Review Essay

STEWART L. WINGER


This book is a work of political theory rather than of history. From Lincoln’s life and writing, Fornieri seeks to elucidate a set of doctrines or teachings. “Despite the voluminous literature on Lincoln,” writes Fornieri, “few works have offered a sustained exploration of the philosophical coherence of his combination of reason and revelation” (34). From this, Fornieri presses a current political argument: “A presentation of Lincoln’s biblical republicanism will show that a nonsectarian interpretation of the Bible, one concordant with unassisted human reason, may be viewed as publicly authoritative within the context of the separation of church and state” (10). Working within a relatively conservative tradition of scholarship, Fornieri sees in Lincoln an antidote to the moral relativism that, according to this school of thought, threatens American life (8). “Without shared consensus,” he declares, “amoral pluralism may lead to anarchy and balkanization” (174).

In the flurry of recent scholarship centered on Lincoln and religion, Fornieri makes several significant contributions, and conservative or not, anyone interested in the place of religion in Lincoln’s thought should consider this book. Whether or not as a nation we can now respond by adopting “biblical republicanism,” Americans on both sides of our current cultural and political divide should at least consider the strengths of Lincoln’s assertion that public policy must ultimately rest on what Lincoln called “philosophical public opinion” (15). Lincoln saw that if the public became convinced that slavery was right, liberal democratic processes themselves would clearly have failed. Thus Lincoln concluded that even in a democracy, responsible leaders could not avoid making substantive moral claims. “The very essence of Lincoln’s leadership,” notes Fornieri, “thus involved a moral stewardship that sought to guide public opinion toward just policies and ends” (14). Others have explained this aspect of Lincoln’s thought, but Fornieri makes this crucial
point especially clear.

Fornieri presents Lincoln’s “biblical republicanism” to correct what he sees as the secular biases of “Straussians” within the neo-conservative movement who typically treat religion in instrumental terms. Thus in contrast to Harry Jaffa, who saw Lincoln’s “civil religion” as the noble lie of a philosopher king who recognized that lesser mortals need all this religion stuff to be kept properly on the straight and narrow, the purpose of this book is to emphasize the sincerity, importance, and profundity of Lincoln’s religious appeal. Jaffa and the Straussians are committed to rationalist ethical theory and are therefore interested in religion almost solely for its political effects. They therefore see Christianity almost strictly in terms of Aquinas and the natural law (97). By contrast, Fornieri at least notes the Augustinian presence in Lincoln: “In an Augustinian sense, faith even proceeded reason for Lincoln” (51, 123, 139). While he does not develop the interpretive thread, Fornieri, as a conservative, is more genuinely respectful of Lincoln and religion than the Straussians, and that respect pays dividends.

Perhaps most helpful, Fornieri counters the view that Lincoln used religious language cynically or manipulatively, claiming, “Lincoln used biblical language in at least five different ways: (1) theologically, to ponder God’s providential role in order and history; (2) civil theologically, as a transcendent rule and measure to judge public life; (3) evocatively, for stylistic purposes and rhetorical emphasis; (4) allegorically, to clarify or didactically to convey a respective political teaching by means of biblical illustration; (5) and existentially, as a meditative unfolding of his personal experience of biblical faith” (38). Lincoln did not use religion merely for political effect, and for those who still need convincing, the examples Fornieri adduces here make a strong case that Lincoln thought in genuinely biblical terms. For instance, Fornieri uncovers Lincoln’s use of Galatians 6:7 (129) revealing the way Lincoln thought and spoke within a biblical framework, seemingly without effort. Far from an affectation, the Bible was part of his accent. The index, as well, can be used to find the uses Lincoln put to various scriptural passages.

As one who was initially skeptical of seeing Lincoln as arguing from natural law, I now find myself more sympathetic to the idea that Lincoln did derive aspects of his “philosophical public opinion” from “natural reason.” Fornieri adduces quotations to show that, on Lincoln’s own understanding of these authorities at least, he consciously discriminated between unaided natural reason and
scriptural authority, availing himself of either or both as the case
demanded (5, 140).

