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**Joseph R. Fornieri**. *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003. 209 pp. $38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-315-9.

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A. Lincoln: Biblical Republican

When Josiah G. Holland was collecting material for his biography of Abraham Lincoln, one of the people he interviewed during a visit to Springfield, Illinois was William H. Herndon, the martyred president's third and final law partner. Holland queried Herndon about Lincoln's religious beliefs and Herndon responded: "The less said the better."[1] Upon publication of Holland's book in 1866, Herndon was outraged to discover that Holland had ignored his admonition by depicting Lincoln as a devout Christian. This was not the Lincoln that Herndon thought he knew and Holland's characterization was also at odds with the testimony Herndon had begun to gather from Lincoln's friends and associates. Herndon proceeded to engage in a crusade against what he perceived as attempts by hagiographers to sanctify Lincoln. The question of Lincoln's religion has been a regular topic of inquiry and sometimes passionate debate ever since. Joseph R. Fornieri's *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* is a welcome contribution to the field, as it offers a nuanced, well-reasoned examination of how the Bible influenced Lincoln's political philosophy.

Fornieri argues, "Lincoln viewed the politics of the Civil War era in terms of civil theology" (p. 3). Also known as "civil religion," "political creed," "political theology," "political religion," "moral consensus," and "public philosophy," civil theology is the "all-encompassing moral vision of public life affirmed by the regime" (p. 7). According to Fornieri, the key elements of Lincoln's civil theology are the republican principle of self-government and the biblical tradition of Judeo-Christianity. Fornieri therefore characterizes Lincoln's civil theology as "biblical republicanism." In the political struggle over slavery, Lincoln's biblical republicanism clashed with the opposing civil theologies of abolitionism, popular sovereignty, and proslavery theology. Fornieri analyzes Lincoln's biblical republicanism by closely examining his speeches and writings and thereby builds a very persuasive justification for his contention that Lincoln's civil theology "articulated the most compelling justification of popular government ever given to the world" (p .4).

The first two chapters of Fornieri's work explore the contours of Lincoln's civil theology. Fornieri dissects biblical republicanism into four components: substance, agent, form, and end. Lincoln realized the vital role of public opinion in a republic and Fornieri considers it to be the substance of his civil theology. In a government of the people, public opinion, or in Lincoln's words, the "public mind," influences public policy and is a reflection of society's moral values. It is therefore imperative that leaders (agents) attempt to guide public opinion in such a way that it best fulfills the moral principles upon which the society was founded. The distinguishing characteristic of Lincoln's civil theology is its form and the essence of the form is encapsulated in the term biblical republicanism. Lincoln believed the end or purpose of government was to protect the natural rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as set forth in the Declaration of Independence. Fornieri asserts that Lincoln viewed the Declaration as the Decalogue of the American republic, while the Constitution of 1787 provided a more perfect Union to secure these rights.

Fornieri attributes Lincoln's ability to articulate such a coherent civil theology to his talents as a writer, thinker, and "perhaps most important, to his profound understanding of the Bible" (p. 35). Anyone familiar with Lincoln's speeches and writings is aware of the numerous biblical allusions that appear in them. While Lincoln believed the Bible was a source of universal moral precepts, Fornieri provides a very thoughtful and enlightening discussion of five major ways in which Lincoln utilized the Bible. This aspect of the book is among its most valuable contributions, as Fornieri deftly demonstrates that Lincoln was neither a religious fanatic nor a cynic who employed the Bible merely as a means to manipulate public opinion. Instead, Fornieri details how Lincoln used biblical language theologically, civil-theologically, evocatively, allegorically, and existentially.

In analyzing Lincoln's existential use of the Bible, Fornieri argues that Lincoln's civil theology "was rooted in a profound religious belief" that included faith in divine providence, guided by a "Judeo-Christian God of righteousness" (pp. 50-51). Few would dispute Fornieri's assertion that Lincoln's "faith deepened with maturity–especially after the death of his son Willie," though he is on less sure ground when he claims that Lincoln's "articulation and interpretation of this faith remained fairly consistent throughout his life" (p. 58). Any consideration of Lincoln's faith must weigh the letters and interviews that Herndon gathered on the subject. In assessing the veracity of Herndon's evidence, Fornieri does not cite either the Herndon-Weik Collection at the Library of Congress or the more convenient *Herndon's Informants*.[2] Instead, Fornieri relies on William E. Barton's *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (1920) and is too precipitous in dismissing evidence of the young Lincoln's religious skepticism. Fornieri accepts Barton's conclusion that a letter written by Mentor Graham in 1874 effectively refutes the story that Lincoln wrote a "book of infidelity" when he lived at New Salem. More than one person informed Herndon that Lincoln had penned such a work and Graham's letter does not necessarily contradict this testimony.[3] Scholars may disagree on the reliability of Herndon's data, but thorough analysis of the evidence is necessary to make the case for Lincoln's religious consistency more persuasive.

