

# Lincoln and the Will of God

by Andrew Ferguson

The famed nineteenth-century mystic Nettie Colburn Maynard wasn't a professional writer—her time spent communing with the Next World left little energy for the literary arts—but she did have a gift for salesmanship. So when she authorized the publication of her memoirs in 1891 she chose a title sure to grab the attention of paying customers: *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist?* Lincoln's name in a title has always been catnip to American book buyers, and they made Mrs. Maynard's tell-all a great popular success. It helped, too, that the answer to the title question, spread over nearly two hundred pages of breathless reminiscence, was: You bet.

To a certain kind of reader, the evidence must have seemed overwhelming. Mrs. Maynard recalled that she held her first séance in the White House in December 1862. She was then a young girl, and President Lincoln was there in the Red Parlor, seated across from her. She fell into a trance—"passed under control" is her technical term—and wobbling through the ectoplasm she offered a bit of advice: The president must ignore advisers who were telling him to delay issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. This act, she told him, would prove to be "the mission for which he had been raised up by an overruling Providence."

As we know, Lincoln took her advice, ignored the timid counsel of his Cabinet, and released the proclamation in a matter of days—perhaps, she later suggested, because her words had been delivered, petite though she was, in the booming baritone of Daniel Webster. Her memoir revealed much more, including one Georgetown séance at which President Lincoln was levitated while sitting, chanteuse-like, atop a grand piano.

Nettie and her book are mostly forgotten these days, but her mission lives on. A booster of spiritualism, Nettie considered it vitally important to enlist Lincoln in her cause, even if only posthumously. In other contexts, the Lincoln biographer David Donald has called this ambition "getting right with Lincoln," and since April 1865 it has been pursued by Americans of every imaginable persuasion: Leninists and vivisectionists, pacifists and vegans, gold bugs and free-marketers, imperialists and one-worlders, even Democrats and Republicans—all have tried, at different times and with varying degrees of plausibility, to claim Lincoln as one of their own. For generations, Americans have liked to say they wanted their children to be like Lincoln: principled, resolute, patient, kind. But what we've really wanted is for Lincoln to be like us, whoever we are.

Nowhere has the appropriation been as relentless as in the matters of religion and Lincoln's spiritual life. Mary Baker Eddy claimed the martyred president as an early proponent of Christian Science, though her discovery of Divine Healing came a year after his death. In the early 1900s, the California guru Paramahansa Yogananda announced that Lincoln had once been a yogi in the Himalayas.

Closer to earth, the evangelizing atheist Robert Ingersoll tagged him as a model of the freethinking skeptic, and the founders of the Ethical Culture Society agreed. In the 1920s, Cardinal Mundelein of Chicago asserted that Lincoln—who was reared by Baptists, married by an Episcopalian, and subjected in his adulthood to endless hours sitting in straight-backed pews being preached at by Presbyterians—was nevertheless a man of closeted Catholic faith, who delighted in laying out an altar for Mass whenever his Catholic aunt came to visit.

Not every attempt to enlist Lincoln is far-fetched, of course, and a good deal of energy has been expended in simply trying to figure out what religious convictions Lincoln held, if any. The latest effort in this very long quest comes from Michael Burkheimer, a high school history teacher and author of *100 Essential - Lincoln Books*. His recently published *Lincoln's Christianity* is earnest and careful and as thorough as a book can be that hopes to treat so serpentine a subject in the span of two hundred pages. For the layman and the Lincoln buff alike, it's a useful and reliable compendium of what we know about Lincoln's religious views. If Burkheimer falters here and there, it is in assuming, or perhaps hoping, that we know more about the subject than we do.

But this is an old mistake. Few figures in American history are so tantalizing as Lincoln—so approachable on the one hand and so unreachable on the other; demanding to be understood and impossible to comprehend. The people who knew him best saw it too. Like most great politicians, he had a personal magnetism that drew people to him, invited them into his confidence, entertained them with his humor and charm, all the while leaving his interior life unexposed and his intimate thoughts unexpressed to anyone. “He was the most shut-mouthed man I ever met,” said one of his closest political allies, in a typical comment.