While I accept Fornieri’s basic point that Lincoln may well rep-
resent a model for bringing moral and religious discourse into lib-
elar democratic politics without posing a theocratic threat to those
democratic processes, I suspect most historians will have serious
problems, not so much with Fornieri’s treatments of Lincoln, which
are well worth serious consideration, but rather with the way Forni-
eri frames his discussion in the broader scope of intellectual history.
He postulates a timeless, eternal Western intellectual tradition and
a timeless eternal Lincoln. For Fornieri, all of Lincoln’s positions are
clearly and unambiguously mandated by the three “R’s”—reason,
revelation, and republicanism—and the only wonder is that other
people did not immediately see it that way. This, I would suggest,
does a disservice to Lincoln’s political mastery, as well as to the
complexities of any common moral life. After 1854, Lincoln took
a very precise position in opposing the expansion of slavery, even
while he accepted the South’s constitutional right to the return
of fugitive slaves, and he once acted as a lawyer in precisely that
pursuit. Lincoln was willing to acquiesce in the probable expansion
of slavery after 1850, but not after 1854. But if it was “prudent” to
compromise on the expansion of slavery in 1850, why was it not
in 1860? And if all of reason, revelation, and republicanism lead
univocally to the precise and politically delicate terms of Lincoln’s
“ultimate extinction” position, why was nearly everyone else so
obtuse? And would Lincoln now look so prudent had any of his
great gambles failed?

Problems inherent in the “timeless” approach are clearly seen on
the issue of biblical revelation. Following Basler, Fornieri contrasts
Lincoln’s “Fragment on the Pro-Slavery Theology” with Slavery Or-
dained of God, by Rev. Frederick Ross. This is a wonderful exchange
because it so clearly shows the confidence with which Lincoln took
up theological argument. Unfortunately, Fornieri makes little of this
opportunity to show the precise way in which Lincoln’s reading of
the Bible had come to differ so much from a prominent proslavery
theologian’s. Instead of pursuing those rich subtleties, Fornieri
sides with Lincoln in maintaining that slavery is in fact wrong,
and leaves it at that. It may well be a correct characterization of
Lincoln’s position to say that “the proslavery interpretation of the
Bible was not merely one of many equally valid perspectives; it
was perniciously false and contradicted by the complementary
teachings of reason, revelation, and republicanism” (78). But here
Fornieri clearly speaks in his own voice, enlisting Lincoln’s aid in arguing against multiculturalism and moral relativism. Fornieri describes Lincoln’s position in order to use it as a club, not to analyze it.

The problems with this approach have nothing to do with the merits or demerits of multiculturalism. In the first place, Fornieri consistently asserts that the Bible speaks univocally against slavery (119, 131, 133). While as a practicing twenty-first-century Christian I might agree with the emancipatory implications of Galations 3:28, it should go without saying that for most of Christian history, slavery was not seen as necessarily unchristian. Christian thinkers from Paul to Aquinas to Winthrop were hardly unambiguously antislavery. Yet for Fornieri, Lincoln read scripture correctly where others did not, because he read it in the light of natural law the way St. Thomas did (141). (One wonders what Aquinas might have made of Lincoln on the bondage of the will, to say nothing of why Aquinas was not more strongly antislavery himself). As David Brion Davis points out, until as late as the 1740s, even Quakers maintained that “true Christians… treat their slaves with compassion, and convert servitude into an agency of conversion.”¹ And this is almost precisely what the Rev. Frederick Ross said in Slavery Ordained of God. Thus the claim that the pro-slavery theology is simply “perniciously false” obscures the moral revolution of the eighteenth century that Lincoln inherited but Southerners resisted, both for the obvious reasons of self-interest and also because they had centuries of seemingly solid doctrine on their side. It deprives history of any real conflict not to show the way Southerners could mount a plausible biblical defense of slavery. And it obscures Lincoln’s brilliance in fashioning his own response.

