

The Struggle for Lincoln's Soul

MARK NOLL

Lincoln has been portrayed both as a devout Christian and as a discreet infidel. The truth is more complicated than these alternatives allow.

What was Abraham Lincoln's religion? What was the connection between Lincoln's private life, including his religion, and his influence on

American history? Why should such historical questions matter?

These are straightforward queries, but pursuing them leads immediately into dense thickets. They are thickets growing from the intense concern that has been lavished upon the details of Abraham Lincoln's life. The 130 years since the assassination of the sixteenth president of the United States have witnessed prodigious quantities of publication—much, much more in Lincoln's case, for example, than for George Washington or Thomas Jefferson, the two early presidents with whom Lincoln is most often compared. For nearly a century after his death, the business of recording reminiscences from those who knew Lincoln personally—or who knew those who knew him, and so on to the fifth and sixth degrees—roared along with tremendous energy. Almost as soon as the work of recovering personal reminiscences began, however, so also did the laborious

persons were making their living from studying Lincoln, collecting Lincolnmiana, publishing Lincoln books, and tending Lincoln shrines. That number has grown severalfold in the years since. The Association of Lincoln Presenters (tall, angular, bearded impersonators who try to speak with Lincoln's high, nasal tones) numbers more than one hundred certified members. Serious Lincoln exhibits, libraries, or collections flourish today in, among other places, Springfield and Chicago, Illinois; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Hodgenville, Kentucky; Providence, Rhode Island; Redlands, California; Washington, D.C.; and, of course, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Throughout the twentieth century, world leaders (and millions of ordinary tourists from home and abroad) have pilgrimaged to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington (dedicated on Memorial Day, 1922). Many have also made the trek to Springfield and the nearby reconstruction of New Salem village, which thrives today as it never did when Lincoln lived there from 1831 to 1837.

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Merrill Peterson, a biographer of Jefferson and emeritus professor at the University of Virginia, offers in *Lincoln in American Memory* a fascinating overview of how Lincoln came to be such a compelling cultural icon. Peterson's book is the source for much of the information provided above. It puts industriously wide-ranging research to good use in explaining American (and international) fascination with the sixteenth president. Peterson's conclusion, resting on 50 densely packed pages of notes, is that America's enduring preoccupation with Lincoln depends upon a powerful combination of factors: his rise from obscure poverty to national greatness; the paradoxes of a character, marked by melancholy and humor, that Carl Sandburg once called "hard as a rock and soft as drifting fog"; the widespread belief that Lincoln embodied the finest aspects of the democratic ideal; and, finally, the fact that Lincoln's greatness lay, in Peterson's words, "at the very core of that huge ganglion of American history, the Civil War."

Besides its many other virtues, *Lincoln in American Memory* also provides an excellent summary of the battle for Lincoln's soul between pious biographers who claim him as a dedicated fellow Christian and naysaying unbelievers who protest that he was one of them.

Michael Burlingame, who teaches at Connecticut College, has made use of even more industrious research to create the most convincing portrait of Lincoln's personality to date. *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* is a controversial book. Not all readers will be able to accept Burlingame's Jungianism, even though Burlingame uses psychology with greater nuance than has characterized Lincoln's earlier psychobiographers. Neither will all experts conclude that Burlingame has interpreted his incredibly diverse range of

Lincoln in American Memory

By Merrill D. Peterson
Oxford University Press
482 pp., \$30

The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln

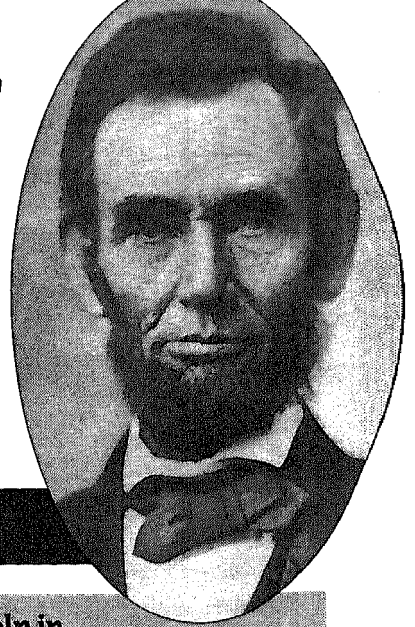
By Michael Burlingame
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The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln

