

Lincoln's Real Religion
Presented by Rev. Martin Woulfe
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Today, I mean to lift up for your consideration, a man who was a lawyer, a politician, and a Republican President. The praises of such persons have not been frequently sung in recent decades, at least not from liberal pulpits. But the person I speak of today is the exception to the rule. For Abraham Lincoln was an exceptional human being – one who stood head and shoulders above the men and women of his day, and, I suppose, above many others, before & since.

I am aware that clustered here in this room are many students (and admirers) of Lincoln. Whether we hail from central Illinois or from the Chicago area, all are quite aware that the name of Lincoln leaves an indelible mark on this state. From Lincoln Highway to the Lincoln tomb; from Lincoln Land College to Lincoln Park; from an automobile bearing his name to the license plates that carry his face; from our coinage to our currency --Truly, this *is* the land of Lincoln.

Today, I will focus on what I have called, “Lincoln’s real religion.” Mind you, this is a popular topic of speculation. This week, I went to Google search, & type in three words: Abraham, Lincoln & religion; there were 202,000 hits. By contrast, I typed in my name & religion & found a mere dozen entrees. So, perhaps, I can take a lesson from Mr. Lincoln in terms of humility.

You may wonder, why would I choose to discuss Lincoln’s religion today? There are several reasons. The first obvious one is that this week the nation will again observe his birthday. Secondly, I think it relevant since this congregation bears his name. But perhaps most importantly, I believe that our nation is in a period of great domestic disturbance and that we should all look to Lincoln for wisdom.

I have visited the preserved section of Springfield, in the quiet hours before dawn, and stood outside his house; I have visited the sites in this state where he debated Douglass; I have paid my respects at his tomb. I often appropriate some of his phrases in my writings and sermons; case in point, I have co-opted that famous phrase, “the better angels of our nature.” I doubt that he would mind; he once said that no one ever offended another by flattery.

William Ellery Channing once wrote, in reference to John Milton that “sometimes a single word or phrase, spoken by genius, carries far into the heart.” So it is with Lincoln. Much of what he wrote is hailed as classic American Literature; his second inaugural address is practically revered among speech writers, and his Gettysburg address has been hailed as one of the most eloquent expressions of the ideal of democracy. As an aside, I will mention that Lincoln borrowed his famous finale to that address, the phrase “of the people, for the people, and by the people” from a sermon given by Theodore Parker. At least, that is considered the gospel truth among many UUs.

Surely, Lincoln did not regard himself as a theologian. In his mature years, he did not publish anything resembling a theological treatise. According to several of his friends, the young

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Lincoln was inspired by Thomas Paine to write a book that denied the divinity of Jesus. But according to the story, that book was deliberately burned to protect his political ambitions. Whether that story is true or not, it is a matter of record that Lincoln shared his religious thoughts discretely, to a few intimates. He would probably be embarrassed by the scrutiny we give to every conceivable facet of his life and character. And yet, we are still fascinated by what we find. So, we revisit his speeches, letters and the recollections by friends & associates – and there we meet an unmistakably devout religious spirit.

Lincoln was complex. His private faith evolved, and grew, as tragedy singed his life. He had a conviction that there was a divine reality that transcended us all. He was well versed in the Hebrew & Christian Scriptures and could freely quote them. But he was not a Trinitarian Christian. Mary Todd Lincoln wrote, “Mr. Lincoln had no hope, and no faith, in the usual acceptance of those words.” Elsewhere, Mrs. Lincoln recorded, Mr. Lincoln’s maxim and philosophy were, “What is to be, will be, and no prayers of ours can arrest the decree. He never joined any church. He was a religious man always, I think, but was not a technical Christian.”

Writing to Judge Wakefield, after his son Willie died, Lincoln himself wrote, “My earlier views on the unsoundness of the Christian scheme of salvation and the human origin of the scriptures, have become clearer and stronger with advancing years and I see no reason for thinking I shall ever change them.”

He did not pretend to understand the will of God; as a result, he had little patience for those who presumed to speak for God. One famous incident took place when a delegation of clergy visited him in the oval office. “I am approached,” he said, “with the most opposite opinions and advice, and that by religious men, who are equally certain that they represent the divine will. I hope it will not be irreverent got me to say that if it is probable that God would reveal His will to others, on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed that He would reveal it directly to me. These are not, however, the days of miracles ... I must study the plain, physical facts of the case, ascertain what is possible, and learn what appears to be wise and right.”

