

A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln and the Politics of Christian Love

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Review

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Havers, Grant N. *A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln and the Politics of Christian Love*. The University of Missouri Press, \$44.95 ISBN 978-0-8262-1857-5

The Intersection of Christianity and Politics

In this accessible and well-written book, Grant N. Havers discusses Abraham Lincoln and charity which the Bible calls love. Although it is pitched for political philosophers, he richly illuminates Christian charity and how it is noticeably absent from today's debates about religion and democracy. This is a work of political philosophy that probes profound themes of Lincoln's political thought and Lincoln's wider role in the tradition of American political thought. Along with Joseph R. Fornieri's *Lincoln's Political Faith* (Northern Illinois University Press) and Lucas Morel's *Lincoln's Sacred Effort* (*Lexington Books*), this work of political philosophy deals with the controversial yet crucial question of Lincoln's synthesis of religion and politics. Havers distinguishes his scholarship from these other works by highlighting the principle of charity in Lincoln's political thought and action. The philosophical statesmanship of Abraham Lincoln reflects deeply on this concept of charity that binds and elevates human beings.

Abraham Lincoln was not some monarch, living in a wholly alien society. Many of the issues of the mid-19th century – from the role of the federal government in the economy to whether America is a Christian nation – remain issues in the early 21st century.

In his long career as a Whig and Republican politician, Abraham Lincoln expressed views on many subjects other than unionism and slavery. Americans are rightly curious about the beliefs and values of the most iconic American president. Contemporary historians are inclined to deflect such questions by mumbling that Lincoln was “mysterious” or “enigmatic.” But there is no lack of

evidence. Lincoln's ideas about race, religion, and the Constitution are well known to scholars. What Lincoln might think about today's American politics is not only a legitimate question, but one that can be answered with a reasonable chance of success. In this provocative book, the author argues that charity is a central tenet of what Lincoln once called America's "political religion." He explores the implications of making Christian love the highest moral standard for American democracy with Lincoln's legacy demanding that a true democracy be charitable towards all.

What would Abraham Lincoln think of the religious right in today's Republican Party – and more to the point, what would the religious right think of him? According to his law partner, William H. Herndon, in 1834 Lincoln wrote "a little book on infidelity" in which he questioned "the divinity of Christ – Special Inspiration – Revelation, Etc." He reluctantly burned it when his friends warned him it would damage his career. During the same year, the young Whig politician criticized supporters of the Democrat Peter Cartwright, an evangelist turned politician as "in some degree priest-ridden." When he ran for Congress in 1846, Lincoln was accused by the religious right of the day of being an infidel. His reply was a classic of politically motivated equivocation: "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 any denomination of Christians in particular."

Lincoln's speeches and beliefs were deeply influenced by the King James Bible, and as the course of the Civil War mounted, he dwelled on the mysteries of Providence. According to his closest associates, however, he never became a Christian. "He had no faith in the Christian sense of the term – had faith in laws, principles, effects and causes," observed Judge David Davis, a longtime friend whom Lincoln appointed to the Supreme Court. His first law partner, John Todd Stewart, wrote, "He was an avowed and open infidel and sometimes bordered on atheism ... went further against Christian beliefs and doctrines and principles than any man I ever heard; he shocked me ... Lincoln always denied that Jesus was the Christ of God – denied that Jesus was the son of God as understood and maintained by the Christian church."

The book is as much a discussion about Lincoln's political legacy in the American political tradition amongst liberals and various factions of American conservatism. In particular, the author considers the disputed question over the relationship between reason and revelation in the works of the influential

political philosopher Leo Strauss and his students.

While Lincoln did not believe that Jesus was the son of God, he did believe in, as he stated in his Second Inaugural address, “with charity for all” and for the vision of human equality contained in the Declaration of Independence.

This work defends Lincoln’s understanding of charity as essential to the hope and vision of the Declaration of Independence while emphasizing the difficulty of fusing this ethic with the desire to spread democracy to people who do not share America’s Christian heritage.</p>

Those in our era are aware that there is evil in the world even if we were not in the presence of Hitler and Stalin. We know that it is necessary to fight that evil.

At the same time, we have a lingering awareness of the sinfulness within ourselves. As Cold War strategist George F. Kennan put it, “The fact of the matter is that there is a little bit of the totalitarian buried somewhere, way down deep, in each and every one of us.” So we as a people should not be carried away by our own righteousness or be seduced by the belief that we are innocent. As this book points out, even fighting evil can be corrupting. As Harry Truman said, “We all have to recognize, no matter how great our strength, that we must deny ourselves the license to do always as we please.”

Many champion the spread of democracy, knowing that democracy is the only system that fits humanity’s noble yet sinful nature. As the mid-century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr declared, “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

Abraham Lincoln talked about the need to balance the moral obligation to champion freedom with not getting swept up in self-destructive fervor. While Abraham Lincoln did not always get this balance right, he understood the difference of a moral foreign policy based on charity rather than the costly idolization of democracy. As such, *Lincoln and the Politics of Christian Love* makes a timely contribution to the wider debate over both the meaning of religion in American politics and the mission of America in the world, opening a new window on Lincoln’s lasting legacy.

Yet, Havers claims that the biblical notions of chosenness and American exceptionalism have been overemphasized in Lincoln's thought, thereby leading to utopian projects at home and foreign adventures abroad. Ideologically, he seeks to rescue Lincoln from neo-conservative interpreters who, in his view, have exploited Lincoln's legacy to justify policies like the invasion of Iraq and the welfare state at home. He does this by oversimplifying the views of these scholars: American exceptionalism is an important strand of Lincoln's and American political thought that need not derail into triumphalism, nor does the defense of equality as a principle of justice necessarily commit one to equality of results or the welfare state.

Notions of Christian charity, or love, strongly shape the political thought of Abraham Lincoln along with other leaders like Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King, Jr. who was deeply influenced by Niebuhr. Havers leads us through how Abraham Lincoln presided over a foundational moment in the development of American democracy, revealing both the problems and possibilities of making it a political ideal.

Havers argues that, it was Lincoln and his ingenious blend of Puritan and democratic insights who best fulfilled the promise of this nation's "bonds of affection." With his recognition of the imperfections of both North and South, his humility in the face of God's judgment on the Civil War, and his insistence on "charity for all," including the defeated Confederacy, as he firmly prosecuted a war in the name of a "new birth of freedom," Lincoln personified the possibilities of religious love turned into civic virtue.

Weaving a rich tapestry of insights from political science and literature and American religious history and political theory, *Lincoln and the Politics of Christian Love* is a major contribution to the study of American political identity. Grant N. Havers makes plain that civic charity, while commonly rejected as irrelevant or even harmful to political engagement, has been integral to our national character, even if it is not a panacea for the rest of the world. Nor should it be, "a quasi-religious mission to spread democracy" which, "may continue to harm the very image and stability of the nation" (182).

Ultimately, the Civil War was fundamentally a struggle to realize justice, not love. While at the end of the war Lincoln appealed to charity for all to bind the nation's wounds, we should never forget that justice could only be achieved through war, crucifixion, and suffering of the nation.

Frank J. Williams is founding Chair of The Lincoln Forum and co-author, with Harold Holzer and Edna Greene Medford, of The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views-Social, Political, Iconographic, and serves as contributing columnist for the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial and Civil War Sesquicentennial, Civil War Book Review