Review Essay

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Abraham Lincoln’s religious and moral views are of perennial interest to students of history and statesmanship. Lincoln never formally joined a particular religious sect, yet is renowned for his knowledge and use of Scripture. He is thought by many to have been a magnanimous man, yet emerged from the most humble of origins. His intellectual virtues were as imposing as his moral virtues, earning him a reputation while in Congress as the bookworm among his fellow legislators.\(^1\) He generally preferred to deliberate over ethical and religious questions rather than insist upon divisive answers to them.\(^2\) He avoided both unmanly cynicism and blind faith, embodying a noble disdain for extremes consistent with a classical understanding of the gentleman.\(^3\) Out of that combination of probity and virtue emerged a statesmanship peculiarly suited for the most trying period in American history.

That statesmanship culminated in Lincoln’s Second Inaugural address, the focus of two of the books under review here. In *Lincoln’s*...

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2. One clear example of this was his hesitancy, at least in public, to resolve the question, on the eve of Reconstruction, of whether the rebellious states had ever been out of the Union: “[W]hatever it may hereafter become, that question is bad, as the basis of a controversy, and good for nothing at all—a merely pernicious abstraction.” Roy P. Basler et al., eds. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), 8:403.

Moral Vision, James Tackach examines the development of Lincoln’s views on slavery, race, and religion during the Civil War, with an eye to their ultimate resolution in the Second Inaugural. He argues that before the war Lincoln held to a “firm belief in the ideology of white supremacy” (43), but that he eventually came to realize the error of his ways. Tackach concludes that the Second Inaugural conveys a sense of Lincoln’s personal “humiliation” (145) on the question of race. As a result of that humiliation, Tackach suggests, Lincoln “reached back to find the Puritan God of his youth” (142) in order to explain the carnage of the war and to cleanse his own soul. In Lincoln’s Greatest Speech, Ronald C. White Jr. focuses his commentary more directly than does Tackach on the text of the speech and the setting in which it was delivered. He examines the intersection between Lincoln’s thoughts on religion and his approach to rhetoric, paying special attention to the classical and Puritan elements of public speaking evident in the Second Inaugural. Thus, White understands Lincoln in a more political light than does Tackach, whose moral portrait of Lincoln is often abstracted from the political conditions of his time. These two volumes, then, convey rather different ways of understanding the relationship between Lincoln’s personal morality and political necessity. In Lincoln’s Virtues, William Lee Miller addresses the relationship thematically, and for this reason his book provides a good introduction to the other two. His volume is, as its subtitle indicates, an ethical biography—an account of the development of Lincoln’s moral and intellectual virtues from his childhood to his presidency. But it is almost as much a treatise on the requisites for moral statesmanship in a modern republic.

Miller understands better than many historians the practical wisdom of Lincoln’s statesmanship, what he calls Lincoln’s “moral realism” (79). Lincoln “was developing, on the run,” he argues, “an ethic of responsibility, of prudence, of realism, like that of many serious politicians—but more explicit and, eventually, profound” (192). This “ethic of responsibility,” which Miller derives from Max Weber, assumes that “there are principles that determine action decisively, but absent those, the moral case should be determined by the consequences, the results, the fruits” (196). Lincoln is a moral realist because he understands that doing good requires more than merely having good intentions.

Lincoln’s Weberian “ethic of responsibility” is opposed to the “ethic of intention,” the individualistic “perfectionism” that Miller likens to a Kantian categorical imperative. This imperative assumes
that duty, rather than consequence, is all that one can really know. Lincoln rejected such a view as an “oversimplified moral outlook” (195), which assumes that to be “principled is to be simple” (80). The ethic of responsibility, on the other hand, demands “observation and intellect” (197), a reasoned engagement with social and political reality. This ethic is akin to the habit and prudence of traditional moral philosophy, especially that of Aristotle, to which Miller obliquely refers (56). Prudence is a “pattern or habit that should become ingrained” in the character, which prepares the morally virtuous person to make sound judgments. “Prudence as a moral virtue,” Miller observes, “made a bridge to the intellectual virtues, as they were called in the old schemes. That means it entailed a central role for cognition, for learning and knowing, in praiseworthy conduct” (223). It is that intellectual virtue which completes or perfects the moral virtues by providing the means for the “intelligent judgment of consequences.”