By Philip Shaw
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was nine years old when he came to function as the soul of the nation? (Be it noted that Jung's "traits of the Wise Man" are the traits of the Wise Father.) How would he form himself from the 1830s to a savvy statesman in the 1860s? (Be it noted that Jung's psychological model of the "domestic strain" of melancholy? (Be it noted that Jung's "egoic experiences" are the egoic experiences of his mother and father.) Ann Rutledge. Burlingame does not see at least the outline of a romance that a young man and a young woman historians had to see. What Burlingame does is the question of the close-up view of the life that was stricken by trauma, later dominated by a steady personal life. Philip Shaw's *Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* is the focus. Palud

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Burlingame does a great deal to restore
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 trouble of sorting the reliable witnesses
 from the unreliable. Now even those who
 knew those who knew Lincoln are almost
 all gone. But battles over Lincoln still
 rage, and almost as acrimoniously as
 when eyewitnesses were alive.
 Substantial industries have grown
 from the veneration of Lincoln. (In the
 deep South, a contrasting industry—
 feeding off hatred of Lincoln as a
 coarse, despotic, and godless conspirator
 against liberty, community, and true
 republicanism—flourished with consid-
 erable vigor into the 1930s and is not
 quite dead today.) In 1950, at least 500

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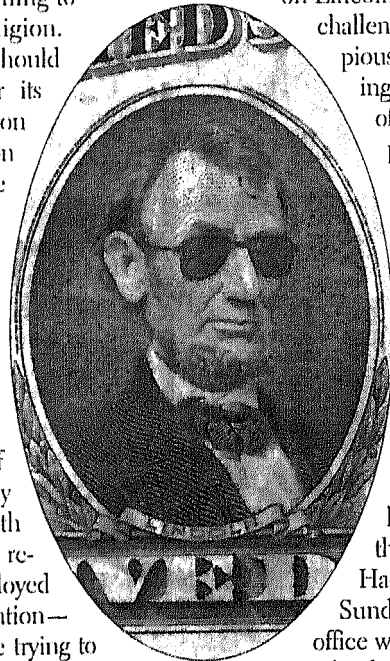
observers from later eras may better understand the meaning of historical events for subjects whose habits of mind were different from our own. Of these three books, Paludan's deals least directly with religion, though there are still numerous points where glimpses of Lincoln's private spiritual concerns peek forth. Yet by what it accomplishes in clarifying Lincoln's politics, Paludan's book also offers vitally important clues for coming to grips with Lincoln's religion.

Each of these books should be read attentively for its main thesis—Peterson on how an American icon emerged, Burlingame for how psychological insight may illuminate wide-ranging research, Paludan for his treatment of Lincoln's presidential successes and failures. But while they do not concentrate on Lincoln's religion, all of the books—because they are researched with breadth and because research findings are deployed with careful discrimination—are also useful for those trying to untangle the vexing knot of Lincoln's faith, and to note the bearing of that faith on broader concerns.

Lincoln's religion has been a source of incessant debate almost from the moment of the assassination itself. One of the first biographies rushed into print came from the pen of Josiah Holland, editor of a Republican newspaper in Springfield, Massachusetts, whose memorial address the month of Lincoln's assassination (April 1865) encouraged a Boston publisher to commission a full life. Holland traveled to Illinois in May of that same year and spoke to some who knew Lincoln. The biography was out the next year and almost immediately sold 80,000 copies. Holland, a pious person himself, acknowledged that Lincoln had never joined a church. He nonetheless portrayed Lincoln as a serious Christian, who had been reared in the faith by an "angel mother," and who had testified persuasively in both Illinois and Washington to faith in Christ.

Holland stressed particularly that Lincoln's religion had been deepened by a reliance on God called forth by the terrible crises of his presidency. He also suggested that the shock of death—at home of two young sons, and then of tens of thousands in the war—had driven Lincoln to deeper dependence on

began to interview others who had known Lincoln as a boy in Indiana, a young man in New Salem, or a respected lawyer in Springfield. Through many ups and downs in his own later life, Herndon pursued reminiscences of Lincoln almost until his own death in 1891. By December 1866, however, Herndon had secured enough material to begin a series of lectures in Springfield. One of his central purposes was to set straight the record on Lincoln's religion. Herndon's



challenge to Holland and his pious imitators was electrifying. Far from being a man of heartfelt Christian piety, Herndon maintained, Lincoln was at best a deist who, though perhaps believing in some kind of general god, had no time for the conventional beliefs or practices of the faith. Herndon was convinced that close-up observations validated his conclusions beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Had he not spent many Sunday mornings in his office with Lincoln (and often Lincoln's boys) while Mary Lincoln went by herself to the local Presbyterian church? Had not these mornings been devoted entirely to nonreligious matters—talking law, swapping tales, and doing as much damage control as possible as the Lincoln boys (never reproved by their father) wreaked havoc upon the books, papers, and furnishings of their office? Moreover, had not Herndon himself seen—and had confirmed by the testimony of judges, lawyers, clerks, and clients—how Lincoln lived on Illinois' Eighth Judicial Circuit? On the circuit, Lincoln had all the time in the world for telling stories (not all of them repeatable in mixed company), studying the law or Euclid, arranging and arguing cases. But he had never (or all but never) talked about or visibly practiced the Christian faith.