After explaining the essentials of Lincoln's civil theology, Fornieri offers a very instructive contrast between Lincoln's biblical republicanism and proslavery theology. Fornieri illustrates the ways in which Lincoln's civil theology skillfully repudiated the arguments of George Fitzhugh, Frederick Ross, and others who believed the Bible offered a justification for slavery. Some confusion arises in Fornieri's discussion of South Carolina governor and Senator James Henry Hammond when he refers to a nonexistent U. S. Senator named "John Hammond." Though Fornieri discusses one of Albert Taylor Bledsoe's biblical defenses of slavery and Lincoln's response to it, he does not inform readers that Lincoln and Bledsoe were fellow Whig lawyers in Springfield before Bledsoe became a proslavery polemicist and post-war apologist for Jefferson Davis. Incidentally, in a piece first published in 1873, Bledsoe recalled that Lincoln never gave any indication that he "entertained a belief in the being of God," yet "he always seemed to deplore his want of faith as a very great infelicity."[4]

Fornieri's fourth chapter is somewhat misleadingly titled "The Development of Lincoln's Political Faith" because he does not discuss how Lincoln's civil theology evolved over time. Instead, he takes on "Straussians," "psychohistorians," and "southern conservatives" who have interpreted Lincoln's 1838 Lyceum Address as the best representation of his civil theology. Though the tone is sometimes too adversarial, Fornieri presents a convincing case that Lincoln's October 1854 speech at Peoria is a "far more profound and mature expression of his civil theology" (p. 92). Lincoln, according to Fornieri, articulated a moral vision for the republic at Peoria that was far superior to Stephen A. Douglas's defense of popular sovereignty. Fornieri provides a rich, insightful analysis that this vitally important speech deserves. Given the recent spate of books that focus specifically on one of Lincoln's key addresses, Fornieri has the core of an excellent monograph on the Peoria speech should he choose to pursue such a project.

The final chapter examines how Lincoln's opposition to slavery, interpretation of the Declaration of Independence, and support for the Union are inseparably tied together by his "biblical view of human nature and equality" (p. 133). This last chapter repeats some points previously made, and since the book begins by framing Lincoln's biblical republicanism as a civil theology in competition with abolitionism, proslavery theology, and popular sovereignty, it is unfortunate that Fornieri does not offer a chapter comparing Lincoln with the abolitionists. The occasional remarks Fornieri does make regarding abolitionists, with the exception of Frederick Douglass, are filled with opprobrium. Fornieri dismisses the abolitionist perspective as "utopian," "self-defeating," and even echoes James Buchanan in blaming radicals, such as Wendell Phillips, for hastening the onset of civil war (p. 160). Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, and other abolitionists invoked both the Bible and Declaration in their fight against slavery. Was their civil theology any less republican or biblical than Lincoln's? Fornieri argues Lincoln believed that "legitimate republican government was bound to and limited by a universal moral law revealed by God in the Bible" (p. 5). How does this compare with the abolitionist argument that a "higher law" justified resistance to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act?

*Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* is a highly erudite effort that causes the reader to look at Lincoln in a new way. Fornieri's study is an interesting amalgam of two recent trends in Lincoln Studies. Like the works of Allen Guelzo, Lucas Morel, and Stewart Winger, Fornieri explores Lincoln as a man of ideas, yet his close reading of Lincoln's Peoria Address is similar to Garry Wills's book on the Gettysburg Address and Ronald White's analysis of the Second Inaugural. As with any original work, Fornieri's book not only offers new explanations, but also

provokes questions. His conclusion that Lincoln's political faith reached its maturity at Peoria in 1854, and culminated with his Second Inaugural Address, leads one to wonder whether Lincoln's civil theology was a static ideology or one that evolved along with some of his political positions. If Lincoln's biblical republicanism remained consistent, how does one reconcile the Lincoln of 1854 who supported the Fugitive Slave Act, opposed equal rights for Americans of African descent, and believed colonization was the best solution to the question of racial adjustment, with the Lincoln of 1865 who had reversed himself on these issues? Perhaps Lincoln's greatest act of faith was his belief in the system of government erected by the founders of the republic and his determination to preserve it at all costs.

Notes

[1]. Herndon, quoted in David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon: A Biography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989; 1948), p. 213.

[2]. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

[3]. Hardin Bale, John Hill, James H. Matheny and Isaac Cogdal all testified that Lincoln had written such a book. John T. Stuart had no direct knowledge of the book but he did characterize Lincoln's religion as that of an "infidel." See Wilson and Davis eds., *Herndon's Informants*, pp. 13, 61-62, 441, 519, 576, 577. For a comparative analysis of Graham's letter and the testimony of Herndon's informants, see Douglas L. Wilson, *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), pp. 80-85.

[4]. Bledsoe's piece was published in the April 1873 issue of *The Southern Review* and was reprinted in Rufus Rockwell Wilson, ed., *Lincoln Among His Friends* (Caldwell: The Caxton Printers, 1942), pp. 462-493. The quote is from page 484.

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