Review Essay

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Stewart Winger provides here a rich, complex series of arguments about Abraham Lincoln’s religion in relation to the intellectual and moral foundations of his era’s political ideology. The volume is prefaced by a lengthy quotation from John Maynard Keynes, who once asserted that “the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas…[S]oon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or ill” (2). Readers, thus, are forewarned that Winger’s will be intellectual history of the unrelenting sort. And the promise of Keynes’s assertion is very well fulfilled in a book that, even when it might be mistaken, is never less than thought-provoking, engaging, and profound.

With the best recent scholarship, Winger seeks to embed Lincoln in the passions, instincts, convictions, debates, and circumstances of his own time. Along with others who have contributed so splendidly in recent years to the understanding of Lincoln, Winger makes full use of the carefully sifted documentary record that has been so painstakingly prepared by Roy Basler, Don Fehrenbacher, Virginia Fehrenbacher, Douglas Wilson, Rodney Davis, and Michael Burlingame.

On the basis of this scholarship and his own careful reading, Winger’s main contention is that Lincoln’s religion represented—or came to represent—a singularly antebellum *tertium quid* situated between revivalistic evangelical Protestantism and utilitarian Paineite liberalism. In the terms of Winger’s title, Lincoln’s “romantic” convictions allowed him to recapture some of the spirit of evangelicalism—trust in God, belief in providence, commitment to morality—without necessarily accepting the evangelicals’ Enlightenment rationalism or their narrowly literal interpretation of the Bible. Central to Winger’s argument is that Lincoln’s “romantic
religion provided a key component for his deeply held Whig political values. To make this part of his case, Winger devotes many illuminating pages to documenting the systemic differences between Lincoln’s Whig convictions and the Democratic principles of Stephen A. Douglas. Almost as many pages are taken up with a similar contrast between Lincoln and the Democratic historian, diplomat, and public orator, George Bancroft.

By identifying Lincoln’s religion as “romantic” and by contrasting his theologically informed politics with the Democratic ideology of Douglas and Bancroft, Winger is poised to sort through the complexities of Lincoln’s own positions. In the first instance, he underscores earlier work by Daniel Walker Howe, Richard Carwardine, Michael Holt, and Allen Guelzo to show that religious convictions were always part and parcel of Whig ideology and, thus, always part of Lincoln’s basic political philosophy. Winger is especially persuasive in arguing that the Whig commitment to “positive moral government” entailed the general sort of religious beliefs that also characterized Lincoln’s mature political views. Against Howe’s detailing of the Whig position as composed of commitment to common law, Protestant piety, Scottish moral philosophy, and classical republicanism, Winger contends that the belief in “positive moral government” became even more important as the Scottish philosophy and classical republicanism (with their roots in Enlightenment circumstances) declined. Winger returns to following Howe in his description of the Whig commitment to capitalism, economic opportunity, and commercial expansion; that commitment, in Winger’s view, differed from post-bellum capitalism because it understood wage labor as only a temporary condition that the democratic United States opened up so that individuals (like Lincoln) could rise to become self-sufficient citizens. As an aside, Winger argues plausibly that one of the reasons for the massive lack of historical attention to Whig political philosophy has been the modern misidentification of Whig individualistic capitalism with the industrial giantism of the post-war period. (It is also worth noting that the Whig ideal of the self-directed citizen of high personal integrity did, in fact, maintain more classical republicanism than Winger concedes.) Winger’s depiction of Lincoln as a deeply committed Whig also includes a discerning discussion of William Seward’s appeal to “higher law” in response to the Compromise of 1850 and the extension of fugitive slave legislation; to Winger, Seward was as careful in putting this notion to work as Lincoln was when he incorporated religious sensibilities into his political
In a further set of well-documented conclusions, Winger details the broader implications of basic Whig convictions. He argues, for example, that Lincoln’s moral opposition to slavery was deeply seated and very long lived; tactics in putting that opposition into play may have changed over time, but not the basic conviction. In addition, as opposed to Douglas and the Democrats, Lincoln never considered the voice of the people to be the voice of God, nor, in opposition to Bancroft, did he ever equate the course of American history with the coming of the Kingdom of God. To Lincoln, rather, Christianity and the United States were analogous—in both cases, the outer casing (organized churches and constituted nation) were not nearly so important as the inner spiritual core (God’s providential rule over the world and the moral promise enshrined in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal”). Although Lincoln shared a romantic view of the United States with Bancroft, the former was never as uncritical of the country as the latter. Despite their ideological differences, however, Bancroft’s two funeral addresses for Lincoln, with their stress on Lincoln’s democratic identification with the people, became canonical. Yet Bancroft’s picture of Lincoln as a simple frontiersman letting himself be borne along by the genius of the American people represented a grave distortion. Lincoln’s real position did not so much rest on undifferentiated trust in democracy as it did on the need to exploit democratic opportunities for educating the people in their moral privileges and moral duties.