As in his previous works, Miller exhibits disdain for the moral perfectionism of critics of statesmen such as Lincoln. Such perfectionism is, he suggests, largely driven by a form of “moral pride” (207) and for the sake of “self-indulgent convenience” (197). Religious zealotry, Miller notes, was a principal source of that pridefulness in Lincoln’s time. The “evangelical Protestant culture” of the period, he explains, placed the individual at the center of his own world. “This radical individualism,” Miller suggests, “was linked to a moral melodrama starring the proponents by its exaggerated picture of the range and freedom and the simplicity of changes in the individual heart and will” (151). In contrast, Lincoln would be an “unmoralistic moralist” (181), one who would convey moral teaching by example and argument rather than arrogance and condescension. “Despite his quiet rejection of the doctrinal core of the Christian religion,” Miller notes, Lincoln “grasped its moral meaning better than most believers” (365).

Weber’s ethics of responsibility and intention are his substitutes for what traditionally would be called, respectively, “this-worldly” and “other-worldly” moralities.† Compared, for example, to abolitionists and prohibitionists, Lincoln is certainly a man of “this world.” For Miller, the thoroughly political nature of Lincoln’s endeavors are central to his ethical character. “It is not,” Miller explains, “simply that he was, in the cliche, a ‘man of his time’; he was a man of his

†For a helpful discussion of this, see Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), chapter 2.
time, his place, and his role. He was a politician…” (355). Lincoln’s views on morality, much like his views on religion, must be understood in the light of the practical realities of his time, not because moral truths change, but because practical possibilities do.

Lincoln sometimes used racist language, notably in the famous debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858. But Miller emphasizes that Lincoln must be compared “not to unattached abolitionists in Massachusetts or to anyone a century and a half later but to other engaged politicians in the Old Northwest in the 1850s” (361). It is the engagement with politics that is most important. As is well known, the climate of opinion on race in Lincoln’s Illinois presented him with great obstacles. Abstract moral principles mean little if they are not brought to bear on political life. Miller intimates throughout the book that Lincoln’s ethical character was sublime precisely because he was a political man. Far from cheapening politicians, the compromises that they make often enable them to do great good. It is the possibility for this great effect on the world that places the statesman on a higher moral plane than the private citizen. In this view, abolitionists come to sight as essentially apolitical and, therefore, essentially less meaningful and even less relevant in any concrete moral sense. While highlighting Lincoln’s independent streak, Miller notes that Lincoln nevertheless was “no rebel or radical who rejected his society fundamentally.” His “ambitions drew him not into some prophetic or revolutionary role outside his society, but into its central machinery” (357).

There is the further question, however, of Lincoln’s prophetic role within his society. After 1854 Lincoln “became a political leader engaged with the deepest moral fundamentals of the nation. He would come to combine with the realism of the politician a new and unwavering moral clarity” (230). “The fundamentals,” Miller explains, “were the ultimate human status, the ultimate human right, and the inclusion in the meaning of the Declaration of Independence, of black persons now held as slaves” (343). Lincoln’s opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act was guided by his recognition that those fundamentals were being assailed. Miller argues that the events of 1854 aroused in Lincoln a renewed insistence upon America’s “universalism and egalitarianism, and the moral concept of the nation, that they rested upon” (230). The Declaration’s assumption that the “one people” of America was also a “good people” was now being challenged. In response to this, Lincoln would come to realize the “moral clarity and elevation of…the prophet” (222).
For Miller, then, there is a difference between worldly and other-worldly prophecy. Lincoln’s statesmanship was a version of the former. He always aimed at the moral improvement of America, but not so as to threaten the existence of the one people itself; he would not altogether banish society despite its failings. Miller emphasizes that Lincoln’s “whole project of fundamental moral opposition to slavery took place within the claims of the Constitution, Union, Law” (237). Even though Lincoln came to stress the centrality for America of the Declaration’s universal and egalitarian principles, he would not understand those principles in an apolitical or other-worldly way. It is noteworthy that while Miller agrees with Tackach and White that the Second Inaugural was Lincoln’s greatest speech, he nevertheless notes that the First Inaugural was really the “speech of his life,” for there we can see in Lincoln’s words the “full argument for the core of his understanding, the underpinning of his policy and his action” (443). The overriding and explicit theme of the First Inaugural is, of course, the American union, not slavery or emancipation; the preservation of the political community itself is Lincoln’s main concern. But Miller sees the deep connection between the principles of emancipation and the necessity of union, for this really means the connection between morality and politics. The moral imperative of emancipation flows from the principles enshrined in the Declaration, which principles form the “standard maxim for a free society.”

