

# LINCOLN'S RELIGION RESTATED

BY LUTHER EMERSON ROBINSON

NOT many characters in history have called out so large a body of interpretative literature as has grown up about the name of Abraham Lincoln. The stream of books still flows, for the definitive words have not all been written. No aspect of his life has excited more earnest controversy than his religion. Attempts to classify his faith have stretched between the most sharply contrasting poles of belief. Tested by the commonly invoked New Testament standard, some of those who knew Lincoln long and "intimately" have lustily contended to prove him an "infidel". Others have as energetically insisted that he was a Christian of reverent and unmistakable type. His belief in predestination, which Herndon called "fatalism", is pretty generally conceded. This feature of his religion is asserted to have been lifelong, and so ultra-orthodox that "it went the full length of current superstition". He has been variously claimed by atheist and Baptist, by Roman Catholic and Methodist, by Spiritualist and Quaker. Universalists and Unitarians have thought that he best fitted their tenets. The debate has been wide enough to maintain that Lincoln must have been connected with the Freemasons. It is apparently one of the benevolent penalties of his great and engaging personality that it was sufficiently

latitudinarian to embrace the possessory rights of almost any segment of faith or opinion which might profit by the claim.

The subject is, of course, elusive enough to warrant an argument; and Lincoln's legacy is great enough to make it important to know the facts about his belief. Many books and articles, containing the fruits of more or less intelligent research, have endeavored to give a touch of finality to the dispute. So complex and devious is the psychology of the human mind in its attitude toward religion that the earlier findings were not sufficiently conclusive. Gradually and more scientifically, the sifting and synthesis of external testimony and internal evidence from Lincoln's authenticated works have made possible a more convincing report of the matter. By far the most satisfactory study of Lincoln's religion thus far published has come from the pen of William E. Barton, under the somewhat too comprehensive title of "The Soul of Abraham Lincoln". This book is so important in its field that it must be regarded as necessary to any library, public or private, fittingly equipped for the critical consideration of Lincoln's religious history. The author's contribution in this volume is one which students of Lincoln have many times felt was needed toward a dispassionate and

scholarly investigation of this side of the great President's thought and character.

That Lincoln was in large measure the product of the pioneer conditions which surrounded his boyhood and young manhood is a commonplace of interpretation. The educational limitations of his frontier environment, the stimuli of the plain folk who made up its sparse inhabitants, the infrequency of communication between points and with the more highly developed eastern states, the almost universal resort to hard manual labor in getting a start in the world, the checkered social and religious atmosphere growing slowly out of the diversity of beliefs and customs brought by immigrants into the western communities—these circumstances induced among the settlers an attitude of free thinking and action in religion and morals while they were absorbed with the more immediate demands of breaking up and cropping the new lands, building houses, and laying out towns and villages as centres of distribution. Mr. Barton gives necessary attention to these stimuli as they molded the soul of the young Lincoln. He pictures the light and shade of the conditions which impressed Lincoln's childhood and youth in Kentucky and Indiana as well as his facts will warrant. Lincoln's schooling, of course, was so meagre that his biographers have given all the exposure possible to the scanty opportunities he found for self-instruction. The social life of the frontiersmen was somewhat leavened by the "camp-meetings and revivals" conducted among them at intervals by the Hardshell Baptists and the New Lights and by the later influence of the Presbyterians. How much preaching the young Lincoln heard in Kentucky and Indiana is uncertain.

One general effect of the pioneer preaching was to convict the popular conscience of the doctrine of predestination and the dogma of eternal punishment. Lincoln's faith was tinctured by the one, but his skepticism rejected the notion of eternal punishment.

Lincoln's religious environment in Illinois is not so difficult to reconstruct. His young manhood at New Salem forms an important chapter in his career. Mr. Barton's early professional life as a minister in rural Kentucky and Illinois enabled him to observe certain religious customs and beliefs, surviving from the pioneer period when Lincoln's mind was in the making, and his record throws an interesting side-light on the social conditions prevailing among the poor white class from which Lincoln sprung. An interesting custom was that of "deferred funerals". The advent of a preacher in the backwoods was rare, and there were instances where a settler would have the funerals of two deceased wives preached "at once". The author records the fact that a Berea College professor, as late as 1919, was engaged to preach the funeral of a boy who died ten years before.