For us, 140 years later, it's even worse, having no experience of Lincoln in the flesh. Yet few who study the man are deterred. There's a vast quarry of testimony and personal reminiscence from his childhood friends, political colleagues, law partners, and family members that historians continue to draw on for their own understanding of Lincoln—and when they do they seldom acknowledge the nearly infinite number of contradictions with which the historical record presents them. This is one reason there are so many Lincolns to be found. The contradictions extend to even the smallest items in his personality.

On the question of his intellectual style, for example, was Lincoln a quick study or a plodder? One friend said Lincoln had told him that he had the equivalent of a photographic memory, reading something once and remembering it forever; another heard him complain that his “mind was like a piece of steel—very hard to scratch anything on it.” In money matters, was he a penny pincher or a spendthrift? Most who knew him and expressed an opinion describe him as tight with money and anxious to collect his legal fees, but there is strong minority testimony that he was indifferent to money altogether. Some children who grew up in his Springfield neighborhood recalled him as a friendly fellow always ready to play and palaver; other neighborhood boys recall an aloof, intimidating presence.

When it comes to a larger and historically more important subject like Lincoln's religion, the problems only ramify. We know that Lincoln attended a Baptist church with his parents as a boy in Kentucky and Indiana, because some church records survive. But from there his religious identity fragments in the conflicting testimony of those who knew him.

One view satisfied the hunger, widespread in the country after his martyrdom, to believe that the president had been a devout and orthodox Christian. Though it was widely known that he never joined a church—he sometimes appeared at the Springfield Presbyterian church where his wife was a member—at least two respected clergymen stepped forward to claim that he was ready to become a member of their congregations before the assassin's bullet interfered with his plans. One particularly influential source was Noah Brooks, a journalist who had befriended Lincoln in Illinois during the 1850s, followed him to Washington, visited with him frequently at the White House, and had been appointed Lincoln's secretary shortly before the assassination. In a bestselling memoir, Brooks confirmed what many wanted to believe: Lincoln, he said, “talked always of Christ, his cross, his atonement” and drew comfort from—and these words, Brooks said, were Lincoln's own—“the hope of blessed immortality through Jesus Christ.”

Another clergyman who knew the Lincoln family confirmed Brooks' account of Lincoln's orthodox Christianity and added a piquant detail: his last words to Mary Lincoln that night at Ford's Theater, which the clergyman heard from Mrs. Lincoln herself. Lincoln had reportedly said that, as soon as his presidency was over, "we will visit the Holy Land and see those places hallowed by the footsteps of the Savior." There was, he told his wife (according to the clergyman), "no city on earth he so much desired to see as Jerusalem." Then the bullet hit him. The thought that Lincoln's last word was "Jerusalem" was greatly reassuring to his devout countrymen.

The thought would be much more plausible, however, were such devout sentiments not allegedly spoken while Lincoln was spending the evening of Good Friday watching a trashy play at a slightly disreputable theater. By the time this story gained currency, Mrs. Lincoln herself was safely dead, although she had already given her own thoroughly secular account of the president's last words. She had asked him whether the audience at Ford's might not be offended that he was holding her hand, and he had replied: "No, they will think nothing of it."

Even less well known at the time, though just as dispiriting for the orthodox, was the only interview she ever gave on the subject of her husband. Years later, when it became more widely known, Ingersoll and other freethinkers used Mrs. Lincoln's words to confirm their view of Lincoln as (at least) an agnostic.