Many of Lincoln's Illinois colleagues shared Herndon's opinions. One of them, Ward Hill Lamon, wrote a biography that made full use of Herndon's collections. Lamon maintained that the secret of Lincoln's melancholy lay precisely in the absence of faith: "The fatal misfortune of his life," wrote Lamon, "was the influence of New Salem . . . which enlisted him on the side of unbelief."

The battle was on. It has raged fiercely for more than a century. Even today, preachers in sermons near February 12, or personalities on Christian radio bemoaning the fall of

twentieth century and the labors of avid Lincoln collector William Barton, professional scholars and amateur historians have carried out a noble series of careful inquiries in the effort to differentiate myth from history. Beginning with Barton's *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (1920) through the work of Benjamin Thomas, William Wolf, David Hein, Allen Guelzo, and other careful scholars, a much more solidly grounded picture of Lincoln's faith has emerged. Such is the complexity of Lincoln's own life, however, that the further rigorous historical inquiry is carried, the more difficult the question becomes.

In the first instance, rock-solid documentary evidence, or well-validated eyewitness accounts, have verified the following facts, at least as far as historical facts can be verified:

- Lincoln was exposed to Calvinistic Baptist preaching as a child and to a clamor of competing Protestant preachers during his years at New Salem. In a strange way, he seems to have both absorbed and been repelled by these early influences.

- In New Salem, Lincoln expressed views that differed from Christian orthodoxy—perhaps a thorough skepticism or maybe only the hypothesis of universal salvation.

- In 1846, Lincoln wrote about his faith directly for the only time in his life when supporters of his opponent in a race for Congress, the Methodist circuit rider Peter Cartwright, accused him of infidelity. The handbill that Lincoln produced in response, which was not rediscovered until the 1940s, contained these carefully chosen, noncommittal words: "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."

- Lincoln knew, read, and quoted the Bible. With Stephen Douglas in the great debates in 1858, during cabinet meetings, and in many private conversations, Lincoln cited Bible phrases to make political or moral points. In his speeches, he also occasionally quoted the Scriptures. Sometimes this quoting was only to find a striking metaphor, as in the House Divided speech of 1858. Sometimes the quotations were integral to the very substance of what he wanted to say, as in the incomparable words of his Second Inaugural Address: "Yet, if God wills that [slavery] continue, until all the wealth piled 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 of the Lord . . ."

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was the immediate rejoinder. "Yes," said the first, "but the Lord will think Abraham is joking." The joke was poignant, because it reflected a truth. Many instances are recorded in diaries and letters written before Lincoln's death where the president either allowed White House visitors to pray with him or actually solicited their prayers. There are also several accounts, though less securely based and usually written down after 1865, that record Lincoln himself praying.

- After the deaths of his sons (Eddie, nearly age four, in 1850; Willie, age eleven, in 1862), Lincoln was comforted by two thoroughly conservative Presbyterian ministers. Both James Smith in Springfield and Phineas D. Gurley in Washington (neither of whom was given to overstatement about Lincoln's piety) testified that, after these traumatic experiences, they witnessed a deepening of Lincoln's faith.

- In Washington, especially after the death of Willie, Lincoln regularly attended Gurley's New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. Sometimes he even came to the midweek prayer service (though, when he did go, he remained in a side room out of view of the congregation).

- At the same time, Lincoln did not practice what in the twentieth century might be called a "Christian lifestyle." Philip Schaff, the Swiss-born historian who lived his adult life in the United States, lectured to European audiences in 1865 on the meaning of the Civil War. He said that when Lincoln was assassinated on Good Friday at Ford's Theater, European pietists were aghast that he was not observing the Holy Festival (which, in their experience, only infidels neglected), while American evangelicals were aghast that he was in a theater (which, in their experience, was associated with licentiousness, secularism, and prostitution).

These matters are about as factual as any such matters are ever likely to be. On the other side are stories that, to the extent it is ever possible to judge the historicity of a purported event, are bogus.

- Ann Rutledge did not lend Lincoln her mother's Bible, nor did he circle verses from the Song of Solomon in it referring to the fairness of "my love." (The story, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1928, came from a medium who was supposedly in communication with both Lincoln and Ann Rutledge.)

