Review

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“The author is aware that he is dipping his net into a stream already darkened by too much ink. The fact that there are so many books on the religion of Abraham Lincoln is a chief reason why there should be one more.”¹ The minister William E. Barton wrote these words nearly a century ago, and since that time the already choppy stream of opinion on Lincoln’s religious beliefs has swelled into a raging river. Anyone ambitious enough to run the rapids must navigate through murky waters containing the sum of Lincoln’s letters and speeches with the testimonies and recollections of his contemporaries, the latter of which are in many cases nothing more than hazardous rocks of self-serving reminiscence or speculative assertions regarding Lincoln’s personal faith that the vigilant explorer must pass with care. The writer Stephen Mansfield, who has authored popular books on the faith of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, has ventured into these churning waters with the intention of creating a religious biography that accurately charts and explains Lincoln’s spiritual journey over the course of his life.

The general outline of Lincoln’s early religious influences is well known. He grew up in the home of devout Separate Baptist parents but as a child never embraced his father’s religion, which Mansfield caricatures as a “weepy, loud, legalistic brand of faith” (26) primarily built on a “haughty, self-assured hyper-Calvinist” (40) doctrine of election to salvation for the few people chosen by God and damnation for the many others forsaken by Him. Once on his own in New Salem, the youthful Lincoln, always a voracious reader, imbibed deeply of the anti-Christian writings of Thomas Paine and Constantin Volney. He became a full-blown skeptic and even wrote a treatise denying essential Christian tenets like the inspiration of Scripture and the

divinity of Christ. Mansfield speculates that Lincoln’s hostility to religion stemmed from a combination of his agnostic reading and his difficult experiences growing up. He suffered much grief from the deaths of loved ones, particularly his pious mother, his sister, and his sweetheart, Ann Rutledge. These losses contributed to periods of melancholy, which today would likely be diagnosed as clinical depression. In fact, he wrote poetry on suicide and once became so despondent that his alarmed friends removed razor blades from his room lest he take his own life. Untethered from its Christian moorings, Thomas Lincoln’s Calvinism became for young Abraham a doctrine of necessity that interpreted events as predetermined and individuals as powerless creatures acted upon by forces beyond their control. Instead of Lincoln the fatalist, as he has been portrayed, Mansfield describes a man who believed himself cursed, forsaken, and abandoned by a “capricious God who caused him so much pain” (45). As a youth he had bristled under the yoke of his emotionally distant father who did not appreciate his intellect or understand his ambition, so as a young man Lincoln became engaged in a spiritual battle with an impersonal Heavenly Father whom he envisioned as an imperious, “unjust deity who punished a man without explaining why” (45).

Mansfield asserts that in Springfield, Lincoln’s anti-Christian views softened. He points to the handbill congressional candidate Lincoln wrote in 1846 when compelled to defend himself against the charges of Peter Cartwright. Although not completely truthful about his infidel past, Lincoln at least affirmed that he would not vote for “an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion,” which he certainly had been (65). Reading Presbyterian minister James Smith’s The Christian’s Defence in 1849 struck a chord as he encountered a convincing apologist who skillfully marshaled reason rather than revelation to defend the faith. The death of his son Eddie in 1850 brought further soul-searching and contemplation of the hereafter. Smith comforted the family and performed Eddie’s funeral. The appreciative Lincolns began attending Smith’s ministry, then rented a pew, and eventually in 1852 Mary joined First Presbyterian Church. Smith later claimed that, at this time, Lincoln professed his belief “in the Divine Authority and Inspiration of the Scriptures,” but several close associates, including his own son Robert Todd Lincoln, contested the veracity of Smith’s statement. Yet in early 1851 when he learned that his father was nearing death, Lincoln charged his stepbrother to remind Thomas Lincoln “to call upon, and confide in, our great, and good, and merciful Maker” who “will

not forget the dying man, who puts his trust in Him” (88). No longer a skeptic, Lincoln the “religious pilgrim” (90) had indeed progressed, but how far? Mansfield maintains that Lincoln could not come to faith because he was still hung up on the idea that God had cursed him, possibly because of his mother’s illegitimate birth (and maybe even his own). As “the son of a bastard,” Lincoln felt that heaven “was shut tight against him,” and “he could not believe as other men did” (93). Mansfield’s Lincoln, then, was still searching, wondering if he could ever find acceptance from a mysterious deity whose existence he now affirmed but who “withheld affection” (96) from one fated “to go on in a twilight, feeling and reasoning my way through life, as questioning, doubting Thomas did” (93).

