

The Religious Views of Abraham Lincoln

For the past 5 years I have been writing *The Secret War Diaries of Abraham Lincoln – Including His Recurring Dreams*. It is a four-volume work which runs from January of 1860 to his assassination in April of 1865.

Lincoln died intestate; he left no will. He also wrote no diaries. I therefore decided to write one for him. Each day I try to make a diary entry or two. It is a work of pure fiction. I rely heavily upon a book called, “Lincoln Day by Day,” which is a chronology from 1809 until his death. It carefully records daily events in the 16th president’s life. It tells who he meets with: items discussed, treaties signed, telegrams and letters sent to friends, editors, politicians and generals, receptions attended, troop inspections and Navy yard visits taken, Cabinet meetings attended and endless streams of visitors who sought jobs or pardons, etc.

For each diary entry I also provide “Author’s notes,” which are historic facts related to the diary entry. Thus, I describe the book as Faction, i.e. part fact and part fiction.

Many Lincoln scholars believe he was an enlightened Deist, like many of the Founding Fathers. Webster defines a Deist as: one who believes in the existence of a God on the evidence of reason and nature only, with rejection of supernatural revelation. The bloody crucible of the Civil War revealed a president who believed in a justice-seeking God, who might intervene in history, even if His intentions were impossible to read.

Lincoln was frequently visited by religious individuals, and by delegations of religious leaders of many beliefs, including Quakers. Before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, many groups of ministers were received by him who urged him to free the slaves. He was close to New York’s Archbishop John Hughes and encouraged him while visiting European capitals to speak to important religious and political leaders on behalf of the Union cause. Lincoln was active in appointing Chaplains and later Rabbis to serve the troops. During the Civil War 117 Union and 41 Confederate chaplains died in battle.

Although some historians, and his law partner, William Herndon have described President Lincoln as an atheist, or as an agnostic, or as one who did not attend church, the fact is that Lincoln and his family did attend a church when he lived in Springfield, Illinois, and later, when he was president. Mary Lincoln, on a tour of Scotland in 1870 wrote to Dr. Smith their pastor in Illinois complaining

about the “fearful ideas” and “falsehoods” that Herndon had put into play. She described her husband as a man who “never took the Lord’s name in vain, who always read his Bible diligently, who never failed to reply to God’s promises and looked upon him for protection.” She said that when her son Willie died, he turned his heart to Christ.”

Lincoln grew up in a religiously conservative Baptist family in the Northern Bible Belt. His people were “Hardshell” or “Primitive” Baptists when they worshipped at the Little Pigeon Church near Lincoln City, Indiana in 1823. When they then moved to New Salem, there were no churches. They lived there from 1831 to 1837 when they left for Springfield.

In his entire life, he had roughly only one year of formal education. He was skeptical of organized religion as a young man, and sometimes ridiculed revivalists. At the same time, he regularly read the family Bible, which was the King James Version. He could quote extensively from it from memory. While in the White House he included many references to the Almighty in his writings, but seldom referred to Jesus Christ.

James Adams, an Illinois lawyer who knew Lincoln well, labeled him a Deist. In 1834, Lincoln reportedly wrote an essay challenging orthodox Christianity modeled on Paine’s “Age of Reason”. A friend supposedly burned it to protect him from ridicule. Mark Noll, an historian at Notre Dame, believes he was probably a Universalist, who believed in the eventual salvation of all people.

In 1843, when he failed to win the Whig Party nomination for Congress, Lincoln said, “It was everywhere contended that no Christian ought to go for me, because I belonged to no church. My reputation levied a tax of considerable per cent upon my strength throughout the religious community.”

Lincoln claimed at the time that “he never denied the truth of the scriptures and that he had never spoken with an intentional disrespect of religion.”

In 1846, during his run for the House of Representatives, he issued a handbill stating that he had “never denied the truth of the scriptures.” He was then opposed by the revivalist, Peter Cartwright. At one of Cartwright’s meetings, Cartwright asked that those who intended to go to heaven, rise. Then he asked those who intended to go to hell, rise. Lincoln, who was in attendance, didn’t stand for either option. When asked by Cartwright “Where do you intend to go?” Lincoln replied, “I did not come here with the idea of being singled out, but since

you ask, I will reply with equal candor, I intend to go to Congress.” He won the election and served one term.

In 1851, after the death of his 3-year old son Edward, he and Mary started attending Presbyterian services in Springfield. He continued his church-going ways when elected. He favored Old School Presbyterianism, a God-in-charge brand of Christianity and rejected the New Revivalism, which supported abolition.