Miller shows that, despite Lincoln’s contrived reputation as a frontier man of humble origins, his life was directed toward a rarified statesmanship. He highlights Lincoln’s tendency to reject the common endeavors of farming, gambling, hunting, and the like for the more sublime pursuits of reading and investigation. But, importantly, Lincoln was not moved to merely scientific pursuits; he was ambitious and geared to politics. Normally this kind of character would befit a man of more aristocratic breeding, but Lincoln was different. Despite being largely self-taught, he became “quite an extraordinary thinker, on moral-political subjects, with depth and power…” (13). In particular, his rhetorical powers dwarfed those of

most of his contemporaries. In short, Miller describes a man blessed with the faculties classically associated with prophecy.\(^6\)

But Miller does not praise Lincoln unreservedly. Miller argues that Lincoln was not a particularly good speaker in his early career. He was prone to “oratorical overkill” (140). His 1842 address to the Springfield Temperance Society was “overdone to the point of being comic” (140). The high-flown peroration to his 1840 Sub-Treasury speech was, Miller says, “goofy” (144).\(^7\) But Lincoln’s earlier, more ostentatious style might simply have been appropriate for that time and place, especially given his more lowly station and the calmer politics before 1854. Miller himself notes that at Lewiston, Illinois, in 1859 an older Lincoln provided a “little reminder” of his “youthful speech endings” (339). There he echoed the Sub-Treasury speech’s emphasis upon his own sacrifice in the cause of liberty. The speech indicates that the mature Lincoln was not above a measure of self-aggrandizing bombast. But the tone of his speeches generally did change, especially in the war years. It is possible, however, that the change in circumstances, as much as the improvement in his rhetorical skills, accounts for the style of Lincoln’s later speeches. It is not surprising that the drama of the Civil War extracted from Lincoln his greatest speeches, especially the Second Inaugural.

James Tackach goes further than Miller, suggesting that the war brought forth from Lincoln not only great speeches, but a moral and religious reformation in Lincoln himself. In this respect, \textit{Lincoln’s Moral Vision} is more than an interpretation of the Second Inaugural; it is an account of a more private, less grand, Lincoln. Tackach’s book provides a sharp contrast to Miller’s. Tackach’s Lincoln is a “mere mortal, shaped by the attitudes of his time and place,” but who nevertheless “lived what Plato’s Socrates would have called the examined life” (xiv). Following Allen Guelzo’s depiction of Lincoln, he describes the sixteenth president as “a Victorian skeptic, eventually brought to God by personal and national tragedies, who made great efforts to determine God’s will” (xvii).\(^8\) With his emphasis upon Lincoln’s private, religious experience, Tackach takes

\(^{7}\) For an alternative view of Lincoln’s early speeches, see Harry V. Jaffa, \textit{Crisis of the House Divided} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), chaps. 9 and 10.

\(^{8}\) Guelzo, \textit{Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President} (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 462.
a more “otherworldly” approach to Lincoln than does Miller. In effect, he argues that Lincoln came to accept the moral perfectionism of the abolitionists, including its religious foundations.

