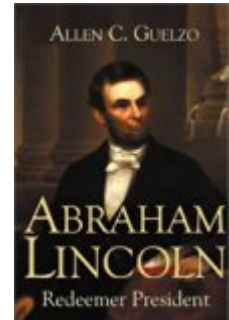


Allen C. Guelzo. *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999. xii + 516 pp. \$29.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8028-3872-8.



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Reluctant Redeemer

Any new work on a figure as well-scrutinized as Abraham Lincoln faces a simple but important question: is this book really necessary? Allen C. Guelzo, honors college dean and American history professor at Eastern College, answers yes and contends that he has developed a different approach to the sixteenth president. His study, co-winner of the 2000 Lincoln Prize, offers "a new way of speaking about Abraham Lincoln" (p. xi), viewing him not simply as a politician and not primarily in terms of personality issues. Instead, Guelzo argues that he does something "which virtually no modern Lincoln biographer has managed to do": he takes "Lincoln seriously as a man of ideas" (p. 19).

Guelzo offers several possible reasons why others have not focused on Lincoln as a thinker. In part, he explains, scholars have tended to shy away from intellectual history in general. Their hesitancy is more pronounced in Lincoln's case since he left behind little in the way of extended, sustained argumentation. In addition, biographers have followed the lead of modern academic

inquiry, dominated by a political approach to the subject. Researchers have also been reluctant or unwilling to mine the rich resources available in the reminiscence literature on Lincoln.

Guelzo is not hindered by what has apparently remained a stumbling block for others: "the difficulty we have had in conceding that the American republic has any intellectual history at all" (p. 21). The author sees the early republic in which Lincoln matured as a society rich in stimulating and continuous debate among its citizens, both elites and commoners. He proposes an "intellectual biography" of Lincoln (p. 24) that focuses on the complex ideological foundations of his subject's outlook and policies. Appropriately, Guelzo opens the biography with a review of prominent ideas and values rather than prevailing interests or power centers.

He identifies four key clusters of belief that shaped Lincoln's mind. First, Lincoln absorbed general, Lockean principles of the Enlightenment which made him sensitive to the protection of individual rights, dismissive of arguments premised on the passions, and skeptical of beliefs left unex-

amined. Second, Lincoln held to the tenets of classical liberalism, particularly his confidence in the constructive force of self-interest, his adherence to Benthamite utilitarianism, and his sympathies with John Stuart Mill's notions of "philosophical necessity."

Third, Lincoln devoted himself to Whig principles, particularly, as Guelzo sees it, the party's sharp break with the Jeffersonian tradition. Convinced that the dream of a stable, agrarian republic would generate a static, restrained society, Lincoln and his fellow Whigs championed the advantages of the new market economy. They placed their trust in rapid commercial expansion, individual opportunity, and social mobility, all realized through a system of wage labor, all confidently moving toward greater economic opportunity and political liberty.

Fourth, despite the strong secular pull of reason, interest, and power, Guelzo argues that a particular brand of Calvinism also shaped Lincoln's mind. The author recognizes that Lincoln was not a church member, that he did not testify to a personal experience of spiritual rebirth, and that he did not profess a set of rigorous or precise theological principles. Yet Guelzo maintains that Lincoln pondered broad religious questions, particularly the relationship between humanity and larger spiritual or cosmic forces in the universe. In such moments of reflection, Lincoln was struck most by the distance between individuals and their God. He sensed that the divine force was radically other, comprised of a will, design, and power that mortals could neither confidently know nor possibly emulate. "God" was a remote, inscrutable force. Humanity's understanding of the world needed to begin with acknowledgment of the unbridgeable gulf between themselves and their creator. This recognition of human limitation led Lincoln to a profound sense of humility, one which accepted mankind's inherent failings, questioned its flawed judgments, and urged continual self-examination. Lincoln mused on the

workings of providence and filled his expression with scriptural allusions. He remained skeptical of church creeds and dwelled in melancholic reflection on the state of himself and his society. "[J]udgment and expiation were the underpinnings of his mental universe, rather than redemption," Guelzo wisely concludes (p. 430).

