

Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics

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Review

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Winger, Stewart *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics*. Northern Illinois University Press, \$38.00 ISBN 875803008

Interpreting an icon

Study presents spiritual side of 16th president

It is often said that more books have been written in English about Abraham Lincoln than anyone except Jesus and Shakespeare. The remarkable accomplishments of our sixteenth president, and his central role in our greatest national tragedy, have led countless authors to trace the outline of Lincoln's life. The constant stream of new books about Lincoln will doubtless turn into a flood as the bicentennial of his birth approaches. New works are soon to appear about Lincoln's eloquence, his literary genius, his commitment to emancipation, and his role as commander-in-chief.

Fortunately these crowded conditions have not deterred Stewart Winger from producing an insightful and original work about one of the few aspects of Lincoln's life relatively neglected by scholars: his religion. Religion was one of the major themes of Allen Guelzo's superb, Lincoln Prize-winning biography in 1999, but Winger eschews biography for a more thematic approach. Ron White strongly emphasized religion in his wonderful 2002 study of the Second Inaugural, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*. Winger, too, deals with Lincoln's sacred effort, but his analysis also includes several other speeches, including the Second Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions.

Stewart Winger won the prestigious Hay-Nicolay Dissertation Prize from the Abraham Lincoln Association and the Lincoln Institute, and **Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics** is an expansion upon his thesis.

Winger portrays Lincoln as a Whig politician firmly opposed to the views of Young America, a political outlook that emphasized innovation and expansion,

and looked askance at notions of tradition or moral improvement. The skeptical Lincoln, like most of his fellow Whigs, was far more concerned with elevating the moral tone of the United States within its current boundaries, rather than casting about for new lands to conquer. Such views would later animate his lonely (in Illinois, anyway) stand against the Mexican War.

Lincoln articulated his political vision, according to Winger, using the language of Romantic Protestantism. The man from Illinois and his fellow Whigs rejected the libertarianism of the Democrats, believing that there was such thing as an objective good. Winger rightly points out on page 122 that Lincoln consistently stood for the same relatively stable set of beliefs throughout his public life, including the belief in rising standards of living, endless material progress, social mobility, and each individual's opportunity to rise. He identified strongly with humanitarian causes, though he counseled moderation in the pursuit of humanitarian ends.

In perhaps one of the most interesting observations in the book, Winger explains that Lincoln refused to cede the moral high ground to the more radical abolitionists. Seeking to explain the defeat of his political hero, Henry Clay, in the presidential contest of 1844, Lincoln chided those abolitionists who had deserted the Whigs to support the Liberty Party in New York. As Winger puts it on page 193, Any spiritual descendant of Martin Luther had to know that action taken merely for the sake of appearing righteous was unholy, especially when it had adverse effects, in this case, the defeat of Clay. In apologizing for his own more cautious approach he challenged the evangelical antislavery party on its own religious grounds.

Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics is laced with several references to Shakespeare which address both Lincoln's devotion to the poet and historian George Bancroft's comparison of Hamlet to the sixteenth president. These Shakespearean elements fit neatly into Winger's portrayal of a Whig politician attuned to the Romantic currents of the age. Such references also remind the reader of the Shakespearean elements of Lincoln's life, the way in which his writing was influenced by the Bard, and the remarkably slight attention paid by scholars to these vital connections.

This new emphasis on Lincoln's religious and philosophical views is a needed corrective to the more fashionable portrayal of him as a wily political operator. And yet, it is worth cautioning that any new interpretation of Lincoln

can potentially be overstated. It will always remain a challenge for scholars to create a balanced picture of Lincoln that weaves his undeniable spirituality with the messy political reality of the nineteenth century. William Lee Miller's *Lincoln's Virtues* is an excellent example of such a cohesive approach, and all students of Lincoln should be eagerly looking forward to his next volume, covering the war years.

Michael F. Bishop is executive director of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission. The commission's web site is www.lincolnbicentennial.gov.