The interview came sixteen months after Lincoln's death, when William Herndon, Lincoln's longtime law partner, sat down with Mrs. Lincoln as part of his research for his own Lincoln biography. Herndon had resolved to track down everyone who had ever spent time with his hero, and the notes and letters he collected over the next few years constitute much of what we know about Lincoln's life—and are also the source of many of the canceling contradictions that cast doubt on what we think we know. Herndon made three transcripts of his interview with Mrs. Lincoln, apparently at three different times. In the first, probably jotted down at the time of the interview, Mrs. Lincoln says (whether in response to a specific question or as a random thought, we don't know), "Mr. L had no hope—& no faith in the usual acceptance of those word [ *sic* and *sic*]."

By the third transcript, which Herndon might have put on paper a few months later, Mrs. Lincoln's statement had grown more elaborate: "Mr. Lincoln had no hope & no faith in the usual acceptance of those words: he never joined a Church: he was a religious man always, as I think . . . he was not a technical Christian: he read the bible a good deal about 1864." Mrs. Lincoln presented her husband as a stoic and fatalist, resigned to the futility of human will to alter the course of events, especially by supernatural means. The second of Herndon's three transcripts has her say: "Mr. Lincolns maxim and philosophy was—'What is to be will be and no *cares* of ours can arrest the decree.'" Yet, in the third transcript that Herndon made, the maxim has slightly altered: "No cares (prayers) of ours can arrest the decree." In a marginal note, Herndon wrote that this maxim was a favorite of Lincoln's, which he had often repeated to his partner: "No prayers of ours can arrest the decree."

The subject of prayer is worth dwelling on a moment, to give a sense of the difficulty we face; for the same kind of difficulty accompanies any attempt to pin down Lincoln's attitude toward orthodox creeds, church attendance, and even the Bible—how often he read it, and what he thought he was reading when he did. For a Lincoln buff/historian like Burkholder—for anyone who wants to get at Lincoln's religious life—the historiographical tangle only thickens, even on so simple a question as to whether Lincoln was himself a man given to prayer.

Herndon was a freethinker, and an evangelizing one. He desperately wanted to present a Lincoln who was, like himself, a man too modern and too sophisticated for Christianity, its doctrines and its practices.

In recalling Mrs. Lincoln's use of the word *cares* as *prayers*, he might not have been above tweaking her testimony in a direction more suited to his own purpose.

So Lincoln believed that prayer was futile? Unfortunately for Herndon and the freethinkers, there's plenty of testimony showing us Lincoln in prayer, calling for prayer, extolling the virtues of prayer. One of Lincoln's better known sayings, repeated by presidents for a century or more, is: "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction I had nowhere else to go." The line debuted in one of the first, most thorough, and most popular posthumous biographies, J.G. Holland's *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1866). Holland was a one-time preacher who, no less than Herndon, wanted to offer the public a Lincoln close to his own heart: "eminently a Christian president" moved to save the Union by his faith in Christ. But Holland gives us no hint as to when Lincoln uncorked this famous sentence or who might have heard him say it.

Much of the testimony about Lincoln's prayerful nature is similarly shaky. Noah Brooks said Lincoln prayed daily, but we don't know whether Lincoln told him this or whether Brooks simply willed it into a fact by asserting it. Lincoln apparently remarked on the efficacy of prayer to a number of visiting divines and elderly Christian women. But several of these remarks ("If there were more praying and less swearing, it would be better for our country," his son's nanny quoted him saying) have the flavor of a politician's platitude.

His formal calls for national days of prayer and thanksgiving are often cited too, rich as they are in religious imagery and feeling. For example: "I invite the People of the United States to assemble on that occasion in their customary places of worship, and in the forms approved by their own consciences, render the homage due to the Divine Majesty, for the wonderful things he has done in the Nation's behalf, and invoke the influence of His Holy Spirit to subdue the anger, which has produced, and so long sustained, a needless and cruel rebellion, to change the hearts of the insurgents."