In order to support his thesis, Tackach must demonstrate that for most of his life Lincoln was a wayward soul. Until as late as 1862, according to Tackach, Lincoln was a confirmed racist. But this is the general problem of the book, as it is for many books that are unduly critical of Lincoln on this point. For example, Tackach strongly criticizes Lincoln’s plan for colonization of emancipated slaves. He believes that Lincoln not only envisioned, but favored, a Negro-free America. It is true that Lincoln remarked to a group of black leaders in 1862 that the physical differences between blacks and whites had caused both races to “suffer,” which is “a reason at least why we should be separated” (88). Statements like this, says Tackach, show that Lincoln was “unable to see African Americans as his fellow citizens; he preferred that they leave America to white people” (52–53). But Tackach’s construction is unnecessary, for, as often was the case with his statements on race, Lincoln here was ambiguous. He specifically stated that “Whether it is right or wrong I need not discuss, but this physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both…” (88). He seems to imply that the turmoil caused by racial prejudice is not right, but he must confront reality: the fears of many racist Americans had to be allayed in order to keep support for emancipation strong. That is, a choice had to be made according to what was politically possible, not merely what was morally desirable.

From a pre-Civil War perspective it may very well have appeared to honest egalitarians that the races could not, as a practical matter, live together in social and political equality. Tackach argues that the colonization plan was unrealistic. “But,” Miller rightly asks, “what was realistic, in the setting of the 1850s? ” (389). Tackach notes that scholars such as Don Fehrenbacher, Mark E. Neely, and Philip Shaw Paludan defend Lincoln’s moderation as just that: a prudential attempt not to exacerbate racial anxieties while still moving the country toward eventual emancipation. But Tackach rejects this interpretation, especially in light of Lincoln’s continued advocacy of colonization as late as 1862. “A simpler explanation for Lincoln’s continuing advocacy of colonization,” he argues, “might

11. Ibid., 3:27.
be that Lincoln, eighteen months into the war, remained a white supremacist and segregationist; he was not waging a war of racial liberation” (90). Tackach leaves the reader with the impression that, because Lincoln did not wage a war of racial liberation, he was a white supremacist. But Tackach recognizes that embracing a policy of complete social equality for blacks would have been politically dangerous, for it might have encouraged the border slave states to join the Confederacy. It may be true that Lincoln could have done more, but as is commonly recognized, prudential questions of this kind are manifestly easier to consider in hindsight than in the moment. Tackach’s insistence that this was a matter of Lincoln’s racism seems unnecessary.

Like a number of Lincoln’s critics, Tackach notes Lincoln’s occasional use of the racial slur. But like many of these critics, he seems not to recognize the nuances involved in Lincoln’s language. For example, Lincoln remarked in the final debate with Douglas in 1858 that, “There is no danger that the people of Kentucky will shoulder their muskets and with a young nigger stuck on every bayonet march into Illinois and force them upon us” (53). Tackach sees this as a particularly harsh comment, and it certainly is. But he misses the heightened sense of degradation that the word adds to the horrible image of human beings impaled on bayonets; Lincoln conveys the ugliness of the phenomenon, rather than merely and self-righteously castigating the slaveholders. Indeed, Tackach himself observes: “Ironically, he used the term in a speech at Hartford in 1860 in which he attacked slavery as a moral wrong” (53).

Tackach, oddly enough, notes the irony of Lincoln using the offending word while criticizing slavery, but fails to consider sufficiently that Lincoln himself may have been aware of that same irony. He instead maintains that Lincoln’s use of the word “suggests, minimally, racial insensitivity” (54). But why insist on this interpretation? Miller quite sensibly notes that while Lincoln “doubtless used the ubiquitous n-word, there is no evidence that he joined in the more intentionally demeaning anti-Negro acts and attitudes common to his world” (40). Tackach seems to suggest that Lincoln’s occasional use of the word, which he admits was less frequent than that of other whites of the time, somehow harmed blacks unduly, that verbal insensitivity somehow is akin to the misery of slavery itself. But exactly the opposite may be true. The ironical use of the

13. Strozier, Lincoln's Quest for Union: Public and Private Meanings (New York: Basic
offending word, as in the case of the “bayonet” reference, likely served then, as it does now, to convey to white racist listeners the ugliness of their own enterprise. Tackach seems unaware of or unwilling to entertain this possibility.

