Review

A. GLENN CROTHERS


The nature of Abraham Lincoln’s faith intrigued contemporaries and remains a rich topic of debate among scholars, who have attributed his evolving spiritual beliefs variously to his Calvinist upbringing in a Separate Baptist Church, his reading as a young man of rationalist freethinkers like Thomas Paine, his attendance at Springfield’s First Presbyterian Church in the 1850s, and the personal and national traumas wrought by the Civil War. Though contemporaries, such as William Stoddard, noted Lincoln’s receptiveness to Quakers during his presidency, few scholars have attributed his faith or his wartime decisions to the influence of the Society of Friends. At least not until William Kashatus, who in *Abraham Lincoln, the Quakers, and the Civil War* argues that Friends played “an important role” in shaping “the president’s evolving spirituality as well as his wartime policies” (120). Kashatus documents all the significant wartime interactions—correspondence, petitions, and personal visits—between Quakers and the president and makes a strong case for their shared empathy. He is less convincing, however, that Friends played a central role in shaping either Lincoln’s spiritual life or his policy decisions. Instead, Kashatus’s insistence on “a strong kindred bond between the president and Friends” (8) reveals more about the way Quakers constructed their memory of the Civil War, and the propensity of Americans to understand Lincoln through their own ideological lenses, than it does about Friends’ influence on Lincoln’s thought.

Kashatus’s case for Friends’ influence on Lincoln lies on four central claims. First, he argues that Lincoln shared with Quakers key moral and religious beliefs: a moral antipathy to slavery, a belief in the “doctrine of necessity,” and a perception—derived from that doctrine—that humans “are instruments of the divine will” (120). Second, Friends’ visits to Lincoln—both individually and in groups—and their words of advice moved Lincoln progressively toward an embrace of
universal emancipation. Third, Quakers influenced the liberal policy Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton adopted toward citizens whose pacifist religious principles led them to resist military service after the Union passed its first conscription law in March 1863. Kasha-
tus argues that Lincoln’s push for the February 1864 law that enabled conscientious objectors to serve in noncombatant roles or pay a fine of $300 to a fund to aid freedpeople resulted from Quaker consultations with Stanton and Lincoln in November and December 1863 (though Friends rejected the measure as inadequate). Finally, Kashatus claims that Quaker relief and education efforts on behalf of freed people after 1863 “anticipated” and “inspired” (107) Lincoln’s embrace of similar policies in the waning months of the war, particularly his support for the creation of the Freedmen’s Bureau in March 1865. Kashatus emphasizes the influence of Progressive Friends who visited Lincoln in August 1862 and thereby helped push him toward emancipation, and the October 1862 visit of Orthodox Friend Elizabeth Gurney and the pair’s subsequent correspondence in convincing Lincoln that he had—through his embrace of emancipation—become an agent of divine providence.

Gurney and Lincoln clearly developed a mutual concern for one another. Friends reported they saw “tears running down the cheeks of our honored President as Gurney solemnly addressed him,” and at the meeting’s close Lincoln twice repeated, “I am glad of this inter-
view” (2). A year later Lincoln requested that Gurney write to him. Her ensuing August 1863 letter voiced her “hearty sympathy” for the president’s “heavy burdens and responsibilities” and expressed her belief that God “did design to make” Lincoln “instrumental in accomplishing” slavery’s end (85–86). Lincoln’s September 1864 response reflected his sympathy for Gurney and his understanding of the “hard dilemma” the Civil War presented for Friends forced to choose between their opposition “to both war and oppression” (4). But Lincoln’s comments also reveal, contrary to Kashatus, the sig-
nificant differences between his fatalism, embodied in his embrace of the doctrine of necessity, and Friends’ confidence that they (and Lincoln) acted as agents of God’s will. Certainly, both believed that God governed earthly events, and Lincoln hoped that the war would result in “some great good.” However, unlike Friends—even those of the Orthodox branch to which Gurney belonged—who believed in continuing revelation through the means of the inward light, Lincoln concluded that “erring mortals” could not “accurately per-
ceive” God’s intentions “in advance.” As he would later state in his
second inaugural address, “The Almighty has His own purposes” that humans could not readily perceive.¹ If Lincoln embraced a doctrine of necessity—which Kashatus defines as “the conviction that the actions of any individual are predetermined and shaped by the unknowable wishes of a higher power” (46)—the Friends who urged him to free the slaves and save the Union, confident that such ends represented the will of the Almighty, did not.²