The elders of his church, the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, invited him to deliver a lecture on the veracity of the Bible to the congregation. Elder Lewis of the church said, “It was the ablest defense of the Bible ever uttered from that pulpit.”

The church later retained him in a case that involved a church organ purchased from another church. It was in a church court. He won the case. His pastor, Dr. James Smith said Lincoln had encountered a book, “The Christian’s Defense,” which triggered doubts about Christianity. They discussed the matter at length, and Dr. Smith reported Lincoln’s doubts were shattered after extensive talks.

Lincoln told his brother-in-law, Ninian Edwards, that he had read a book by Dr. Smith on the evidences of Christianity and was convinced of the truth of the Christian religion.

Jesse Fell, a long-time friend of Lincoln, who had proposed the Lincoln and Douglas debates, said, “The president seldom communicated his views on religion. They were not orthodox. On the “innate depravity of man, the character and office of the great head of the church, the atonement, the infallibility of the written revelation, miracles, future rewards and punishments and many other subjects, he held opinions utterly at variance with what are usually taught in church.”

He opposed slavery all his life. He had observed it in practice in New Orleans as a young man, and never forgot the cruelty he observed there. He also abhorred anti-Semitism and criticized generals Grant and Sherman for their mistreatment of Jewish traders. The generals had taken disciplinary actions that banned Jews, as a class, from certain occupied areas under their control. He appointed Jewish Rabbis to serve in Army units with Jewish soldiers, and Catholic priests to serve in predominantly Irish Catholic regiments.

When president, he attended the First Presbyterian Church on 7th Street where he rented pew No. 20 each year for \$50. It is still there; the seventh row

from the front on the left side. His pew still has the original brass marker with Lincoln's name on it. In 1950, a Navy commodore donated a beautiful stained-glass window to the church. It depicts Lincoln with the pastor and a freed slave. Lincoln is flanked by Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross, and Florence Nightingale, who advised Lincoln government on the organization of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, which aided wounded soldiers and sailors.

The Chaplain of the Senate, Phineas Gurley and Mary Todd Lincoln claimed the president believed in Christ in the religious sense, whereas his law partner, William Herndon and his bodyguard, Ward Hill Lamon rejected the idea that he was a believing Christian. Herndon reported that Lincoln admired the deists Thomas Paine and Voltaire, and that he was interested in Darwin's theories of evolution.

It is my view that he was equally familiar with the Old Testament's teachings as those of the New Testament. He was content with the concept of an all-powerful God who shaped events, and he often expressed those beliefs in major speeches.

When pressured by abolitionists to end slavery, they told him that he should act when he felt "moved by the Spirit to do justice to the African -Americans in bondage." He would then tell them that "when he heard the Lord speak to him on the subject, he would act." But he admitted that, to date, he had not heard such a command being sent specifically to him from above. He rejected the idea that God was on the Union side or on the Confederate side.

In 1902, when Philosopher William James was lecturing at the University of Edinburgh, he claimed that Lincoln intensified his belief in God's omnipotence during the Civil War, even as he remained "unchurched" in his commitment to the sacraments. James believed that Mary Lincoln, who at the beginning of her life was more conventional in spiritual matters, had changed from Presbyterianism to briefly Episcopalianism, and then to spiritualism following her son Willie's death. Mary Lincoln participated in seances in which the dead could be contacted. Lincoln believed such notions to be bunk, but humored his wife who often attended them at the White House. When Willie died in 1862, he said, "May God live in all. He was too good for this earth. The good Lord has called him home. I know that he is much better off in Heaven." He rarely mentioned heaven or hell.

In his First Inaugural Address, when he spoke of the national crisis of secession he said, “Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has never yet forsaken this favored land are still competent to adjust in the best way all our present difficulty.” He rarely ever used the word, “Christianity” in any of his speeches.

In September of 1862 he announced to his Cabinet his decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation after the Union victory at Antietam. He said he was doing so because he was honoring a promise, he’d made to God in exchange for a significant battlefield win. He told them that “God had decided this question in favor of the slave.” Earlier in that year he had written a memo titled, “Meditation on the Divine Will,” which he never published. In it, he said that he wrote that “God could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.”

After the Union victory at Gettysburg, he issued the first federally mandated Thanksgiving Day. He wrote, “No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who while dealing with us in anger for our sins hath never the less remembered mercy.” He asked that the day be one of “Praise to our beneficent Father, who dwelleth in the heavens.” Hardly the words of an agnostic or atheist.