To make his case, Guelzo turns to standard sources such as *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Roy P. Basler. But he also draws heavily from the reminiscences of Lincoln's associates and contemporaries in collections such as *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*. Guelzo acknowledges that the latter group of works has proven controversial -- though he does not specify why -- and holds up Carl Sandburg as an example of a biographer who made "utterly uncritical use of any and all reminiscence sources" (p. 469). Guelzo argues that he has followed a more cautious and careful approach to the materials.

That care slips a bit, however, when it comes to citations. "[I]n line with both the purposes of this book as an extended essay and with the series for which it is intended," (p. 472) Guelzo dispenses with standard endnotes and opts for a more general scheme of documentation meant to "identify primary Lincoln-related citations, and whatever secondary citations may be absolutely necessary" (p. 472). Unfortunately, the "identification" is not as complete as it might be -- and the "absolute" not applied as steadily as it should. This leads to a few questions, some minor, some major. It is difficult to determine who spoke of the "mathematical exactness" of Lincoln's mind (p. 83). The author does not clarify when James Smith's observations on Lincoln's religious views were written (p. 152). And Guelzo does not provide evidence for a statement concerning "the real heart of Lincoln's personal religious anguish" (p. 446). Standard citations might have helped clear up these points.

When the author does identify his sources, a different type of problem occasionally surfaces: at

times, Guelzo makes more of Lincoln's religiosity than the source material will bear. One example of this interpretive problem springs from the analysis of reminiscence literature. The author discusses Mary Todd Lincoln's recollection that, on the night of the assassination, her husband expressed a desire to visit the Holy Land. Guelzo correctly notes that there is no other source to verify the claim. Nonetheless, he expands on the point, contends that "there is more sense to it than it seems," and suggests that the episode was in line with Lincoln's "search for religious truth." Guelzo lends a measure of credence to Mrs. Lincoln's report but does so in a sketchy and indirect manner (pp. 434-435).

A second type of interpretive weakness involves the meaning and significance Guelzo gives to Lincoln's own words. In his analysis of the Gettysburg Address, the author argues that Lincoln's reference to "four score and seven years" demonstrated that the President was "conjuring up at once association with the 90th Psalm's declaration that the human lifespan was 'threescore years and ten.'" The words "our fathers" reminded listeners of an image "like the biblical patriarchs." And by referring to a "new nation, conceived in Liberty," Lincoln spoke "as though the republic were one with the woman of St. John's Revelation" (p. 373). It is difficult to know if this was what Lincoln intended -- or what his audience "heard." Even if scriptural references were purposeful, Guelzo's comments may point more to literary similarities than to ideological intentions. The author states that Lincoln's "repertoire of biblical citations was more a cultural habit rather than a religious one, to provide 'lines to fit any occasion'" (p. 313). There may be a reason to make more of the Gettysburg speech than this. But if so, Guelzo should clarify how he distinguishes Lincoln's casual and conventional allusions from more sincere and substantial religious sentiments.

A third interpretive problem involves Guelzo's method of analysis: at times, his argument

rests more on analogy than direct evidence. Referring to Lincoln's inner turmoil, Guelzo suggests that he "was plunged into a 'terrible Melancholy,' a manic depression reminiscent of the hopeless torrents of the predestinarian Baptists" (p. 95). The author adds that "the roots of his 'melancholy' certainly have undeniable resemblance to the religious despair of those who feared they were not of the elect" (p. 119). That may be so; but it may be beside the point. Perhaps the key issue with Lincoln's depression was physiological rather than religious in nature. Sometimes a chemical imbalance is just a chemical imbalance.