Other problems undermine Kashatus’s argument. Abolitionists and religious leaders visited and petitioned Lincoln regularly during his presidency, many of them urging him to move forward more aggressively on the issues of emancipation and black equality. Lincoln met them all, working “to maintain good relations with church leaders of every major faith” and nurture the churches’ crucial support for the northern war effort. Many of these clergy saw Lincoln as an instrument of divine will in saving the nation and ending slavery, and like the Quakers whom Kashatus describes, they prayed on his behalf, defended the administration’s wartime measures, and urged their congregants to support his reelection in 1864.³ Placed in this broader religious context, the words and support of a small number of Friends—who represented a tiny fraction of the Union’s believers in 1860—seem less significant in shaping Lincoln’s policies and religious pronouncements. Likewise, Kashatus’s claim that the Freedmen’s Bureau was “inspired” by Quaker efforts to educate and aid freedpeople during the Civil War—as noteworthy as those efforts proved—disregards the role of a much larger ecumenical cast of black and white reformers and abolitionists who shaped its creation. Friends’ efforts likely garnered the attention of policy makers, and Quaker schools certainly benefited from federal funds and protection in the immediate postwar years, but any convincing evaluation of the significance of Friends’ work on behalf of the freedpeople requires a greater effort at contextualization.

Kashatus’s study suffers regularly from this sort of special pleading on behalf of Quakers. He argues, for example, that Lincoln first offered his plan for gradual compensated emancipation in Delaware because of the state’s “considerable Quaker population with a strong antislavery tradition and an active Underground Railroad network” (120). Here, Kashatus ignores the obvious: Lincoln turned to Delaware because it possessed the smallest enslaved population of any of the loyal border slave states, less than two percent of the total population concentrated in the state’s two southernmost counties. Kashatus likewise attributes an outsize role to English Quaker John P. Bright in shaping Britain’s decision not to recognize the Confederacy. Though Bright proved a persuasive defender of the Union cause in Parliament, Britain’s decision ultimately reflected a realistic evaluation of the nation’s political and economic interests and popular antislavery opinion. Union victory at Antietam and Lincoln’s decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, not John Bright’s parliamentary eloquence, barred the door to British recognition of the Confederacy.

Kashatus closes with a description of Quaker myths about the relationship between Friends and Lincoln, specifically that Lincoln died with Elizabeth Gurney’s letters in his pocket and that Isaac and Sarah Harvey, a Quaker couple from Ohio, visited Lincoln three days before he issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, prompting this “sudden shift in policy” (121). Kashatus notes that historians have debunked both stories but insists nonetheless that each has some basis in fact. He speculates, for example, that Robert Lincoln, seeking to “spare his mother and the family any humiliation,” “may have quietly removed” Gurney’s letter from his father’s pocket to hide the “embarrassing” “intimacy” of the relationship between the married president and the widowed Quaker (125). Likewise, he surmises that because Isaac Harvey obtained three letters of introduction from the governors of Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio to meet Lincoln “it does appear that the Harveys and Lincoln met sometime between 1861 and 1864” (123), despite no further evidence of such a meeting. Both stories offer the opportunity for Kashatus to explore the nature of historical memory, especially among Quakers in the post–Civil War era when these myths gained currency, but rather than explore the reasons Friends forged and repeated these unsubstantiated stories—indeed, as late as 2009 Wilmington College honored the Harveys with a statue inscribed with the words “Who Sends Thee?”—he states only that they reflected “the special relationship Friends believed they enjoyed with Lincoln” (125).
With this conclusion, Kashatus moves from the realm of historical scholarship into the territory of Lincoln legend, an unfortunate turn for what is a generally well researched if not fully contextualized study.\footnote{4} Friends clearly perceived in Lincoln’s presidency an opportunity to forward their religiously inspired reform agenda, and they saw evidence of God’s handiwork in his determination to end slavery and save the Union. Moreover, Lincoln’s sympathetic response to the Quakers who visited him and his indulgence of religious conscientious objectors in general strengthened this perceived bond. Still, it remains a problematic leap to conclude, as Kashatus does, that Quakers shared Lincoln’s fatalism, had a “profound” influence on the president’s “spiritual development” (68), or played a significant role in shaping his embrace of emancipation and the policies of the Freedmen’s Bureau. And so the myths surrounding Lincoln continue to grow.

\footnote{4. For a recent study of such Lincoln myths, see Edward Steers Jr., \textit{Lincoln Legends: Myths, Hoaxes, and Confabulations Associated with Our Greatest President} (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007).}