Lincoln trusted that if he acted in accordance to what was right, that right would make right. He believed in dreams and in destiny. Some biographers characterize him – at least towards the end of his life -- as a mystic. Two decades after his death, one editor wrote, He was at first a writing infidel of the school of Paine and Volney, and afterwards, a talking infidel of the school of Parker and Channing.”

But that spirit does not exist in a vacuum – complicating matters, shortly after his death, some biographers deliberately began to miscast Lincoln as a devout Christian for posterity’s sake. Equally important, much religious folklore has colored Lincoln’s faith and life. Here was Abraham, father of two nations – north and south, free and enslaved. Here was Moses, the man who emancipated the slaves from their bondage and showed them the promised land. Here too was a modern messiah, murdered on Good Friday, whose blood was shed as a final act of atonement for every tear and every drop of blood shed by generations of slaves. As a result, historians and churches have been battling for Lincoln’s soul ever since.

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I suspect that Lincoln is one of those characters, like Jesus, who is often recast in the likeness of the speaker. So it is with the great; many have been students of Lincoln. Most politicians praise him; even Adolph Hitler was an admirer of Lincoln; he studied Lincoln's rhetoric and his conduct of the Civil War – that is, once Hitler was persuaded that his first name, Abraham, and his dark complexion, were not the result of Jewish heritage.

Let me ask the basic question, what is religion? My answer is that religion is the search for it is a path for fundamental truth and profound meaning – in particular, what is the relationship between the individual and the community, and the individual and what she/he perceives as the “ultimate reality of the universe.”

Most people embrace the particular religious tradition into which they are born. In any given tradition, the faithful are taught to revere a particular interpretation of its sacred scriptures, to observe its rituals and partake of its sacraments and above all else, to embrace its scheme of salvation. Many, if not most, will draw a sharp distinction between what is holy and what is profane; who is to be saved and who is to be lost.

But we are not just members of a specific tradition. We are also citizens of a particular nation, with its unique institutions. Every person on the planet shares dual fellowship in two religions, one sacred, the other, secular. And this creates a tremendous tension.

. In many parts of the world, the line of demarcation between church and state are blurred, for the state appropriates the language, symbols and power of the sacred to ensure its stability. According to a study conducted in 2001 by an institution called Freedom House, of the 195 countries in the world, only six had full religious freedom – Estonia, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United States. This statistic reveals that the great mass of living humanity has a different perception and/or expectation of the fusion of religion and the state. In some countries, the head of state is de facto the head of the nation's religion; which is not to say that all citizens take it to heart. But consider the use of the Christian cross on various flags – the union jack, a good example – or that the flags of many Islamic nations are emblazoned with not only the crescent moon but also with verses from the Qu'ran. Likewise consider the power that prominent religious leaders have on political decisions, and the power of religious courts to punish, maim and kill.

Yet I firmly believe that in this country there is such a thing as a civil religion. Many authors, such as Martin Marty and Sydney Mead, subscribe to the view that this nation fosters a “religion of democracy.” Some, mindful of the inherent tensions between this religion and the particular religions that agitate for influence within the nation, refer to the American democracy as “the lively experiment.” Its most basic scriptures are the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; its priests are every lawyer and every legislator who serve the public interest. Its evangelists include Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Its temples are every courthouse and every state house; its shrines, every patriot grave and every battlefield; its symbol, the flag; its prayer, the pledge of allegiance; its hymns, the national anthem and My Country 'Tis of Thee. Its chief sacraments

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are voting and serving on a jury. And, perhaps most importantly, its ultimate promise is liberty and justice for all.

Some will argue that this is a Christian nation, founded on so called Christian virtues. I would challenge that assumption and suggest rather that even in the very beginning, this nation was founded on principles of the Enlightenment, in particular, that of reason and of law. And yet, there is much ambiguity. In the Declaration of Independence, for example, reference is made to the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God. These are not necessarily the same thing; nor are they descriptive of the God of any one tradition. But they were loath to break with their traditions. Often, therefore, the framers of this democracy deliberately used religious language to invest their vision with power and authority. As a result, the Constitution bears two dates: "the 17th day of September in the Year of Our Lord one thousand and eighty seven and of the independence of the United States of America the Twelfth." One is a religious reference, the other, a reference to "the new secular order."