Thus more might have been made of the contrast between Ross and Lincoln. Was Lincoln more Arminian than the Southern Presbyterian as one might guess, stressing free will and moral autonomy. Or, ironically, was Lincoln actually more theologically orthodox on this point? Perhaps the two men were equally orthodox in their theological anthropology. Was it just a matter of where they came down on the slavery issue, or were there also more strictly theological issues at stake? Did the Southerner counter Northern claims to be building the Temple of God here on earth with “post-millennial” claims of his own? If so, how did these claims contrast with

Lincoln’s views? And it would be interesting to know what parts of the Bible Lincoln drew from, what parts he shied away from, and why. This would help the historian to place Lincoln more accurately in historical context and help the political theorist to characterize Lincoln’s thought more precisely in terms of religious typology. Did Lincoln choose his scriptural passages differently, thus casting his theological inheritance in his own unique way, one which Fornieri and this writer alike now find congenial. Could Lincoln in any way have scooped Martin Luther King or even twentieth-century liberation theology? Could he have owed a debt to abolitionists like Theodore Parker or even to African American liberationist readings of scripture he may have encountered in his youth? How, in short, does Lincoln’s antislavery reading of scripture fit in the history of American and Christian thought? But this would involve greater recognition of the complexities of the past than attempted here.

If the Bible does not speak univocally against slavery, what are we to say of a term like the Judeo-Christian God? (51). That term basically originated in the mid-twentieth century when it served the purpose of helping Americans overcome the “Anglo-Saxon Protestant” self-conception that held sway say roughly from 1878 to World War II and the civil rights movement. It was never a useful term of historical analysis, and it says little or nothing important about Lincoln. For much of history, it might even make more sense to speak of “Judeo-Muslim” civilization in contrast to Christian Europe. The revival of the term “Judeo-Christian” in conservative circles today generally says more about the cultural politics within these circles than it does about their subjects of their writing. The term thrifty bridges the historical divide between neo-conservative Jews and the Christian Right.

As with the first “R”—revelation—one simply cannot assert that reason has condemned slavery univocally. If the Bible and Christianity are not unambiguously antislavery, the best one can say for the natural law tradition is that it is not unambiguously proslavery. Suffice it to say, Aristotle defended the institution of slavery. George Fitzhugh, and not Abraham Lincoln, was the Aristotelian of mid-nineteenth-century America. Nor was Aquinas clearly against slavery. The natural law has shown a remarkable ability to change with the times, and Jefferson famously did put antislavery on a natural law footing. But of course he began to have a change of heart in his Notes on the State of Virginia where “self-evident truths” came under the glass of his empiricism. Jefferson clearly struggled, but he was not unambiguously antislavery. What is deemed “natural” has a lot
to do with who does the deeming, and thus Socrates and Augustine (and Lincoln) were right to acknowledge that self-knowledge was more fundamental than natural law. Only after self-scrutiny and confession can we see the world aright, without malice and with charity.

The case is similar with equality. “We may hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” but Plato and Aristotle certainly did not. They began from an assumption of natural inequality, as did Jonathan Winthrop in the Speech on the Arabella cited by Fornieri: “Lincoln’s belief that America had a divine mission or calling to serve as an exemplar of democracy to the world was influenced by the cultural force of New England Puritanism as represented by John Winthrop” (24). Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” may well be one of the most cited and least read works in the “canon” as here envisioned. Winthrop began this with a denial of natural equality: “God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection.” Winthrop sought to preserve the power of landed gentry oligarchs and it should go without saying that the Puritans were not democrats.

Winthrop was deeply suspicious of economic activity as well, and in addition to a denial that natural law and scripture would countenance a drive for equality, the second great theme of “A Model of Christian Charity” was that the drive for economic advancement was likewise counter to the covenanted purpose of what soon became Massachusetts Bay. Says Fornieri, “the Puritan idea of mission implied a relationship of corresponding rights and responsibilities. On the one hand, the notion obliged them to act in accordance with the demands of a model community. On the other, it entitled them to a chosen status, one denoting a unique relationship with the Creator. Nevertheless, as Winthrop sternly warned, divine favor could be withdrawn if the Puritans failed to live up to their moral responsibilities” (25). This is correct as far as it goes, but Lincoln was much less willing to arrogate to himself the purposes of God than was Winthrop. Strikingly, the moral responsibilities Winthrop referred to run counter to most of American historical experience and counter to Lincoln’s emphasis on both equality and economic opportunity. Fornieri is not alone in conveniently ignoring the substance of Winthrop. Quoth Winthrop, “but if our hearts shall turn away so that we will not obey but shall be seduced and worship other Gods, our pleasures, and profits, and serve them; it
is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the
good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it.” Alas,
Ronald Reagan’s speechwriters did not even bother to read the very
paragraph from which the famous “city on a hill” line was taken.
References like these from the academic right are generally more
about the semblance of scholarly authority than the substance.

