him

angry. We are told that he used to read and recite passages from Burns's *Holy Willie's Prayer* and the *Address to the Unco Guid*, poems which must have increased his dislike of conventional Calvinistic Baptist preaching. As a result, when he was free to choose for himself, he gave up church attendance altogether. He also read anti-religious books (notably Volney's *Ruins of Time*), though he continued at the same time to read the Bible. Occasionally he would tell a story or drop a remark that hinted at his reaction from orthodoxy; and, as a consequence, all kinds of impressions about his anti-religious views were spread, and in due course proclaimed to the world as a whole.

John T. Stuart, his first law partner, declared that Lincoln was "an open infidel," and that he "always denied the divinity of Christ." David Davis, on the other hand, said (what was more likely to be true) that "he never talked about religion," and "though he had no Christian faith he did believe in a Creator." Others alleged that he took Christianity for granted, though his Christianity was more after the fashion of Theodore Parker than strictly orthodox. Finally, we have the testimony of his wife. "Mr. Lincoln," she said, "had no faith and no hope in the usual acceptation of these words. He never joined a church. But still, I believe he was a religious man by nature. He first seemed to think about the subject when our boy Willie died, and then more than ever about the time he went to Gettysburg. But it was a kind of poetry, and he was never a technical Christian."

All this is very puzzling unless we see it in relation to Lincoln's character. His slow development is observable here as elsewhere. Manifestly he revolted from the kind of religion that suited his father. But that he was ever an "infidel" no one that knows him can think. He slowly formed his own conclusions; and though admittedly they were somewhat hazy, they were at least his own, and unlike a good deal of orthodoxy they got their value from a living relation to life. "I have never united myself to any church," he said, "because I have found difficulty in giving my assent without mental reservations to the long and complicated statements of Christian doctrine which characterize their Articles of Belief and Confessions of Faith. When any Church will inscribe over its altar as its sole qualification of membership the Master's condensed statement of the substance of both 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 neighbour as thyself,' that church will I join with all my heart and with all my soul." This represents Lincoln's deepest conviction and the man who could so speak might be unorthodox, but he could hardly be called irreligious,

much less anti-religious, and most of us would agree that he was nearer the Kingdom of Heaven than many who can more accurately tithe the mint and anise and cummin of theological opinion.

It was not, however, till towards the end of his life that Lincoln began to speak freely about the deep things he had slowly wrought out for himself. God, he believed, is over all, just and wise and good, and any true statesmanship must take cognizance of His will. Especially did Lincoln feel this as he brooded over the sad fact that even the best of men can come to take opposite sides about great moral issues, as they did in the Civil War. Both parties claimed to be right, and both unquestionably contained in their ranks multitudes of sincere and thoughtful Christians. Who was to say where the truth and justice of things finally lay? Only God, said Lincoln, with deep and fervent piety; and as he beat out his faith in Providence amid the clash of arms itself, he gave us perhaps the noblest expression of the truth we are ever likely to see.

He sketched it first in a private paper he wrote for his own edification in 1862. "The will of God prevails," he said. "On great issues each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God cannot 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 as they do are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true, that God wills this contest and wills that it should not end yet. By His great 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."

Lincoln here is still groping his way to a final understanding of the problem. Where is God in human events, and what is the relation of His will to them? Somehow he shapes and controls, and His judgments are always better and wiser than we can see. War and peace, evil and good, pain and pleasure, are all in the texture of life; and even the things we shrink from and hate must be subdued by God's power to the purpose He has before Him.

So Lincoln wrestled for peace with the problem of his country's sorrowful strife. He tried to see above both North and South to the meaning of the Civil War for the nation as a whole; and his final word he gave to the world in his great Second Inaugural, March 4th, 1865, surely one of the finest

declarations that Lincoln (or anyone else) ever made on this theme of Divine Providence. Speaking with magnificent impartiality for the South (in arms against his government) as well as the North, he said:—

“Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered—that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. ‘Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh.’ If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offences 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? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman’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.’

“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Lincoln, as we have seen, was called an “infidel”, and by the orthodox among Christians he was looked at somewhat askance. But can anyone that really knows him doubt his deeply religious character? In theology, as in politics, he took his own way, slowly, sometimes reluctantly, but thoughtfully and sincerely. One might say of him that as he grew in stature with God, so equally he grew in power with men, and his closing years were a tribute to his slowly developed, but deeply rooted piety.

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