- Lincoln almost certainly was converted in a Methodist church in 1839, as was first



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Many of Lincoln's Illinois colleagues shared Herndon's opinions. One of them, Ward Hill Lamon, wrote a biography that made full use of Herndon's collections. Lamon maintained that the secret of Lincoln's melancholy lay precisely in the absence of faith: "The fatal misfortune of his life," wrote Lamon, "was the influence of New Salem . . . which enlisted him on the side of unbelief."

The battle was on. It has raged fiercely for more than a century. Even today, preachers in sermons near February 12, or personalities on Christian radio bemoaning the fall of the United States from earlier days of Christian conviction, retell the stories of Herndon sometimes fire back. Both groups seem to feel that, if only Lincoln could be enlisted on their side—whether of evangelical faith or naturalistic rationalism—it would amount to a great victory in today's culture wars.

Behind the scenes of battle, however, a calmer mood prevails. For nearly 70 years, a process of critical evidentiary scrutiny has been at work. At least since the early

wide-ranging research, Paludan for his treatment of Lincoln's presidential successes and failures. But while they do not concentrate on Lincoln's religion, all of the books—because they are researched with breadth and because research findings are deployed with careful discrimination—are also useful for those trying to untangle the vexing knot of Lincoln's faith, and to note the bearing of that faith on broader concerns.

Lincoln's religion has been a source of incessant debate almost from the moment of the assassination itself. One of the first biographers rushed into print came from the pen of Josiah Holland, editor of a Republican newspaper in Springfield, Massachusetts, whose memorial address the month of Lincoln's assassination (April 1865) encouraged a Boston publisher to commission a full life. Holland traveled to Illinois in May of that same year and spoke to some who knew Lincoln. The biography was out the next year and almost immediately sold 80,000 copies. Holland, a pious person himself, acknowledged that Lincoln had never joined a church. He nonetheless portrayed Lincoln as a serious Christian, who had been reared in the faith by an "angel mother," and who had testified persuasively in both Illinois and Washington to faith in Christ.

Holland stressed particularly that Lincoln's religion had been deepened by a reliance on God called forth by the terrible crises of his presidency. He also suggested that the shock of death—at home of two young sons, and then of tens of thousands in the war—had driven Lincoln to deeper dependence on God. A year after Holland's biography appeared came the first of many books repeating his picture of a pious president—Z. A. Mudge's *The Forest Boy*, from the American Sunday School Union. Although it went so far as to criticize Lincoln for never making a public profession of his belief, this book, like so many to follow, likewise portrayed him as an individual with deep, orthodox faith.

To William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner in Springfield for 21 years, these portraits were a very bad joke. Spurred into action especially by what he considered Holland's effete, eastern whitewash, Herndon ransacked his own memory and



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY RANDAL BRADY

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• At the same time, Lincoln did not practice what in the twentieth century might be called a "Christian lifestyle." Philip Schaff, the Swiss-born historian who lived his adult life in the United States, lectured to European audiences in 1865 on the meaning of the Civil War. He said that when Lincoln was assassinated on Good Friday at Ford's Theater, European picturists were aghast that he was not observing the Holy Festival (which, in their experience, only infidels neglected), while American evangelicals were aghast that he was in a theater (which, in their experience, was associated with licentiousness, secularism, and prostitution). These matters are about as factual as any such matters are ever likely to be. On the other side are stories that, to the extent it is ever possible to judge the historicity of a purported event, are bogus.

• Ann Rutledge did not lend Lincoln her mother's Bible, nor did he circle verses from the Song of Solomon in it referring to the fairness of "my love." (The story, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1928, came from a medium who was supposedly in communication with both Lincoln and Ann Rutledge.)

• Lincoln almost certainly was not converted in a Methodist camp meeting in 1839, as was first claimed publicly by the organizer of the meeting, the Reverend James F. Jacques, in 1897.

• From the other side of the theological spectrum, Lincoln almost certainly did not write to a certain Judge J. A. Wakefield during his White House years to affirm, "My earlier views of 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." This "document" was first produced in 1924 by Joseph Lewis at the annual banquet of New York Freethinkers Society. The judgment of Merrill Peterson is authoritative: "If Lincoln ever wrote such a letter, it has not been produced, nor is J. A. Wakefield

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The battle was on. It has raged fiercely for more than a century. Even today, preachers in sermons near February 12, or personalities on Christian radio bemoaning the fall of the United States from earlier days of Christian conviction, retell the stories illustrating Lincoln's deep piety. Although their number is not as great, populist naysayers who know their Hernon sometimes fire back. Both groups seem to feel that, if only Lincoln could be enlisted on their side—the rationalism—it would amount to a great victory in today's culture wars.