Nor can the third “R”—“republicanism”—be said to be univocally
antislavery. Space does not permit, but suffice it to say, Fornieri is
far too sanguine about the antislavery intentions of the Founders.
This can only be achieved through a highly selective reading of
the past and of the historiography; thus it comes at the expense
of our finest historians, many of whom we can hardly dismiss as
left-wing nay-sayers of America. Henry F. May, David Brion Davis,
and Edmund Morgan come to mind, but there are many others.

By giving the impression that Lincoln was simply right and ev-
eryone else simply wrong, Fornieri’s interpretation also does a dis-
service to the rich tradition of abolitionism. Not only is it obvious to
Fornieri that reason, revelation, and republicanism unambiguously
denounce slavery, it is also obvious to him that radical abolitionists
were simply wrong to push too strongly for abolition (123, 144).
Perhaps unconsciously echoing early- and mid-twentieth century,
pro-Confederate historiography in which abolitionist was almost
synonymous with wild-eyed idealist and fanatic, Fornieri is confident
that Lincoln had the only defensible position on the slavery ques-
tion.

But was there no sense in which even John Brown was proven
right in the end when he said that the sins of this nation would not
be purged except by blood? Isn’t this the same conclusion Lincoln
came to in the Second Inaugural? In the 1850s Lincoln was willing
to allow slavery to continue perhaps another one hundred years!
If justice delayed is justice denied, as in this case it surely would
have been, then even Lincoln had sins to atone for. In a sense, he
really was “that slave-hound from Illinois.” Lincoln himself came
to recognize this, even if Fornieri does not. Fornieri quotes but does
not apply the relevant passage from Lincoln’s letter to Thurlow
Weed in which Lincoln says of his Second Inaugural: “whatever
humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself” (172). By
dismissing the abolitionists too easily, Fornieri misses the very
depths of Lincoln’s confession. Beginning with what I take to be
Lincoln’s honest confession of his own racism in the Peoria speech,
as well as his acknowledgement in the same breath that his own
feelings might not quite square with true justice, we lose the true
Lincoln if we obscure his self-confessing tendencies. And it is less surprising that Lincoln would say of reconstruction plans: “I dislike an oath which requires a man to swear he has not done wrong. It rejects the Christian principle of forgiveness on terms of repentance. I think it is enough if the man does no wrong hereafter” (171). In spite of Fornieri’s convincing argument that Lincoln argued from “natural reason,” more of Augustine and less of Aquinas, more self-critique and less self-congratulatory moralizing accurately characterize Lincoln’s position. As a nation, if we say we are without sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. There may be an urgent twenty-first-century lesson in this after all.

I find this pattern with startling consistency. In order to avoid anything like “amoral pluralism” (174), neo-conservatives take great pains to postulate unity. Everyone “great” must be brought into essential agreement with our now early-twenty-first-century “conservative” moral outlook. But do we seriously think society will come unhinged if we acknowledge that our “great thinkers” disagreed profoundly on the most important questions? Must we therefore deny the rich diversity of our own past and shut off any honest engagement with history? To the detriment of historical inquiry, Fornieri means to suggest that the answers to moral questions are obvious.

All too predictably, we are now asked to fold Lincoln into the resulting biblical, “Judeo-Christian”/Augusto-Thomistic-Puritan/Natural Law/Jeffersonian/Founding Father/Heritage Foundation mush. This is unfortunate because one of Lincoln’s most attractive traits was his ability to remain at home in a world of honestly and carefully nuanced disagreement. Lincoln often articulated the positions of his opponents better than those opponents themselves. Without losing his sense of moral direction or his sense of humor, Lincoln generally, though not always, remained fully at home in a twilight world of self-scrutiny and long moral shadows. We might strive to do the same.