For the facts both of his education and his religious reactions, diligent recourse has been made to the testimony of those who knew Lincoln at New Salem. Here Mentor Graham came into his life and instructed him in Kirkham's grammar as well as in the elements of surveying. Here he continued to read and reflect upon the Bible. Shakespeare, Burns, and Byron were among the poets he discovered. Newspapers were an important part of his mental dietary, and by chance Blackstone's "Commentaries" was made to supplement the Statutes of

Indiana, which he had read before moving to Illinois. He reacted, too, to religion. For him, as for the average family, there was in his surroundings little suggestion of other-worldliness outside of the occasional camp-meeting and its sequential public baptism at the nearest creek or the funerals of those who died in the neighborhood. These events and the "occasional visitations" of the circuit riders to preach in the school-house or in the cabin of a receptive settler, contrasted piously with the Sunday hunting and fishing, "breaking young horses, shooting at marks, horse and foot racing, and the like".

As a young man lusty of life Lincoln shared in Indiana and Illinois the untutored freedom of acting and thinking common to his neighborhood. His penchant for reading brought him into contact with Volney's "Ruins" and Paine's "Age of Reason" as well as with the Bible and the poets. To reenforce his contention that Lincoln was an infidel, Herndon asserted that while at New Salem Lincoln wrote an essay to disprove the Bible as God's revelation and Jesus as the Son of God; that Lincoln's employer, Hill, snatched this little "book" and threw it into the stove to prevent its publicity from injuring the young man's political prospects. With the keenness of a trained advocate, Mr. Barton shows that Herndon actually knew very little of the New Salem Lincoln, that he depended upon hastily gathered hearsay evidence, and that what Lincoln actually wrote was a "little manuscript", which he showed to Mentor Graham, containing "a defense of universal salvation". As Graham wrote, Lincoln "took the passage, 'as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive,' and followed with the proposition that whatever

the breach or injury of Adam's transgression to the human race was, which no doubt was very great, was made right by the atonement of Christ."

But this was not "the book", says Mr. Barton, which Hill burned. Again, upon Mentor Graham's better testimony, he shows that Herndon did not know that the object burned in Hill's store was a letter Hill had written to McNamur about Ann Rutledge. This letter was found by some school children, who gave it to Lincoln, the postmaster, in Hill's store. "Some of the school children", wrote Graham, "had picked up the letter and handed it to Lincoln. Hill and Lincoln were talking about it, when Hill snatched the letter from Lincoln and put it into the fire. The letter was respecting a young lady, Miss Ann Rutledge, for whom all three of these gentlemen seemed to have respect."

Lincoln, then, did not, like Shelley, write a youthful essay to disprove traditional orthodoxy, but to give it as he believed a more rational interpretation. However, the storm of controversy over Lincoln's faith came, soon after his death, to centre upon a point of pure theology. J. G. Holland, editor at the time of "Scribner's Magazine", went to Springfield to gather materials for his biography of Lincoln. Among others, he interviewed Newton Bateman, State Superintendent of Education, who had known Lincoln long and intimately. Holland published as Bateman's words a confidential comment Lincoln had made to the latter during the presidential canvass of 1860, in which he expressed deep disappointment that a majority of the ministers of Springfield were reported as favoring Douglas for president. In this comment, Holland reported Lincoln as saying:

I know there is a God, and that He hates

injustice and slavery... 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. 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.

Then the theological storm broke loose. Lamon's "Life of Lincoln", based upon Herndon's notes and papers, soon followed and boldly challenged the veracity of Holland's report of Lincoln's words. The dispute focused upon the sentence, "I know I am right because I know that liberty is right, for Christ teaches it, and Christ is God." "Lincoln", wrote Lamon, "never in all that time let fall from his tongue or his pen an expression which remotely implied the slightest faith in Jesus as the Son of God and the Savior of men." Herndon, also, strongly condemned the statement ascribed to Lincoln, and called upon Dr. Bateman to confirm or deny Holland's language. Herndon did not deny that Lincoln was a deist, but he was certain Lincoln had never acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God. Lamon concluded that Bateman's memory had played him false or that he had thought it no wrong to employ a religious fraud to set at ease the public desire to be assured of Mr. Lincoln's orthodoxy. He maintained that Lincoln held all truth to be inspired, whether Newton's discoveries, a Baconian essay, or one of his own speeches.