Lincoln, however, didn't write the proclamations himself. They were the work of various aides and - Cabinet members, and Lincoln affixed his signature to them as he might to a diplomatic protocol. Indeed, the grandiloquent language of the thanksgiving proclamations is so far from his customary tone of cool logic and ironic detachment that they merely remind the reader of how out of character religious effusion was for the Lincoln we know from the letters and speeches he did write. Certainly many friends testified that they never heard Lincoln speak of prayer—and that, moreover, the devotion that prayer requires seemed alien to his nature. That nature these friends understood to be literal-minded, earthbound, empirical, skeptical, legalistic.

But, again, the complications pile up, for it turns out that we today can know things about Lincoln's inner nature that his friends did not. Lincoln never kept a diary, but he wrote constantly, grabbing scraps of paper to use as repositories of unfinished ideas and knotty intuitions that he shared with no one else. Several of these fragments survive.

One of them reveals, for instance, that Herndon, who so wanted to find in Lincoln's inner self a mirror of his own lack of religious faith, got his hero wrong in telling and demonstrable ways. After a visit to Niagara Falls in 1858, Herndon returned to describe its wonders excitedly to Lincoln, who he knew had visited the Falls ten years before. According to Herndon, Lincoln's response was deflating: "The thing that struck me most forcibly when I saw the Falls was, where in the world did all that water come from?"

"Herndon," the historian Don Fehrenbacher wrote, "treasured this remark as convincing evidence that Lincoln had no eye for the beauty and grandeur of nature." But Lincoln, we now know, was making a joke at Herndon's expense. What Herndon didn't know was that, after his own visit to the Falls, Lincoln

had been moved to write an extraordinary note to himself, apparently for his eyes only. The note, as it's come down to us, is a single page, incomplete and trailing off in mid-sentence. It wasn't discovered until after his death and wasn't made public for another thirty years. In it we hear Lincoln talking to himself.

"Niagara Falls!" it begins. "By what mysterious power," Lincoln wonders, "is it that millions and millions are drawn to gaze upon Niagara Falls? There is no mystery about the thing itself."

No mystery? It quickly becomes apparent that this dismissive remark is intended ironically. Niagara, to Lincoln, is nothing if not mysterious. He ticks off the ways in which men have used scientific means to dispense with the mystery of so great a wonder. Geologists will determine the angle of the water's plunge, and measure the volume of the water, and calculate the speed with which it passes over the precipice. "Yet this is really a very small part of that world's wonder." Other scientists and philosophers will admire Niagara's role in the purely physical process of the water cycle: "This vast amount of water, constantly pouring down, is supplied by an equal amount constantly lifted up by the sun"—and so on and so on.

And yet, "still there is more" to Niagara, much more to this wonder of the world—something inexhaustible, he writes, some immensity that human reason can't explain or quantify or otherwise bottle up and before which men are powerless. What appears as "no mystery" to the literal-minded man, to the skeptic, is mysterious indeed. Lincoln, even in speaking to himself, is mute as to what that mystery might be. The fragment is the work of a man suffused with awe, awakening to a slightly uncomfortable appreciation for the limits of human understanding. It is a religious rumination, and, as far as we can trace it, the feeling it expresses would only grow as Lincoln himself grew older.

From fifteen years later, we have another, much better known fragment. Like the Niagara note, Lincoln wrote this to himself and stashed it away. It too reveals Lincoln's religious sense but in a different, more profound phase. From an awed appreciation of the physical world, it had deepened into a much darker apprehension of a Providence that haunts human affairs. The catalyst for this change, of course, was the Civil War—the torrent of suffering and blood that threatened to destroy the country and that Lincoln himself had played a part in unleashing. His secretaries, who found the scrap among his private papers, dated it September 1862, though it could have been written later. They called it "Meditation on the Divine Will."

It is written with a logician's care, in the categories of a lawyer. "The will of God prevails," it begins. "In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God can not be *for* and *against* the same thing at the same time."