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There are many other such incidents, most of them the product of late reminiscences. What they show is Lincoln's respect for God, his eagerness to commit the Civil War to divine rule, and his own personal sense of living under the authority of divine providence. What they do not show is a clear-cut profession of orthodox faith.

Once we have reached this twilight land of conflicted, partially legendary, and quasi-mythic history, we are in excellent position to benefit from the carefully balanced work of experts who study other aspects of Lincoln's career. Philip Paludan, for example, makes a great contribution in *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* because he is able to disengage himself, at least partially, from debates about what later interested parties have wanted to hear Lincoln saying. Earlier prevailing interpretations argued that Lincoln oriented his policies around either preserving the Union or ending slavery, either upholding the Constitution as the law of an undivided land or promoting the expansion to all Americans of ideals in the Declaration of Independence. The first notion in each pair defines the conservative Lincoln beloved of constitutionalists, twentieth-century Republicans, and even eventually Southern defenders of the lost cause. By contrast, this conservative Lincoln has been despised by twentieth-century radicals, who hold that he forfeited opportunities for civil equality by his concessions to racism. The second notion in each pair defines the emancipating Lincoln beloved of radical Republicans in the antebellum era, moderate civil-rights advocates, and many modern Democrats. By contrast, this egalitarian Lincoln was despised by Northern and Southern conservatives of his own day who accused him of using big government to foment a second American Revolution.

The genius of Paludan's research is to argue that "Lincoln respected equally the nation's institutions, manifested in the political-constitutional system, and its ideals, revealed in the Declaration of Independence." In other words, if we go to Lincoln with the ideological disjunctions of what came later, we lose the reality of what existed for Lincoln himself. If we think that the only options for Lincoln were views that have prevailed since Lincoln's day, we miss what Lincoln himself actually meant, felt, and valued. If later Americans separated what Lincoln joined, it becomes a his-

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Michael Burlingame's *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* brings us closer to the truth. Burlingame has accumulated a great mass of anecdote and evidence. He has sifted this mass with care. His portrait of the private Lincoln—though, of course, not the last word—is a revelation.

Especially revealing is what Burlingame feels he must conclude about the dysfunctional character of the Lincolns' marriage. The evidence, once liberated from the demands of myth-making, is overwhelming.

The difficulty began with a remarkable set of poor matches: culture (she was aristocratic, he was dirt-poor), age (when they married, she was 23, he 33), temperament (she was what Burlingame, using Jungian archetypes, calls negative Eternal Youth, he was positive Old Man), and moods (he was able to relax, she could not).

Then there were the debilities Lincoln himself brought to the marriage. He was emotionally withdrawn, a man who prized reason over passion, a person who did not communicate himself easily. After his death, Mary Lincoln said that though her husband was a man of "deep feeling," he was "not a demonstrative man[—]when he felt most deeply, he expressed, the least." Lincoln was absent, emotionally or physically, much of the time. For years, he spent four months out of every twelve away from Springfield on the judicial circuit. When he was in

they were slaves (and ragged on Lincoln when he tried to pay them extra on the side); she assaulted him on more than one occasion (with firewood, with potatoes); she probably once chased him with a knife through their backyard in Springfield; and she treated his casual contacts with attractive females as a direct threat, while herself flirting constantly and dressing to kill. A regular visitor to the White House wrote of Mrs. Lincoln that "she was vain, passionately fond of dress and wore her dresses shorter at the top and longer at the train than even fashions demanded. She had great pride in her elegant neck and bust, and grieved the President greatly by her constant display of her person and her fine clothes." Commenting on one such dress, Lincoln said to his wife, "Mother, it is my opinion, if some of that tail was nearer the head it would be in better style."

Burlingame presents this picture of the Lincolns' marriage in a chapter buttressed with 425 notes, most of them to more than one source, many of them containing mini-essays on questions of reliability. His conclusion deserves the most serious respect: the Lincolns' marriage was a mess. But with his laboriously mined conclusions, Burlingame by no means rests with mere historical gossip. He wants, rather, to show how his

deep research in Lincoln's private life also illuminates the public person. How was it that Lincoln, when president, could work so effectively with the rampant egos who filled his administration? Burlingame's hard-won conclusions on the Lincolns' marriage give him the right to attempt an explanation: "The long years of dealing with his tempestuous wife helped prepare Lincoln for handling the difficult people he encountered as president. After examining the Lincoln marriage, Benjamin Thomas eloquently concluded that 'over the slow fires of misery that he learned to keep banked and under heavy pressure deep within him, his innate qualities of patience, tolerance, forbearance, and forgiveness were tempered and refined.'"