Herndon wrote that his several attempts to get a statement of the case from Bateman for publication were unavailing, but that he had preserved notes of his interviews with Bateman, which one day would set the matter right. Meantime, the world could take

his "word" for it that Holland was wrong. "If Bateman is correctly represented by Holland, he is the only man who will say Lincoln believed Jesus was the Christ of God, as the Christian world represents. Sometime my notes will show who is truthful, and who is not. I doubt whether Bateman is correctly represented."

These notes, as Mr. Barton remarks, have never been found. Bateman refused to respond to Herndon's inquiry. Later on he wrote, confidentially, that his conversation with Lincoln had turned upon the application of "moral and religious truth to the duties of the hour, the conditions of the country, and the conduct of public men—ministers of the gospel. Neither was thinking of orthodoxy or heterodoxy, Unitarianism, Trinitarianism or any other ism." Subsequently Bateman said to I. N. Arnold, who was preparing a Life of Lincoln, that Holland's report of the conversation in dispute was "substantially correct". Mr. Barton, however, concludes with Lamon and Herndon that Lincoln did not say, "I know I am right because I know that liberty is right, for Christ teaches it, and Christ is God." Lincoln could not have used such language, Mr. Barton writes, "with nothing to distinguish the view of Lincoln as Unitarian or Trinitarian". He is the more confident because Nicolay and Hay did not mention the incident, because Bateman did not refer to it in his subsequent lecture on Lincoln, and did not protest against the criticisms of Lamon and Herndon. Bateman and Holland, he feels, each incurred his "ratio" of error: five years had elapsed since Bateman had the words from Lincoln; besides, he was tempted "to enlarge upon the incident" as a concession to the desire of "Christian people for a clear statement" of Lin-

coln's faith. Holland's discrepancy, he believes, arose from his being a writer of fiction as well as of history: thus, naturally, "he did not fail to embellish the story as Bateman told it to him". Finally, Holland, "probably did not write it down at the time, but recalled it afterward from memory". Although neither Holland nor Bateman intentionally falsified neither "cared, probably, to face too searching inquiry as to how the enlargement had come".

From our own knowledge of Lincoln's words referring here and there to his confidence in the Bible and its two supreme personalities which he recognized as giving it validity, it is difficult to see how, as a matter of logic, the author finds it necessary to conclude with Lamon and Herndon that Lincoln was not correctly quoted in the phrase, "Christ is God". It would have been obviously dishonest for Bateman gratuitously to offer the phrase to a biographer as Lincoln's own words, and just as dishonest for the biographer to insert it for the sake of embellishment. The phrase is quite *en rapport* with its context, particularly with, "I have told them that a house divided against itself cannot stand, and Christ and reason say the same"; also with "Douglas don't care . . . but God cares, and humanity cares, and I care." If Bateman felt that neither he nor Lincoln, in the interview, was thinking of theological distinctions (such as Herndon was metaphysical enough to insist upon), but only of the application of "moral and religious truth" to public men and questions, why not take him at his word? It is more than likely that Lincoln used the words in question without consciously distinguishing his view as Unitarian or Trinitarian. Bateman was probably too self-respecting to engage in controversy with

Herndon. Like Dr. Smith, whom Mr. Barton justly credits for influencing Lincoln's religious convictions, Bateman simply did not care to make Herndon his medium of communication to the public. He had confided to Holland the substance of an intimate personal talk with Lincoln, and felt that Holland had quoted him substantially as Lincoln had spoken to him. Herndon had read the words with a metaphysical coloring out of character, as far as he knew, with Lincoln's thinking; whereas, Lincoln had only impressed his impression of the practical identity of Christ's teachings with God's will and character.

John G. Nicolay, Lincoln's private secretary, stated that "Mr. Lincoln did not, to my knowledge, in any way change his religious views, opinions, or beliefs, from the time he left Springfield to the day of his death." If this impression is substantially correct, what, then, was Lincoln's religious view?