As an Illinois state legislator, Lincoln opposed naming Christmas as an official public holiday, and also did so as president. He believed Christmas and Easter should be privately celebrated as religious Holy Days. Lincoln favored the strict separation of church and state. When asked to remove a pastor from his church for expressing pro-Southern sympathies, he refused to interfere in church matters. Christmas would become a federal holiday on June 27, 1870 when President Ulysses S. Grant signed the law making it official.

In the Autumn of 1864, Lincoln wrote to Mrs. Lydia Bixby, a widow who had lost five sons in the war. He penned, “I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word which should attempt to beguile you from the loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom. Yours very sincerely and respectfully. A. Lincoln.”

In his Second Inaugural Address, delivered just a month before his assassination, he said, “Both North and South read the same Bible, and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any man 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.” He concluded, “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 up by the bond-man’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.” He closed saying, “With malice toward none, charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphan to do all we can which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.”

I believe that a man, who did not believe strongly in God, could not have delivered those words.

The second Inaugural, although only 800 words long mentioned God 14 times, gives four Biblical allusions and three invocations of prayer. Ron White, author of *A. Lincoln: A Biography* writes that Lincoln’s God mentions are not ornamental but part and parcel of the strength of his argument.” White believes he was, “a theological but not a religious man.”

In his most famous speech, at the cemetery at Gettysburg he hoped that the nation, “under God” would have a new birth of freedom.

In 1864 when former slaves in Maryland presented him with a Bible, he said, “It is the best gift God has given to man. All the good Saviour gave to the world was communicated through this book.” He seldom used the word, Savior.

On April 22, 1864 Lincoln signed the Mint Act, which authorized the U.S. Mint to imprint the words, In God We Trust for the first time on U.S. coins. The two cent coin was the first to display the motto.

In my opinion, Lincoln was a politically astute intellectual, with little formal education, who had many unresolved doubts about Christ, God the Father and the

concept of the Holy Trinity. They were life-long, unresolved uncertainties that held until his assassination. He was a shrewd man of his word, a man of absolute honesty and truth. I believe he prayed for divine guidance in his decision-making, yet made his military and political decisions in the full realization that he did so without the benefit of God's direct guidance. He admitted to Quakers, and many others who implored him to take certain actions "in accordance with what he perceived to be God's Will," that he sought it, but had never found it. He was a pragmatic realist who relied upon his folksy wisdom and conscience as best he could. As a gifted country lawyer, he relied upon the verifiable facts of every case he ever tried. I seriously doubt he believed in miracles.

In my diary writings, I have taken the liberty of suggesting that Lincoln frequently dreamed of living in the time of Christ, because he would have liked to have defended him as an attorney in the Roman and Jewish courts at the time of his trials and ultimate crucifixion. I have Lincoln referring to specific legal errors committed by those who tried Christ. He points out that, under Jewish law, defendants were given no lawyers to defend them. He reasons that Christ's arrest was illegal because they came for him with lanterns and torches. The arrest was therefore illegal, for it violated Hebrew law, which had an inflexible rule that no proceedings, from arrest to conviction in a capital case could take place after sundown. Second, it was affected through the agency of a traitor and an informer, which was also in violation of the Mosaic Code and Rabbinical rules thereon. (Judas the informer was a paid traitor.)

The Bible that Lincoln used for his 1861 inauguration is an Oxford University Press edition published in 1853. It has 1,280 pages and is small in size, measuring 4 inches wide by 1.75 inches thick. It is bound in burgundy red velvet with gilt edges. When that event took place, his personal Bible had not arrived from Springfield, Illinois. In 1928, Mary Eunice Harland, the widow of his oldest son, Robert Todd Lincoln, donated the inaugural bible to the Library of Congress. It contained markers at the 31st chapter of Deuteronomy and the fourth chapter of the book of Hosea. President Barack Obama chose that same Bible to use at his historic inaugurations of 2009 and 2013.

Abraham Lincoln deserves to be studied in our classrooms, particularly when our national traditions are being seriously challenged. He stood for truth, honesty and devotion to the teachings of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. He is my favorite president.

In Pinehurst, the North – South Amateur Golf Tournament has been played regularly since 1901 for men and 1903 for women. It it was established 36 years after the end of the Civil War when regional animosities still festered. The Tufts family created the tournament so that Northern golfers could get to know Southern players in an atmosphere of good sportsmanship, harmony and friendship. In the true spirit of Lincoln.