Unfortunately, there has never been a Michael Burlingame for Lincoln's religion. What even preliminary research in the Civil War era shows, however, is that Lincoln displayed a higher, finer theology than did the



known to Lincoln's *Collected Works*."

• In 1883, a dedicated collector of Lincolniana, Osborn H. Oldroyd, published a book of reminiscences that included an oft-quoted testimony to Lincoln's personal faith. Oldroyd wrote that he had taken the words from a newspaper, which in turn extracted them from a letter Lincoln wrote to an old friend in Illinois sometime in 1864 or early 1865. The quotation ran, "When I left Springfield I asked the people to pray for me. I was not a Christian. When I buried my son, the severest trial of my life, I was not a Christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ. Yes, I do love Jesus." No corroborative evidence has ever been found to legitimize this letter. William Barton, who himself believed that Lincoln had a substantially orthodox faith, provided a judgment in 1920 that serious Lincoln students have accepted ever since. Barton wrote that he had seen variations on this story, although usually not as elaborate, in newspapers from mid-1865, but none of them included a specific citation. His own judgment was severe: "Mr Oldroyd has endeavored to learn for me in what paper he found it and on whose authority it rests, but without result. He does not remember where he found it. It is inherently improbable, and rests on no adequate testimony. It ought to be wholly disregarded."

The situation for Lincoln's religion resembles the situation for other facets of his private life. Once solidly verified quotations and narratives have been separated from the almost certainly spurious, there remains a vast array of embellished incidents. These stories are the puzzlers. Many of them can be verified up to a point, but they also contain unlikely or unverified details. Here are a few:

• Lincoln almost certainly spoke about religion with Newton Bateman, Illinois Superintendent of Public Instruction, in the months between his election in November 1860 and his departure from Springfield in February 1861. Yet the story of a fully orthodox profession of faith that Bateman supplied Josiah Holland in the summer of 1865 was too good to be true. When challenged by William Herndon about the veracity of his account, Bateman twisted and turned, but in the end conceded that he embellished what the president-elect had said.

• It is a fact that Lincoln enjoyed good relations with the Reverend Mr. Gurley and that Gurley spoke with conviction about Lincoln's general trust in

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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY RANDAL BINKLEY



It is my opinion, if some or that tail was nearer the head it would be in better style." Burlington presents this picture of the Lincolns' marriage in a chapter buttressed with 425 notes, most of them to more than one source, many of them containing mini-essays on questions of reliability. His conclusion deserves the most serious respect: the Lincolns' marriage was a mess. But with his laboriously mined conclusions, Burlingame by no means rests with mere historical gossip. He wants, rather, to show how his deep research in Lincoln's private life also illuminates the public person. How was it that Lincoln, when president, could work so effectively with the rampant egos who filled his administration? Burlingame's hard-won conclusions on the Lincolns' marriage give him the right to attempt an explanation: "The long years of dealing with his tempestuous wife helped prepare Lincoln for handling the difficult people he encountered as president. After examining the Lincoln marriage, Benjamin Thomas eloquently concluded that 'over the slow fires of misery that he learned to keep banked and under heavy pressure deep within him, his innate qualities of patience, tolerance, forbearance, and forgiveness were tempered and refined.'" Unfortunately, there has never been a Michael Burlingame for Lincoln's religion. What even preliminary research in the Civil War era shows, however, is that Lincoln displayed a higher, finer theology than did the nation's professional Christian theologians. How this came about is a puzzle. That it happened is very clear.

All throughout the war, major Christian leaders North and South consistently equated God's will with the principles of their own side. The limited vision of those theologians was truly dismayed, which is probably why almost no one now studies their words. Henry Ward Beecher, for example, in his Brooklyn pulpit and with a well-circulated Christian magazine, was the best-known clergyman of his era. Yet when he spoke at the rededication of Fort Sumner on the very day that Lincoln was shot, his only message was grateful



Inner World of Abraham Lincoln brings us closer to the truth. Burlingame has accumulated a great mass of anecdote and evidence. He has sifted this mass with care. His portrait of the private Lincoln — though, of course, not the last word — is a revelation.

Especially revealing is what Burlingame feels he must conclude about the dysfunctional character of the Lincoln's marriage. The evidence, once liberated from the demands of myth-making, is overwhelming. The difficulty began with a remarkable set of poor matches: culture (she was aristocratic, he was dirt-poor), age (when they married, she was 23, he 33), temperament (she was what Burlingame, using Jungian archetypes, calls negative Eternal Youth, he was positive Old Man), and moods (he was able to relax, she could not).