On the matter of Christianity, Lincoln at no time declared himself with more perspicacity, perhaps, than in the letter he wrote to Reverend Dr. Ide and others, May 30, 1864:

I can only thank you for thus adding to the effective and almost unanimous support which the Christian communities are so zealously giving to the country and to liberty. Indeed it is difficult to conceive how it could be otherwise with anyone professing Christianity, or even having ordinary perception of right and wrong. To read the Bible as the word of God himself, that "in the sweat of *thy* face shalt thou eat bread", and to preach therefrom that, "in the sweat of *other men's* faces thou shalt eat bread", to my mind can scarcely be reconciled with honest sincerity. . . . When, a year or two ago, those professedly holy men of the South met in semblance of prayer and devotion, and, in the name of Him who said, "As ye would all men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them," appealed to the Christian world to aid them in doing to a whole race of men as they would have no man do unto themselves, to my thinking they contemned and insulted God and His church far more than did Satan when he

tempted the Saviour with the kingdoms of the earth. The devil's attempt was no more false, and far less hypocritical. But let me forbear, remembering it is also written, "Judge not lest ye be judged."

Lincoln was no literalist in his interpretation of the Bible. The dogmas of the virgin birth and eternal punishment did not appeal to him as fundamental to the validity of the Bible as a divine revelation of religious truth. In the growth and composition of the book he was disposed to recognize the man-made element, but apparently this did not destroy for him its unique importance as a spiritual and ethical guide for humanity. In Chambers's "Vestiges of Creation" he discovered and accepted the principle of natural evolution. He did not unite with any church, but the evidence seems indisputable that he declared himself willing to join any church that asked assent only to the two great commandments. Like his education and his political history, his religious experience was a persistent evolution in search of the faith that best satisfied the demands of unselfish reason. The impact of pioneerism left its accent in his manners and

sympathies. Nature made him a great gentleman and bestowed upon him a mind of superior powers. Emerson felicitously spoke of him as "an entirely public man". As such, he carried his unbroken and unfinished intellectual and spiritual development into his practice of church attendance, into his practice of daily prayer and meditation, and into his public policy and utterance. His was the almost perfect union of the western mind with the Hebraic spirit. These elements of his genius found their highest expression in his Second Inaugural, a state paper combining both history and religion into a masterpiece of pure literature.

Mr. Barton's volume is richly as well as carefully documented. He surpasses his predecessors both in the assemblage of external and internal evidence bearing with finality upon the much mooted question of Lincoln's religious faith. His book is so well done that it is likely long to remain the standard work on the subject.

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The Soul of Abraham Lincoln. By William E. Barton. George H. Doran Company.

## A SIERRA POET IN THE MAKING

BY HERBERT COOPER THOMPSON

JOAQUIN MILLER, "poet of the Sierras", has come in for a revival in California. A magazine of San Francisco has not long since issued a memorial number (it is seven years since his death), and collectors are paying increasingly high premiums for his manuscripts and first editions. This is, to some extent, a tribute to his unique personality, for it is certain that he has, in death, lost none of his grip on the imaginations of those who knew him or knew of him. Tourists still make pilgrimages, as in his life, to the strange collection of cabins in the hills overlooking San Francisco Bay, where he made his home.

Miller, besides his magnetism, admirable character, and whimsical originality, was a picturesque figure. Tall, powerful, with keen eyes, strong, handsome face and flowing beard, he made an imposing appearance on all occasions—a fact no one appreciated better than he. Cowhide boots, in which he stalked to fame in London's drawing-rooms in the early 'seventies, soft shirt, slouch hat, and corduroy clothes fulfilled the popular notion of the way a "poet of the Sierras" should look. Yet he was no mere "faker". He came honestly by his far-Western garb. He crossed the plains to Oregon during the gold rush, as a lad of ten; and before he finished his schooling, he had worked in the mines, fought

Indians, and shot a deputy sheriff. Charles Warren Stoddard later wrote of him: "Never had a breezier bit of human nature dawned upon me this side of the South Seas than that Poet of the Sierras when he came to San Francisco in 1870." And a British reviewer in the days of his early fame correctly said that his superiority over Byron in certain respects lay in the fact that his materials were derived not from a morbid imagination, but from his own actual experience on the borders of civilization.

An episode in his early career relating to his fight with the deputy and other early reminiscences, hitherto unpublished, have been given to me by one of Miller's boyhood companions and newspaper associates, Colonel William Thompson of Alturas, California. And I am also heir to a number of backless ledgers in which the young poet scribbled at verse and political speeches and jotted personal notes while practising law in Canyon City, Oregon. These bits I here offer to his admirers.

"I am a genius," Miller declared to Thompson during his struggling years. "The world does not appreciate me, but it will yet recognize and honor my name." He did not say this boastfully. He said it because of his absolute faith in himself, although it well