Mansfield describes the Lincoln who left Springfield for the White House as “a theologically liberal Christian” (107), one who believed many of the basic tenets of Christianity without espousing the deity of Jesus. What transpired in Lincoln’s spiritual journey that took him from an inability to believe in the early 1850s to becoming “as near to being a Christian as a man can be who has not fully resolved the matter of Christ’s divinity” (109) is anyone’s guess, for Mansfield offers no evidence or even conjecture to fill in the gaps. Nevertheless, he finds ample proof of the sixteenth president’s religious leanings—Bible reading, church attendance at New York Avenue Presbyterian, and fast day proclamations petitioning God for deliverance from the scourge of war. The death of his son Willie in February 1862 was another turning point in his spiritual pilgrimage. Mired in the depths of grief and despair, Lincoln’s spirits were lifted during a visit from prominent New York minister Francis Vinton. According to the painter Francis B. Carpenter, the Episcopal clergyman comforted the president by assuring him that Willie was not dead but alive in heaven. Now sensing “a more personal connection” to God (149), Lincoln increasingly saw himself as an instrument in the hands of the Almighty, who was controlling events and using the war to bring to pass his own purposes. One of these purposes, Lincoln believed, was ending slavery. Gideon Welles recorded that the president made the decision to issue the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation after Antietam because of a vow to God that victory constituted “an indication of Divine will... to move forward in the cause of emancipation” (166). Lincoln’s belief that God worked through human history received its fullest treatment, of course, in his Second Inaugural Address, where he asserted that the war had unfolded according to God’s inscrutable plans, playing out in a manner contrary to the prayers of either North or South as punishment to both for the offense of slavery. Mansfield takes stock
in Mary’s testimony that her husband was speaking about his desire to visit Jerusalem at the moment when a bullet abruptly ended his earthly pilgrimage. Where Lincoln’s spiritual journey from skepticism to providentialism may have ultimately taken him had he lived will never be known, and Mansfield maintains that pinpointing a conversion experience or reaching definitive conclusions about Lincoln’s faith misses the point. Instead, he claims that we do well to simply identify and trace the development of Lincoln’s spiritual struggle with God and to appreciate how this journey taught him to accept the providence of God in history and to realize “that his [own] magnificent life was a life destined by God” (187).

*Lincoln’s Battle with God* is thought-provoking, and Mansfield correctly depicts Lincoln’s faith as maturing over time. However, this is not as original an interpretation as he suggests. He implies that previous writers have not studied Lincoln’s faith carefully or comprehensively enough. On one extreme are those who want to use Lincoln to push a moral agenda or simply claim him as an adherent of their particular denomination. On the opposite pole are professional historians, broadly categorized as “a tribe renowned for undervaluing the role of religion as a motive force in past events” (190), who have downplayed or completely ignored Lincoln’s religious development. While some historians certainly have discounted Lincoln’s musings about God, several others—noted scholars Allen Guelzo and Richard Carwardine quickly come to mind—have treated Lincoln’s faith as an important facet for understanding him.³ In fact, a recent article in this journal makes a compelling case from the Second Inaugural Address that by the end of his life Lincoln believed in a personal, sovereign God.⁴ The problem, then, is not that historians have continued to disregard Lincoln’s faith. Instead, they realize that much of the evidence relating to Lincoln’s religious beliefs rests on questionable sources, and they choose to set aside many of the anecdotes and reminiscences that seem doubtful or lack credibility. Mansfield recognizes these problems as well, but more often than not he includes the dubious incidents. For example, after recounting the story of Francis Vinton’s interview with the president after Willie’s death, Mansfield admits that “we cannot know with certainty if Carpenter’s account is even partially true,” yet he nevertheless concludes that “we should be slow to discount


his testimony” (148–49), even though there are known inaccuracies in Carpenter’s rendering of the tale. Relying on questionable anecdotes such as this one ultimately weakens Mansfield’s effort to offer a convincing portrait of Lincoln’s faith.5

Indeed, on several occasions throughout the book Mansfield is forced to acknowledge that he has no way of knowing “with certainty” or “definitively” the extent or growth of Lincoln’s faith (30, 87, 89, 109, 148, 154). Any reconstruction of the past, of course, is tentative at best and limited by the surviving evidence, which generally represents only a small number of sources that fall far short of providing historians with anything remotely resembling historical omniscience. The troubling aspect of Mansfield’s depiction of Lincoln is that even when he knows that the evidence cannot support a particular assertion, he nevertheless holds out the possibility that his tenuous claim might be true. For example, despite Lincoln’s growing faith and belief in God’s sovereignty, he never spoke of personal trust in Jesus as orthodox Christianity demands. Mansfield writes that Lincoln “also believed in Jesus Christ in some sense, too, and, though it may seem odd to speak of Christ peripherally when describing Lincoln’s faith, this is exactly how we must understand what Lincoln believed of the Christian Savior. . . . Regardless, we cannot let this fact alone keep us from considering the possibility that Lincoln was an orthodox Christian in his view of Jesus Christ at this time [1861]” (107–8). Since evidence, rather than “considering the possibility,” must be the final criterion for our assessments, it seems more historically accurate to describe Lincoln, as Guelzo has done, as a unitarian who believed in an omnipotent, sovereign God the Father but who never embraced a trinitarian Godhead that included Son and Spirit.6 Even though he