It is fair, of course, to question Lincoln’s judgments. But Tackach unfortunately engages in interpretations that border on the inexcusable. A glaring example is his discussion of Lincoln’s occasional use of the word *creature* when describing black slaves. A well-known instance of this is his observation, recounted in a letter to Mary Speed in 1841, that a group of slaves tied together on a riverboat appeared like “fish upon a trot-line,” yet were “the most cheerful and happy creatures on board.” Lincoln observed that the slaves were able, despite their condition, to relieve their misery by singing, dancing, and joking with one another. Taking his cue from Charles Strozier, Tackach suggests that “Despite Lincoln’s assertions that African Americans are human beings included in the ‘created equal’ clause of the Declaration of Independence, his imagery suggests that he saw them as ‘creatures’ that were something less than fully human” (53). But this is absurd; Lincoln’s use of *creature* here is just an expression. Miller gets this right in a way that Tackach does not. He notes that Lincoln makes a “general observation about the human condition under humiliation and deprivation.” This was “an occasion for contemplating the effect of ‘condition’ upon human happiness—it concerned, not some peculiarity of the black ‘race,’ but universal human responses” (368). There is nothing in the letter to suggest that Lincoln meant that blacks are more satisfied with enslavement than are whites. Any plain reading of the text reveals this to be so.

Oddly enough, while he looks to Socrates as a model for Lincoln’s examined life, Tackach forgets a central element of Socratic statesmanship: the practical need for “noble lies.” Lincoln’s “white supremacist” views before the war may very well have been a variant of the noble lies that Socrates thought politically necessary. Such lies, in fact, may enable the community to achieve a greater good. As Miller rightly notes, despite Lincoln’s disclaimers about full Ne-

14. In the 1858 speech at Lewiston, for example, Lincoln quotes the Declaration and describes the intentions of its authors: “This was their majestic interpretation of the economy of the Universe. This was their lofty, and wise, and noble understanding of the justice of the Creator to His creatures.” *Collected Works*, 2:546. He clearly means here that all human beings, black and white, are God’s creatures.


gro equality, “the philosophical cat was out of the bag” (262). His detailed arguments for human equality and his incessant criticism of slavery logically pointed toward full citizenship for blacks.

Tackach insists upon Lincoln’s racism because he wants to highlight the redemptive powers of Lincoln’s religious faith. This, of course, assumes that we can know with some certainty Lincoln’s beliefs on this matter. Tackach rejects Lucas Morel’s argument that “Lincoln’s personal beliefs and their relation to his public speeches and actions remain veiled.” Indeed, Tackach not only believes that Lincoln possessed a faith, but that his faith deepened as he began to recognize the sin of his racism and tolerance of slavery. Lincoln’s turn to the “living God of history” in the Second Inaugural, Tackach correctly argues, is indicative of Lincoln’s admission of the limits to reason and the need for faith. But Tackach goes further, suggesting that Lincoln eventually accepted, at least implicitly, the superiority of the abolitionist position, that he thought the ethic of intention to be superior to the ethic of responsibility. The Second Inaugural’s description of divine punishment for violation of the sacred law resolves the “obvious contradictions in Lincoln’s thinking about slavery” exposed by men like Stephen Douglas. “If slavery were indeed evil, a blight on America’s charter of freedom,” Tackach argues, “then how could it be tolerated even for one minute longer where it exists?” (22). By the end of the war, Tackach implies, Lincoln had come to believe that intelligence can, at best, only discern the commands of God or of conscience; it should not, therefore, abrogate those commands in the name of prudence.

But Lincoln’s more particular sin, it turns out, was his initial insistence that the preservation of the Union should be his principal aim in the war. Indeed, Tackach argues that the Union itself was a “fiction” that paled in comparison with the moral necessity of emancipation (132). He notes Barbara Fields’s view that the goal of preserving the Union was “too shallow to be worth the sacrifice of a single life.”16 Tackach is quick to point out, of course, that “Lincoln probably would not have completely agreed with that assertion...” (124). But he clearly intimates that the abolitionists, who had been much more willing to risk the Union for the sake of emancipation, adhered to a purer moral vision than did Lincoln. They did not commit, in effect, Lincoln’s sin of prudence.