This ambiguity has been handed down to us. This past week, I surveyed about 15 different Presidential inaugural addresses, from George Washington to George W. Bush. According to Marty, "in a nation without a monarchy, the president acquires kind of a priestly role which is easily overdone." This past week, I have read a dozen or more presidential inaugural addresses, from George Washington to George Bush – and truly, every one of these addresses reveals a tapestry of religiosity and politics woven fine. As I expected, each newly initiated President articulates the American creed. Typically, they weave together references to the eternal and speak of destiny. Without exception, they ask for the blessing of the eternal and give a list of the virtues of civil religion: one recent example, the inaugural address of President George Bush in 2001, lists those chief virtues as civility, courage, compassion and character. But of course, if you want to read the classic example that weaves a religious spirit, and a critique, with politics, I refer you to Lincoln's 2nd inaugural.

Lincoln was a devoted believer in the "religion of democracy." What distinguishes his rhetoric from much that mimics his is the air of authenticity; of humility; of humor. When we encounter Lincoln, he seems a modest and moderate man. And his values, if not his theology, is reminiscent of UU principles.

And yet, we speak of the separation of church and state. Some will describe it as a wall, others as a shifting line. I think the latter is more accurate. Or perhaps it is a figment of imagination – an important figment, the last best hope on earth. As you are well aware, there are frequent skirmishes in the homeland between opposing factions as to how far one particular tradition may impose its interpretations on society at large. Several examples: one faction will berate what it calls "activist judges" who support equal civil rights for gays and lesbians yet support a judge who insisted on displaying a 2.6 ton granite monument of the 10 commandments in an Alabama courthouse; factions are sharply divided on the words, "under god" in the pledge of allegiance. Likewise, the different factions skirmish on the appropriateness of vouchers, nativity displays in civic areas, specific religious symbols on water towers, and religious oaths, prayers and mottos at secular events. At times though, it seems, we are on the verge of a 2nd civil war and that the experiment is doomed to fail.

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When this congregation was founded, 51 years ago this week, the people here assembled chose Feb 11th, a Thursday, as the official date of inception for this congregation. Why the 11th, and not the 12th, Lincoln's birthday? My guess is that they were aware that Lincoln had left Springfield for Washington, DC on February 11th, 1861 – the occasion when he delivered his famous “affectionate farewell” speech. Thus, February 11th would mark the anniversary when the person of Lincoln left Springfield forever -- and the date when the spirit of Lincoln returned home.

The dignitaries who spoke at the dedication ceremonies reminded those present that Lincoln himself never belonged to any particular denomination and that the decision to link his name with this congregation carried special significance – and responsibility.

One person recalled that Lincoln had once said, “when any church will inscribe over its altar, as its sole qualification for membership, the Saviour'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 neighbor as thyself,’ that church will I join with all my heart and all my soul.” *The people there assembled evidently believed that Lincoln would approve of the new congregation.*

This sentiment was on the mind of Frederick May Eliot, then President of the American Unitarian Conference. Eliot said, “Organized religion of today, as in the days of Lincoln, devotes too much time to the ‘secondary purpose’ and too little effort to the ‘heart of the matter’ – expressed in Jesus’ two commandments, to love God and man.

If we are to give (Lincoln's name) to a religious society, it must be with a soul searching and indomitable resolve to keep it from ever losing the perspective that puts first things first and keeps secondary things in their proper place.”

These sentiments were echoed in a letter received from Adlai Stevenson, who wrote, “...you bear the name which has become synonymous the world over with the mystical heights of strength and beneficence to which it is possible for the character of an individual human being to rise.”

In their estimation, genuine religion for Lincoln, themselves, and the generations to follow, would avoid creedal statements but look to the gospel revealed by one's character and good works. As we go forward, let us be committed to a future that is inviting; we must do the best that we can to make the world a better place. We are neither saints nor sinners, but human beings – a curious blend of hopes and fears, dreams and visions; in such a process we must proceed as a community that trusts one another. Let us proceed into this venture, let us trust one another, and in particular, be guided by what Lincoln called, “the better angels of our nature.” To the extent that we succeed, we will further the blessings of creation.