5. Another example is the story of Lincoln’s visit with a wounded Daniel Sickles two days after the Battle of Gettysburg. According to James F. Rusling, Lincoln told Sickles that after kneeling in prayer “a sweet comfort” overtook him, and he promised to “stand by” God if God delivered a Union victory in Pennsylvania. Mansfield regards this incident as a “documented, confirmable deed” (169–70). Although Lincoln definitely spoke with Sickles on July 5, the substance of the conversation is attested to by only two men, one of whom was notorious for bending the truth to his advantage, and the conversation reconstructed several decades later. See Barton, Soul of Abraham Lincoln, 2012. This exchange is given a “D” rating (“a quotation about whose authenticity there is more than average doubt”) in Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, comps. and eds., Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), lii, 387–88.

6. Guelzo, Abraham Lincoln, 153. When reviewing the testimonies of those who claimed that Lincoln’s faith developed a more “Christological” component at some point, Carwardine concludes, “It is possible, but the weight of the evidence is against it” (Lincoln, 37).
attended theologically conservative Old School Presbyterian churches in Springfield and Washington and likely heard several sermons explaining the necessity of conversion, as best as we can tell from the existing evidence Lincoln never affirmed the Reformation solas of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Although he seeks to strike a balance between the “technical historian” insistent on going only so far as the evidence permits and the “poet and bard” whose inner muse leads him to flout the historical record (192), Mansfield sometimes tilts toward the latter and conjectures in the face of the evidence. Anyone exploring the matter of Lincoln’s personal faith would do well to apply his own words written to the Quaker Eliza P. Gurney in September 1864. “The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance. . . . Meanwhile we must work earnestly in the best light He gives us.”7 We all, in truth, are erring mortals and limited in our knowledge of Lincoln’s faith, yet from his own words we have sufficient light to know with certainty various aspects of his personal beliefs that confirm his spiritual growth over time.8 Still, with a subject as hidden and intangible as faith, which necessarily involves heartfelt belief in spiritual truths, and with a cacophony of voices clamoring to elucidate Lincoln’s faith in the years and decades after his assassination, there are some things about Lincoln’s inner religious life that we will never know.9

Nevertheless, the light that we have illuminates a man humble enough to change. As a self-made and self-confident man ascending to the presidency, in his First Inaugural Lincoln found no “better or equal hope in the world” than that of “the ultimate justice of the

8. Mansfield’s catalog of Lincoln’s verifiable beliefs includes God, his providence, the inspiration of the Bible, heaven, the resurrection of the dead, the usefulness of “righteous” churches (in contrast to hypocritical and legalistic ones), the benefit of “holy” preachers (as opposed to meddlers in politics like Peter Cartwright), prayer, “Christian character and generosity,” and “Jesus Christ in some sense” (107). For a more judicious comparison, see Mark Noll, “The Struggle for Lincoln’s Soul,” Books and Culture: A Christian Review (September/October 1995), accessible at http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/1995/sepoct/5b503a.html.
9. Richard Carwardine has put this point well. “We will never get to the bottom of Lincoln’s private religious thought, or definitively weigh the competing claims about his personal piety. But there are unmistakable signs that from the time of his election, he attended to religion with growing seriousness, that his ideas about God’s role in the universe sustained a marked change, and that these notions informed how he thought about his administration’s purposes” (Lincoln, 221).
people.” But after nearly four years of devastating war, in his Second Inaugural he declared that God’s sovereign purposes had trumped the feeble plans of both sides. Indeed, the people’s longing for “an easier triumph” was frustrated, and their prayers to gain divine assistance for conflicting purposes “could not be answered.” The only appropriate response to the war must be submission to God’s will and reverential acknowledgement that “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.” Borrowing his own words again, we must conclude that Lincoln would want “impartial history” to not only recognize his personal conviction that God brought the war for the purpose of ending slavery but also “find therein new cause to attest and revere the judgment and goodness of God.”