Yet the bloody back-and-forth of the war gives no hint as to which of the two parties God has chosen to side with. That very inconclusiveness raises the terrible possibility that God is on neither side—or, rather, that God is simply in favor of the war itself for reasons unknowable. "I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet." The will of God, after all, prevails; his sovereignty, Lincoln has come to believe, is the necessary condition of human affairs. "He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds."

Note the bloodless phrasing: "I am almost ready to say this is probably true." *Almost . . . probably*. It is the expression of a cautious, legalistic mind being shaken up—confronting something too large to fit the intellectual compartments he has used to understand experience. But he is also being led, or leading himself, to a definite conclusion: This is no ordinary war, because this is no ordinary country.

The question of why Providence should have willed such a calamity is foreshadowed in one final fragment to consider, written (most likely) in the early days of the war. In it Lincoln plays with the figure from Proverbs 25:11: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.”

To Lincoln, the image illuminates the distinction between the picture and the frame, between a thing contained and that which contains it. In his reading, the Union is the frame that contains the golden principle: the proposition of liberty and equality—that all men are created equal—advanced by the Declaration of Independence. “The assertion of that *principle*, at *that time* [of the Revolution], was *the* word, ‘*fitly spoken*’ which has proved an ‘apple of gold’ to us. The *Union*, and the *Constitution*, are the *picture* of *silver*, subsequently framed around it. The picture was made, not to *conceal*, or *destroy* the apple; but to *adorn*, and *preserve* it. The *picture* was made *for* the apple—*not* the apple for the picture.”

Read together, the fragments show Lincoln’s mind as it matures toward his two greatest utterances, the fullest expressions of his most fundamental ideas. These are, of course, the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural. They are not merely works of statecraft but homilies in a civil religion of his own devising, steeped in the cadences and rhetoric of the King James Bible. They were the consequence of Lincoln’s deepest contemplation and belief, arrived at with some care and (we may suppose) discomfort. At Gettysburg, Lincoln explained why the country—the Union—was worth preserving. It was not any Union that was being preserved, it was a particular kind of Union: a Union dedicated to a timeless proposition that existed before the Union was even conceived.

The war would determine whether such a proposition could be safely entrusted to human institutions. By the time of his Second Inaugural, with the end of the war in sight and the preservation of the Union a near certainty, he could say with confidence that the proposition had survived. And this “fundamental and astounding” conclusion had come about under the watchful and unfathomable eye of a Providence whose ways are ultimately beyond explanation but “whose judgments are true and righteous altogether.”

This is what we know for certain of Lincoln’s religion. After all the informed speculation and historical sleuthing, the rakings of historiography, the mountains of testimony and reminiscence and wishful thinking pointing in one direction and another, the written record that this “shut-mouthed man” himself left us will have to be sufficient.

“I don’t know anything about Lincoln’s religion,” a longtime friend, David Davis, remarked after Lincoln’s death, “and I don’t believe anybody knows anything about it.” Though Davis’ skepticism should give pause to more historians than it has, he overstated the case. We will never know for sure whether Lincoln held orthodox Christian beliefs, whether he believed in the Trinity, the divinity of Christ or his resurrection, the life everlasting, the forgiveness of sins, the inerrant word of God as revealed in the Old Testament or the New.

But perhaps the country has benefited from not knowing. The uncertainty has made Lincoln our common property, whoever we are, from Robert Ingersoll to Cardinal Mundelein to Nettie Maynard. It may be indeed that Lincoln’s is the only kind of religious expression that will travel in a free country like ours. His religion has lasted a century and a half and has appealed to believers of all kinds, and to skeptics too, exactly because of its generality. Yet it still means something definable and concrete: The country, Lincoln believed, is the carrier of a precious cargo, a proposition that is the timeless human truth, and the survival of this principle will always be of providential importance. We assent to Lincoln’s creed, wide open as it is, when we think of ourselves as Americans.

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USED BY PERMISSION. ANDREW FERGUSON *is senior editor of the Weekly Standard and author of Land of Lincoln: Adventures in Abe's America (Atlantic Monthly Press).*