

“Lincoln: Can We Claim Him?”  
February 12, 2012

The Reading

The reading is by the Reverend Martin Woulfe, minister serving the Abraham Lincoln Unitarian Universalist Church in Springfield, Illinois. It is from Woulfe’s Prairie Group paper of 2006 titled “Abraham Lincoln: The Man and His Times.”

Here begins the reading.

[In the late 1830s, slavery] . . . was not the only topic on the minds of Lincoln’s contemporaries. When not following the political debates and raucous campaigns of the day, many people were drawn to religion as either a comfort or an intriguing topic of discussion. Religious freedom seemed to be in the ascendant . . . . Across America, denominations built impressive churches and schools in established communities while itinerant evangelical preachers, both liberal and conservative, roamed the prairies. Methodism and Universalism in particular were rapidly gaining adherents . . . (pg. 5).

During this period, Lincoln formed his partnership with William Herndon . . . . When not discussing pending cases, the two men often discussed politics and religion. Herndon introduced Lincoln to the writings of [Unitarian ministers] William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker.

There was much to discuss. This period [of the early 1840s] witnessed significant shifts within the nation’s consciousness and within liberal religion . . . . [By 1841] . . . the Reverend William Ellery Channing released his blistering attack against slavery . . . [as] a “painful and repulsive” evil . . . . During that same year, Theodore Parker preached . . . his “On the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” which ignited a new controversy between first and second generations of Unitarians . . . (pp. 7-8).

Perhaps because religious conventions were being forcibly challenged, the orthodox [Christians] wasted no time in counterattacking, especially in politics. The election campaign of 1846 [for Congress] was a prime example. Lincoln . . . found himself running against the Rev. Peter Cartwright . . . .

It was during this campaign that Cartwright spread the report that Lincoln was an infidel. It was well known that Lincoln generally remained aloof from churches . . . . Nonetheless, it was true that Lincoln had to stoutly defend his religious views to the voters. Combating the accusation that he was an infidel, Lincoln wrote [in 1846] the following statement “regarding a charge that in substance I am an open scoffer at Christianity . . . .”

That I am not a member of any Christian church, is true; but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular.

Furthermore, wrote Lincoln, “I do not think that I could myself, be brought to support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion. Leaving the higher matter of eternal consequences, between him and his Maker, I still do not think any man has the right thus to insult the feelings, and injure the morals, of the community in which he may live” (pp.10-11).

Here ends the reading.

“Lincoln: Can We Claim Him?”

by

The Reverend William Haney

February 12, 2012

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Amado, Arizona

At the risk of being redundant, I may have told this story to some of you before. When I was practicing architecture in Santa Fe, I became acquainted with a number of leaders of the various Pueblos north and south of the city. The firm did quite a lot of work with the Pueblos. Some leaders became close friends. One was Walter Dashenoe. He was elected Governor by his clan at the Santa Clara Pueblo north of Santa Fe. I was invited to attend the celebration of his installation. At his house members of the Pueblo would extend best wishes to him and make an offering of corn meal to a small altar-like place in a corner of the living room. While I was there, Walter motioned to me to follow him into an adjoining room. There, he picked up a dark walking stick with a silver cap head. He told me to look at the silver head. There, inscribed was the signature, “Abraham Lincoln.” This “Lincoln Cane” was presented by the President to all of the Pueblos as a part of the Treaty between each Pueblo and the United States of America. Tony Hillerman speaks of this cane in one of his novels. The “Lincoln Cane” is passed down from Governor to Governor of every Pueblo from the time of Lincoln’s presidency.

That presidency was the most trying of any in the nation’s history. Lincoln was both hero and villain. He was committed to holding the Union together at all costs. Although he was initially somewhat opposed to slavery, he felt the course of that demonic institution would eventually play itself out. He felt the opening of the West to farms rather than plantations would out-compete slavery. His interest was in the ambition and enterprise of the free farmer to eventually eliminate the need for slaves strictly as an economic factor. The holder of slaves in the South did not see it that way. As each region became settled in the West, without a clear national policy toward slavery, local strife was initiated. This was particularly the case with Missouri and Kansas as expansion crossed the Mississippi River. The pro-slavery migrants from the southern states came into direct conflict with anti-slavery migrants from the northeast and immigrants from Germany. The families of Anheuser, Busch, Miller, Pabst and others were adamantly opposed to slavery, America’s “Original Sin.” Violent competition ensued whether a State would enter the Union either “free” or “slave.”

In 1855 the Territory of Kansas held an election to determine whether it would be “free” or “slave.” So-called “Border Ruffians” from Missouri crossed the line and cast illegal votes in favor of Kansas being a “slave” State. A pro-slavery legislature was elected and anti-slavery legislators were expelled from office. Outraged people gathered in the town of Lawrence, which was founded by Unitarians. Demanding their own Constitutional Convention, they proclaimed the pro-slavery legislature illegal and petitioned the United States government to admit Kansas as a “free state.” That did not end the violence. A former school teacher, Quantrill led a massacre of the townspeople of Lawrence. Vicious guerrilla warfare spread through Missouri and Kansas.