In *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech*, Ronald White takes a somewhat different view of the Second Inaugural. He is much less critical of Lincoln than is Tackach, especially on the question of race. He notes that “One may criticize Lincoln for his attitudes on race or the timing of emancipation, but only if there is a prior acknowledgement of the centrality of the Constitution in both his political and moral thinking” (96). White seems to think that Lincoln was right to defend the Constitution. More generally, White is attentive to the limits of moral perfectionism. He notes the danger in the caustic rhetoric of abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison, who often “alienated the uncommitted” (91) and “inflamed and thus polarized the public” (92). Lincoln, in contrast, “most often chose to speak in language that he believed would not ignite, and just might convince the uncommitted” (94). For White, the Second Inaugural represents the peak of Lincoln’s rhetorical powers. Instead of alienating the people, “Lincoln offered his sermon as the prism through which he himself strained to see the light of God.” The “refractions from that prism,” White argues, are morally and politically salutary, for they “point to judgment and hope” rather than division and despair (203).

White argues that Lincoln came to see the limits of prudence. But he is more tentative than Tackach about the conclusions to be drawn from this. Guelzo suggests that Lincoln “made the idea of the nation—a single people unified rationally . . . around certain propositions that transcended ethnicity, religious denominationalism, and gender—into the central image of the republic.” While Tackach sees this as a kind of Kantian ground for the republic (155), White presents a more complex view. Simple adherence to moral precepts and blind faith in the Lord were not Lincoln’s final thoughts on the subject. Lincoln eventually concluded that human beings must be as practically wise as they can, but that their choices occur within the confines of a world often conditioned by an inscrutable providence.

White shows how the Second Inaugural conforms to Aristotle’s understanding of rhetoric, particularly Lincoln’s use of “both intrinsic and extrinsic proofs” (83) to persuade his audience. Through an impressive line-by-line exegesis of the speech, White explains just why it was so successful, how Lincoln was, indeed, a “master of phrase and words” (77). But the power of the Second Inaugural, he argues, depends as much or more on Lincoln’s recognition of

the “centrality of the Bible in nineteenth-century America” (103) as it does on his linguistic mastery. White agrees with many observers, including Tackach, that the speech is written in the form of a Puritan jeremiad, in which is “combined both criticism and reaffirmation” (153). In the typical jeremiad, the preacher first explains and criticizes the sins committed by the congregation and then reaffirms the congregation’s judgment to go forth and sin no more—to repair the damage that has been done. In Lincoln’s case the sin and the cause of God’s wrath was American slavery; the reaffirmation was Lincoln’s call to the nation to go forth “With malice toward none; with charity for all. . . .”

Like Tackach and other commentators, White reads the Second Inaugural as the result of Lincoln’s growing respect for the life of faith, especially in light of the horrors of the war. Reason, it seems, cannot fathom the enormity of suffering brought on by the rebellion. The oft-cited “Meditation on the Divine Will,” he suggests, represents “a fundamental shift in Lincoln’s approach to the war before it was revealed in public” (126). In the September 1862 fragment, Lincoln notes that he is “almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet.” While contemplating the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation eighteen months into the war, Lincoln expresses his openness to the possibility of a providential God acting in the affairs of the nation. But he is only open to this possibility; he is not convinced. In the Second Inaugural, written thirty months later, Lincoln would express his final conviction that, indeed, God had willed the war as a just punishment for the sin of slavery.

The principal lesson of the speech is that God decided that not just the South, but the North as well must suffer. Because of this, neither side, but especially the North, should engage in recriminations against the other. “Human purpose,” White notes, “whether of the North or the South, lay in the invoking of a tribal God.” Lincoln’s purpose, on the other hand, “had been to invoke a universal God. . . . With God there is no partiality” (198). But one wonders whether the acceptance of that universal God’s rejection of tribalism necessarily entails the moral perfectionism that Miller criticizes. The logic of the Puritan jeremiads informing the Second Inaugural, for instance, may be interpreted to require just that. “If the covenant of grace led individuals to heaven,” White notes, “the covenant community should lead to the transformation of

19. David Herbert Donald, for example, argues that this “comforting doctrine
society into a heaven on earth” (152). This smacks of the kind of imprudent idealism that Miller suggests is so contrary to Lincoln’s sensibility.