Guelzo points out a number of other correspondences and similarities. He maintains that the Reverend James Smith "bore some uncanny intellectual resemblances to that of the Lincolns" (p. 149). He examines the "eerie parallel" in the religious reflections of Emily Dickinson and Lincoln (p. 18). Referring to 1854 campaign speeches, he argues that "the notion of purifying the republican robe of liberty in a sacrificial washing sounded eerily like the millennial imagery of the martyrs in St. John's Revelation" (p. 193). And Lincoln's "Doctrine of Necessity," Guelzo contends, "more nearly echoed...the determinism of Jeremy Bentham, whose comments on free will and necessity have, when set beside Lincoln's, an eerily familiar ring" (p. 119). It is also true that Ronald Reagan's speeches sometimes sounded "eerily" like those of F.D.R.; but such a chilling similarity may reveal more about political strategy than personal philosophy.

A fourth interpretive problem involves the author's handling of Lincoln's "silences." Occasionally, when Guelzo's subject does not overtly address religious matters, the author maintains that Lincoln merely transferred spiritual concerns to other issues. Guelzo discusses "the satisfaction of loyalty" as "the most obvious moral surrogate for Christianity" (p. 101). "Duty became the moral surrogate of religion" (p. 158). "[A]lmost as a compensation for the absence of faith, 'infidels' like

Lincoln redoubled their own pursuit of conscientiousness" (p. 158). For Lincoln, "the Declaration came to assume the role of a substitute scripture" (p. 196). It appears that almost anything could have served as a proxy for religion. Such broad claims, however, tend to be highly speculative.

The author offers important insights about Lincoln's seeking, skeptical spiritual ruminations and illuminates the struggles his subject underwent to make sense of himself and his world. Guelzo does not need to press the material further to make his point. By doing so, he ironically verges on a weakness he observes in other works: the tendency to over-embellish Lincoln's religious life. Fortunately, Guelzo does not repeat the mistakes of some biographers who have transformed Lincoln into a full-fledged, faithful, reborn Christian. The author means to deal with Citizen Lincoln, not Saint Abraham, a man troubled by doubts rather than comforted by dogma, a politician at ease with Whiggish religious moralism but not orthodox Christian theology.

Yet the very title of the biography unnecessarily complicates the analysis. The phrase "Redeemer President" is not Guelzo's. It is certainly not Lincoln's. Indeed, one can hardly imagine, after reading Guelzo's account, how Lincoln would have abided such a label, especially "since Lincoln did not believe in the possibility of redemption for himself" (p. 446). The words are Walt Whitman's, published in 1856. The phrase, Guelzo notes, brings to mind the strained arguments of those who wanted to transform the late Mr. Lincoln into "Whitman's Redeemer President, redeeming the political community of the republic from the sin of slavery and corruption in his own blood and pronouncing forgiveness to all offenders" (p. 441). Guelzo recognizes that the phrase "redeemer president" carries considerable theological baggage. He also argues that it was a strange description to use for a president who had no tie to any church, who did not profess Christianity, and who died in, of all places, a theater.

The phrase might be appropriate for a book focused on the social construction of Lincoln's character -- but not for one proposing an intellectual reconstruction of Lincoln's own worldview. *Abraham Lincoln: Victorian Doubter* would have reflected more accurately the content and tenor of Lincoln's religious thought -- as well as Guelzo's own descriptions of his subject (p. 462).

Despite instances where Guelzo overstates his case -- and understates modern scholarship on the intellectual history of the early republic -- the author has still contributed an informative and illuminating study of Lincoln's life. Guelzo writes in a graceful style. His work tells the story of Lincoln's life in a comprehensive and dramatic fashion. He provides readers with a useful overview of the key currents of thought in the early 1800s. And he pulls together interpretive threads from a number of Lincoln studies. In particular, he extends further the "neo-orthodox" reading of Lincoln's religious principles outlined a decade and a half ago by Hans J. Morgenthau and David Hein in *Essays on Lincoln's Faith and Politics* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1985).

While not seeing himself as a "redeemer" president, Lincoln was a reflective leader for whom religious issues raised endless questions rather than conclusive answers. Perhaps the open-endedness of his inquiry helps account for the on-going (and stimulating) reexamination of his life that scholars such as Guelzo continue to present.

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