Then there were the debilities Lincoln himself brought to the marriage. He was emotionally withdrawn, a man who prized reason over passion, a person who did not communicate himself easily. After his death, Mary Lincoln said that though her husband was a man of "deep feeling," he was "not a demonstrative man" — when he felt "most deeply, he expressed, the least." Lincoln was absent emotionally or physically, much of the time. For years, he spent four months out of every twelve away from Springfield on the judicial circuit. When he was in Springfield, he often absented himself to the State House or his law office until very late at night. Moreover, while Lincoln was indulgent with the children, he also left their management almost entirely to his wife.

Mary Todd's contribution to the marriage may have added measurably to Lincoln's emotional distance. If she was not entirely the "wolf" that William Herndon described, she nonetheless did often fly into violent rages; she pushed Lincoln relentlessly to seek high public office; she complained endlessly about poverty; she overran her budget shamelessly, both in Springfield and in the White House; she abused servants as if

great contribution in *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* because he is able to disengage himself, at least partially, from debates about what later interested parties have wanted to hear Lincoln say —

argued that Lincoln oriented his policies around either preserving the Union or ending slavery, either upholding the Constitution as the law of an undivided land or promoting the expansion to all Americans of ideals in the Declaration of Independence. The first notion in each pair defines the conservative Lincoln beloved of constitutionalists, even eventually Southern defenders of the lost cause. By contrast, this conservative Lincoln has been despised by nineteenth-century radicals, who hold that he forfeited opportunities for civil equality by his concessions to racism. The second notion in each pair defines the emancipating Lincoln beloved of radical Republicans in the antebellum era, moderate civil-rights advocates, and many modern Democrats. By contrast, this egalitarian Lincoln was despised by Northern and Southern conservatives of his own day who accused him of using big government to foment a second American Revolution.

The genius of Paludan's research is to argue that "Lincoln respected equally the nation's institutions, manifested in the political-constitutional system, and its ideals, revealed in the Declaration of Independence." In other words, if we go to Lincoln with the ideological distinctions of what came later, we lose the reality of what existed for Lincoln himself. If we think that the only options for Lincoln were views that have prevailed since Lincoln's day, we miss what Lincoln himself actually meant, felt, and valued. If later Americans separated what Lincoln joined, it becomes a historical task to show that these incompatible values were unified in Lincoln's own mind and in his policies. This task Paludan accomplishes superbly.

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has ever been found to legitimate this letter. William Barton, who himself believed that Lincoln had a substantial-ly orthodox faith, provided a judgment in 1920 that serious Lincoln students have accepted ever since. Barton wrote that he had seen variations on this story, although usually not as elaborate, in newspapers from mid-1865, but none of them included a specific citation. His own judgment was severe: "Mr Oldroyd has endeavored to learn for me in what paper he found it and on whose authority it rests, but without result. He does not remember where he found it. It is inherently improbable, and rests on no adequate testimony. It ought to be wholly disregarded."

The situation for Lincoln's religion resembles the situation for other facets of his private life. Once solidly verified quotations and narratives have been separated from the almost certainly spurious, there remains a vast array of embellished incidents. These stories are the puzzlers. Many of them can be verified up to a point, but they also contain unlikely or unverified details. Here are a few:

• Lincoln almost certainly spoke about religion with Newton Bateman, Illinois Superintendent of Public Instruction, in the months between his election in November 1860 and his departure from Springfield in February 1861. Yet the story of a fully orthodox profession of faith that Bateman supplied Josiah Holland in the summer of 1865 was too good to be true. When challenged by William Herndon about the veracity of his account, Bateman twisted and turned, but in the end conceded that he embellished what the president-elect had said.

• It is a fact that Lincoln enjoyed good relations with the Reverend Mr. Gurley and that Gurley spoke with conviction about Lincoln's general trust in God in the two memorial sermons that he preached after the assassination. Yet the story that Lincoln had arranged to join the New York Avenue church upon public profession of faith has never been securely documented.

• It is probably true that the former Catholic priest Charles Chiniquy prayed with Lincoln in the White House on June 10, 1864, for the two were acquainted from Springfield days, and Chiniquy's presence in Washington can be verified. But it stretches the imagination that Lincoln professed to Chiniquy a fully orthodox faith, as Chiniquy's memoir, *Twenty-Five Years in the Church of Rome* (1886), claims. And it

vengeance: In the day of God's judgment, the South's "guiltiest and most remorseless traitors . . . these most accused and detested of all criminals, that have drenched a continent in needless blood, and moved the foundations of their times with hideous crimes and cruelty, caught up in black clouds full of voices of vengeance and lurid with punishment, shall be whirled aloft and plunged downward forever and forever in an endless retribution."