Winger’s argument for the importance of religion and “higher law” morality in Lincoln’s Whig picture of the world also entails careful adjudication of questions about what Lincoln’s religion was really like. As others have concluded, so Winger also feels that considerable change took place in Lincoln’s personal beliefs over the course of his adult life—from a dalliance during the 1830s with utilitarianism in philosophy, the deism of Tom Paine in theology, and universalism in his understanding of human salvation, to positions after moving to Springfield and then on to Washington that came considerably closer to Protestant orthodoxy. Winger also contends that, even when Lincoln was wandering off into the Paineite wilderness, his upbringing as a Calvinistic Baptist left him with an unusually strong suspicion of Enlightenment notions of human self-determination. The reverse of this suspicion was Lincoln’s lifelong belief in a “doctrine of necessity,” which at times resembled simple fatalism but increasingly manifested itself as trust in divine
providence. One of Winger’s most convincing judgments puts the matter like this: “Lincoln’s version of necessity was theological rather than mechanistic…. If Lincoln personalized his God only very rarely…, he nonetheless always assumed that the universe was morally guided” (181). The belief in “necessity,” moreover, allowed Lincoln on occasion to “out-orthodox the orthodox” through gentle criticism of the era’s enthrallement with the power of self-determining personal choice. Yet despite his providentialism—as well as his near teetotalism and an unusual facility in quoting the Bible—Lincoln did not make an evangelical profession of faith or adopt the pietistic conventions of his age. Lincoln shared belief in providence with the ministers James Smith (Springfield) and Phineas Gurley (Washington), but not the specifics of the evangelical religion they advocated. In contrast to most of the era’s professional Christians, Lincoln’s providentialism was very reserved—only on the rarest occasions, as in the events leading up to his decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation—did he pretend to fathom the specific details of God’s control over the world.

Winger’s judgments about Lincoln’s personal religion, as well as about the function of religion in his Whig ideology, are well-considered, but they do lead him into conflict with several distinguished Lincoln scholars. In these conflicts, often spelled out in the notes, Winger is most convincing when he suggests that David Donald misconstrued matters of character, as well as conviction, by featuring Lincoln’s “passivity.” Lincoln was, in fact, a compulsive worker as lawyer and politician and, once past initial indecision, a most active president. Where Donald read “passivity” from Lincoln’s references to the overriding hand of providence, Winger urges that he should have recognized instead “a Romantic embodiment of Max Weber’s Protestant ethic” (156). Similarly, Alfred Kazin’s account of Lincoln’s Calvinist leanings as a leftover remnant from “the hardships of the frontier” badly misinterpreted what Winger, with solid evidence, describes more accurately as “a finely articulated result of centuries of [Reformed Protestant] religious development” (172). Against both Allen Guelzo and Douglas Wilson, Winger argues that Lincoln’s engagement as a young man with utilitarian and deistic ideas was superficial and relatively unimportant for his fully developed convictions. This difference of opinion is harder to judge, since it requires an opinion about the spirit of Lincoln’s mature providentialism and perhaps also about whether the melancholia that continued through the White House years represented only Lincoln’s realistic reaction to a world full of suffering and grief (Winger) or was rooted in
Lincoln’s earlier despairing conclusions about the indifference of God to the world he had created and then sent off on its course of iron cause and mechanical effect (Guelzo and Wilson). The issue is by no means simple, but Winger’s arguments have contributed to a fuller understanding of how Lincoln’s early opinions may have related to his later convictions.

Winger’s own conclusions, along with his strictures against other historians, carry weight because they are based on careful interpretation of Douglas and Bancroft as Lincoln’s ideological opponents, deep understanding of the intellectual history of antebellum religion and politics, and close readings of Lincoln’s own key statements from the 1830s through to the Second Inaugural Address.

Still, some questions remain. One concerns Winger’s account of what lay behind the succinct, but stunning, declaration concerning the mysteries of an all-wise providence in the Second Inaugural. Winger discerns a major change in Lincoln’s attitude toward the status of the United States as taking place only in the difficult summer of 1864, with Grant stalled before Richmond and Sherman not yet triumphant in Georgia. Before then, according to Winger, Lincoln’s romantic nationalism, while tempered in comparison to Bancroft’s, was still vigorous. If the United States was not the chosen nation, it was the home (in a pre-presidential phrase) of “the almost chosen people.” Thus, in Winger’s view, the Gettysburg Address of late 1863 was “the apex in the development of Lincoln’s Romantic nationalism” (202). Only in the disappointments of mid-1864 did Lincoln conclude that, in fact, God could probably get along without the United States, and it was this opinion that lay behind his assertion in March 1865 that “The Almighty has His own purposes.” Alternatively, however, it could be suggested that the skein of reasoning leading up to the Second Inaugural began much earlier. In September 1862, Lincoln not only made his uncharacteristically specific reading of providence before issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, but he also wrote the private memorandum that Hay and Nicolay later labeled a “meditation on divine will.” Doubts about the messianic character of the United States were fully evident in this document’s conclusion that “In the present civil war it is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party.”

had already begun to contest his belief in the divine destiny of the United States.

Doubts may also be raised about Winger’s use of the concept “romantic” to explain Lincoln’s positions. Doubtless, Lincoln shared with many of his peers, including George Bancroft, an impatience with mechanical understandings of life and a commitment to sentiment as more important for revealing the human condition than Enlightenment rationality. Yet Lincoln was never so simply a “romantic” as he was definitively a Whig. Since, for example, his commitment to careful reasoning always remained part of his make-up, it is difficult to see how a generic academic construct like “romantic” can capture the complexities of Lincoln’s convictions. Winger has made a real contribution by identifying romantic elements in Lincoln’s principles and also in detailing the way in which Whigs benefited from a “moral romanticism” and Democrats promoted a “romantic nationalism.” But labeling Lincoln with an essentialist “romanticism” risks the same kind of damage that Bancroft perpetrated by describing Lincoln in terms of an essentialist democracy.

Despite such criticism, this is a worthy book. It deserves to rank with Allen Guelzo’s Redeemer President (1999) and Richard Carwardine’s Lincoln (2003) as not only one of the best books on Lincoln’s religion, but also one of the best books for showing how Lincoln’s religion fit into the broader commitments that motivated his aspirations as an ambitious Whig and his actions as a Republican president.