Beginning in the early 1850s leading up to the violence west of the Mississippi River, Abraham Lincoln was settling into family life and the practice of law in Springfield, Illinois. No longer in the Congress, his law practice prospered and he was able to remodel the house he and Mary Todd Lincoln shared with their forming family. His wife joined the First Presbyterian Church and the family rented a pew – but Lincoln rarely attended. Still involved in State politics as a Whig, after Unitarian Horace Greeley’s visit to Springfield, Lincoln and his law partner, Unitarian William Herndon joined the Republican Party. By this time Lincoln was recognized one of the town’s leading citizens. His unsuccessful bid for the seat in the United States Senate against Stephen Douglas brought him national attention in 1858. Due to a split of votes between Chase and Seward at the Republican Convention in Chicago, Lincoln against all odds became the nominee for President. With a split within the Democratic Party, Lincoln won the presidential election. Immediately after the election, word spread of pending secessions. Lincoln’s victory had a high cost. His popularity was limited. The Northern States cast a quarter million more votes against him than did the entire South. The die was cast. From South Carolina:

We, therefore, the people of South Carolina, by our delegates in Convention assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, have solemnly declared that the Union heretofore existing between this State and the other States of North America is dissolved.

Lincoln had no choice: to preserve the Union. Civil war broke out.

In the decade before the war while Lincoln was attending to his professional and political future, Universalist minister Levi C. Martin arrived in Springfield in 1851. He established the First Universalist Church, which would “meet at the Representative Hall of the State House to organize an association and succinctly added that ‘Preaching and lecture to follow at the usual hours’” The Universalist presence in Illinois also included in 1851 the founding of the Illinois Liberal Institute in Galesburg, some 90 miles northwest of Springfield. A few years later the new school was renamed Lombard College and relocated to Chicago; and still later merged with the Unitarian Meadville Theological School. Ralph Waldo Emerson appeared in Springfield in early 1852, delivering on three successive nights lectures attended by Lincoln. Later, due to Lincoln’s law partner William Herndon’s insistence, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker arrived in Springfield to deliver a series of lectures titled “The Progressive Development of Mankind.” Although there is no documentation, it is probable that he met Parker since it is clear Lincoln was in Springfield at that time. When Lincoln left Springfield for Washington as newly elected President, Herndon gave him a collection of Theodore Parker’s sermons. Contained within this collection was a sermon with a unique phrasing that Lincoln used *verbatim*: a “government of the people, by the people and for the people.” To what extent our Unitarian and Universalist faith traditions influenced Abraham Lincoln is difficult to reveal.

Lincoln’s religious values are difficult to expose. Lincoln leaving his Calvinist Baptist early background gave him the ability to see through pious superficialities. He saw the ambiguity in society, calling Americans the “almost chosen people.” A number of Christian denominations claim him – and for good reason. During the 1860 presidential campaign he depended upon religious groups for support. In Springfield he had initial support from two Presbyterian and one Baptist ministers. He also found the Methodists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians were

at the outset to support him because of his anti-slavery stance. He was able to persuade the Northern Protestant evangelicals for anti-slavery support. His political acumen did not spill over into embracing the theological positions of the denominations or evangelicals. There was always the nagging question whether he was a Christian in the orthodox sense. The answer appears probably not. During his earlier Congressional campaign against the Methodist minister Peter Cartwright an incident occurred. Cartwright was known to combine evangelical preachments with his campaign rhetoric. At one meeting in Springfield, Lincoln showed up and sat in the congregation. In closing the meeting, Cartwright said, "All who desire to go to heaven and give their hearts to God, will stand." With only some standing, he added, "All who do not wish to go to hell will stand." Everyone stood, except Lincoln. Cartwright singled him out, noting that Lincoln did not stand and asked, "May I inquire of you, Mr. Lincoln, where you are going?" Slowly Lincoln rose, saying;

I came here as a respectable listener. I did not know I would be singled out. I believe in treating religious matters with due solemnity. I admit the questions propounded by Brother Cartwright are of great importance. I did not feel called upon to answer as the rest did. Brother Cartwright asks me directly where I am going. I desire to reply with equal directness. I am going to Congress."

The congregation burst out in laughter to the embarrassment of Cartwright. With this kind of humor, it was difficult not to eventually support him.