Then there is the problem of Lincoln’s private religious views. White recognizes the complexities of the theological influences on Lincoln, both before and during the war. He suggests that Lincoln biographers have “too often equated fatalism and providence” (136), thus distorting the nature of Lincoln’s religious beliefs. They tend to equate his early “doctrine of necessity” with his understanding of providence in the Second Inaugural. The result has been to read Lincoln’s appeal to a “Living God” as a denial of moral accountability for human beings. It is certainly a question whether the doctrines of predestination prevalent in Lincoln’s time, relying as they do on the omnipotence of the Living God, necessarily preclude an ethic of responsibility. White seems to think that this is not the case, at least not for Lincoln. The “logic and language of fatalism….did not exhaust his thinking about historical causation” (148). White believes that Lincoln became attracted to a more “reasonable” Christian theology, especially that of Old School Presbyterian ministers like James Smith and, especially, Phineas Gurley. In their theology, “God’s divine power is able to embrace human freedom and responsibility” (137). This power inheres in the “personality” of the Christian God, with its various “attributes” that Lincoln refers to in the Second Inaugural. Since this personal, “Living God” is “the source of all life,” He can overcome the determinism apparent in the nature of things; He can endow man with free will and moral accountability, however mysterious that endowment may be. The doctrine of necessity, in contrast, like other forms of fatalism or determinism, was “oriented around the depersonalization of the concept of God” (146).

White admits that, when confronting Lincoln’s rhetoric, “No amount of analysis of technique can fully explain the deep, brooding spirit that underlies his words” (201). Yet, like Tackach, he generally thinks that we can discern from Lincoln’s public and private statements his beliefs about religion, especially his belief in a personal God. White introduces observers, like Reinhold Niebuhr, who argue that in the Second Inaugural Lincoln was only “describing allowed the President to live with himself by shifting some of the responsibility for all the suffering.” Lincoln (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 515, 566–67. Tackach (page 139) likewise disagrees with this view, but White addresses the question more fully.

20. Niebuhr, “The Religion of Abraham Lincoln,” The Christian Century 82 (Febru-
belief in God, but not including himself in the circle of believers” (146). Lincoln may have adopted the third-person voice when referring to the “believers in a Living God” (147), White argues, but his “form of speech here is consistent with other examples of his rhetoric” (148). It “did not mean that Lincoln was not speaking from the vantage point of his own personal beliefs” (147). Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear what Lincoln thought. Like Tackach, White thinks that if Lincoln had serious doubts about his faith before the war, the experience of the war itself removed them: “If the rhythms of fatalism had been a comfort in the past, they were inadequate for the stormy present. A depersonalized God was not enough” (148).

But was Lincoln limited to either a personal God or an impersonal necessity, with their attendant problems of human freedom and moral responsibility? Niebuhr may have been right, that Lincoln meant to exempt himself from the class of believers in a Living God. But perhaps he meant to deny any simple fatalism as well. He may have rejected both alternatives. It is quite possible that he looked to a third view, an objective order of right, whether natural or divine or both, in which God manifests Himself in varying ways depending upon the conditions of the various human minds seeking to comprehend Him. A proper disposition toward freedom and morality may require such a theological amalgam, for absolute certainty would preclude the finitude that defines human nature.

Perhaps it is best to understand Lincoln’s statesmanship as a form of prophecy, through which an inscrutable God is made intelligible to the many by imaginative and rhetorical means that are themselves not amenable to easy analysis. Perhaps it is not so much a specifically religious belief on the part of the prophet that matters, but rather the inculation of a piety consistent with the aims of the political community. Lincoln may have thought, as Lucas Morel has argued, that “the successful preservation of democracy depends more on citizen deliberation and choice than on adherence to certain religious doctrines.”

That is, the attempt to ascertain Lincoln’s religious views may miss the larger moral and political purposes of


22. See Donald, *Lincoln*, 269: “The concept of the Union, older than the Constitu-
his statesmanship and example. His prophetic role would require, especially after 1854, that he turn to the Declaration to affirm reason as the foundation of America’s moral order. But it also would require an appeal to the “Living God” of the Bible to bolster or supply the defect of reason when necessary and prudent. Consider also that the Second Inaugural has something of the religious tone of abolitionism, even though abolitionism was by then no longer a threat to the Union. Given that, the Second Inaugural may be seen as the highest example of Lincoln’s “moral realism.”