Just as lopsidedly self-serving were public statements from the South. John Adgar, editor of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, in late 1865 defended the conduct of Southern preachers during the war with these words: "If they . . . expounded God's word as it sanctions slavery, and taught their people to commit the cause they were maintaining against a radical infidelity in humble prayer to his wise, and sovereign, and merciful arbitrament; we do not see that any part or all of this can be condemned as a preaching of politics."

Lincoln, by contrast, knew that God had not enlisted on either side. The man who never joined a church saw such theological matters more clearly than the men who led America's churches. As early as 1862, he could write words in a private memorandum that neither John Adgar nor most other American clergy could even imagine: "In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party." In March 1865, while the South still seemed to have more staying power than would actually prove the case, Lincoln nonetheless offered momentous words of the sort that Beecher and his ilk could not conceive. Almost certainly Lincoln hoped to be heard in the South, as well as in the North, when he said, "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives 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 the 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."

So, what was Lincoln's religion? It was genuine, but only partially Christian. Its exact shape cannot be specified further until someone carries out broad, painstaking, conceptually sophisticated research comparable to that which Burlingame devoted to Lincoln's marriage. Certainly a start has been made in tracing Lincoln's private religion—for example, his reactions to early Calvinist preaching and to the deaths of his children—as a basis of



Waco Log

RICHARD J. MOUW

*The self-understanding
of a "sinful messiah."*

Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America

By James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher

University of California Press

242 pp., \$25.95

Religious conviction is poorly understood by the folks who shape the patterns of international diplomacy. That thesis is articulated clearly and systematically in an important book of essays published last year by Oxford University Press: *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, edited by Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson. The study of international

Americans export it so readily is that we have a surplus on the domestic front. In *Why Waco?* authors James Tabor and Eugene Gallagher demonstrate this surplus in dramatic fashion. They argue convincingly that David Koresh and his followers were systematically and tragically misunderstood by federal agents, who made no serious attempt to understand the religious convictions at work in the 51-day siege at the Branch Davidians' Mount Carmel community.

The government's handling of the Waco situation is a timely topic, and this book is a significant contribution to that discussion. But it is also valuable simply

Adventist Church dissociate themselves from the group throughout the world. In a sense, the message of the Adventists are quite different from the distance. Koresh was a dynamic within the church and carried it into the mainstream of the world to oppose. But Tabor argues that the points of contact are important to identify.

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Waco Logic

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Early Seventh-day Adventists developed their scheme of prophetic interpretation by making much of the image of the three angelic messengers in Revelation 14. The work of the first two angels was accomplished by William Miller in the nineteenth century in his announcement that the "end times" had arrived and in his prediction of the imminent destruction of "Babylon." Ellen White performed the third angel's role by establishing sabbatarian practice and denouncing the rituals of the established churches.

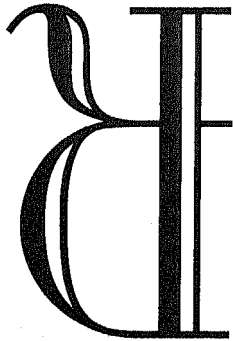
David Koresh built on this basic Adventist pattern of matching events in recent history with angelic references in the Book of Revelation. What he added was the insistence that these three angels were a subgroup of the seven

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David Koresh has been widely portrayed as "the wacko from Waco," a demagogic, fornicating child abuser who provided a pious gloss to what was essentially an egotistical program in group manipulation. Tabor and Gallagher firmly reject this portrayal. Koresh, they argue, was a sincere religious leader with a highly nuanced and relatively coherent theological perspective.

The Branch Davidians "stand firmly within the Millierite-Adventist tradition" of religious thought. Needless to say, that kind of portrayal will not go down well with the leaders of the Seventh-day

religious conviction is poorly understood by the folks who shape the patterns of international diplomacy. That thesis is articulated clearly and systematically in an important book of essays published last year by Oxford University Press: *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, edited by Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson. The study of international relations, the essayists insist, is dominated by a "secularizing reductionism" that views religion as a declining force in contemporary life. This perspective has had disastrous results for Western diplomacy. The Middle East provides a good case in point: negotiating strategies that presuppose the universal appeal of a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis of human motivation simply do not work very well with Iranian clerics who see themselves as serving a God who finds utilitarian calculations distasteful. But the influence of secularizing reductionism is not restricted to international diplomacy. One reason why we



STEVE SCHMIDT