With the network of sympathetic clergy, Lincoln was able to forge a coalition. As a pragmatist he essentially created a fusion party among Republicans. He was able to bring together Whigs from his former Party affiliation, along with Christian denominational leaders and evangelicals, Unitarians, Universalists, and even some anti-slavery Democrats. In dealing with evangelicals he was able to capture their zeal as pragmatic coalition builders and high minded crusaders. He obviously treated them with respect even though he could not align himself religiously with them, whether liberal or conservative. His engagement with the evangelicals and denomination leaders stemmed from his own sense of faith. According to Richard Carwardine in his book titled *Lincoln: Life of Purpose and Power*, for Lincoln;

First, the Union amounted to more than a glorious experiment in liberty and republicanism and the rebellion [against England] to more than simple treason: the struggle for national destiny resonated beyond the earthbound political sphere. Second, Lincoln learned that in this sanctified struggle [against slavery] between darkness and light he was God's chosen instrument [or at least many prominent clergy told him so]. Third, was Lincoln's belief in Providence which was his term for the Almighty God (pp. 224-225).

Carwardine concludes by pointing out that Lincoln never believed as did the evangelicals in their view of God with Christ as Lord and Savior. In his early religious searching he found Providence to be a predictable ruling force. Once in the White House, according to Carwardine;

Lincoln's Providence now became an active and a more personal God, an intrusive judgmental figure, more mysterious and less predictable than the ruling force it superseded . . . that the Almighty was an all-seeing force in history, ready to dispense retributive justice

on a naturally sinful people and delinquent nation, but also ready to intervene to help human efforts directed towards a righteous end (pp. 225-226).

From this stance as described by the author, this is not entirely Unitarian or Universalist theology. It was, however a means of divine companionship when Lincoln felt isolated and remote from his peers as he pursued the war. In the Reverend Eric Haugan's Prairie Group paper titled "With Malice Toward None, With Charity For All";

Although Lincoln never joined a church, there was still no way to speak in America of equality and politics, which did not involve a congruence to internal principles of right and wrong. Nor did Lincoln hesitate to chart out a path for a political future by reminding people that the future had to be seen, as he said in his second inaugural address, under the dictates of the justice of God and with malice toward none, with charity for all. For Lincoln, moral principle and clarity, no matter what our political persuasion, in the end unites us and all that ensures that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom . . . (pg. 11).

Eventually, America's "Original Sin" of slavery became part of Lincoln's focus for establishing "a new birth of freedom" in the Union.

Lincoln viewed the Union as the protector of Liberty. Although the Constitution substantiated that Union and all liberties, it never addressed the nation's "Original Sin" – slavery. Beginning before his senatorial campaign, he shifted the vision of the nation. This happened in Peoria in 1854 in a debate with Stephen Douglas. Lincoln turned the nation's focus away from the legalism of the Constitution to the moral principles of the Declaration of Independence. Originally addressed as a document proclaiming independence from the tyranny of the English Crown by the hand of slave-holder Thomas Jefferson, himself a Unitarian, Lincoln re-cast that document of political dissent into one of moral unity. Using the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln was able to portray the nation's democratic Republic's story of liberty as a deeper and broader parable.

Prior to the Peoria debate, Lincoln's reference to the Declaration of Independence was only a few times. In 1838 he referred to a "civil religion" founded at the beginning of the nation and set out as "natural law" in the Declaration. Lincoln felt in order to approach the "sin" of slavery there had to be a moral and philosophical grounding. It was not merely a matter of law or Constitutional legalism. The Declaration was his "substitute scripture." It was for him the transcendent ideal upon which the nation should stand. In the Peoria speech, Lincoln said;

Near 80 years ago we began by declaring that all men are created equal. But now, from that beginning, we have rung down to the other declaration, that for some men to enslave others is a sacred right of self-government . . . . Our Republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us purify it. Let us turn and wash it white in the spirit if not the blood of the Revolution . . . . Let us readopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices and policy which harmonize with it. If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union, but we shall have saved it as to make it and keep it forever worthy of the saving.

In the decade of the 1850s Lincoln declared in 127 speeches exclusively against slavery using the Declaration as the moral and philosophical basis.

Is there any way Abraham Lincoln can be claimed to be if not an actual Unitarian Universalist, at least incipiently so? Since there is lack of clarity of Lincoln's own theological and religious position, probably not. He spoke very little overtly about religious matters. Nor can any other orthodox Christian tradition claim him. Lincoln's religious nature remains elusive since his grasp of human nature was such that many can read their own religion into his. What is not elusive is the significant parallel in thinking with Lincoln and Theodore Parker. Through the twenty-year friendship and influence of his Unitarian legal partner, William Herndon, Lincoln became aware of the trials and progressions of the Unitarian faith tradition. His close friend makes it clear there was influence from Parker upon Lincoln, as do some biographers. Both Lincoln and Parker understood the Declaration as a religious proposition; that it articulated a "natural law." Each saw the Constitution was an imperfect striving to make the Declaration real. For both the Declaration of equality and inalienable rights was the pole star by which government of the people, by the people and for the people could and should navigate. This profound steering was aimed at healing a nation recovering from a devastating war. With that war behind us, there is yet a need for setting a course toward peace and justice. Lincoln's second inaugural address remains a standard that must be applied to the course of the nation at all times:

Malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God give 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 battle, and for his widow; and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

Amen.