“Simply a Theist”:
Herndon on
Lincoln’s Religion

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On the evening of Friday, December 12, 1873, William Herndon rose to address a public meeting at the courthouse in Springfield. Undaunted by the bad weather, the people of the Illinois state capital had turned out in good numbers, enticed by the speaker’s reputation and his advertised subject: Lincoln’s religion. Expecting a forthright lecture from Lincoln’s former associate, Herndon’s hearers were not disappointed, for he did not mince his words as he sought to show that his sometime law partner had lived and died “an unbeliever.” “Mr. Lincoln,” he declared, “was simply a Theist—an unbeliever in Christianity.” The president had died as he had lived: “an infidel . . . in the orthodox sense of the term.” It was “twaddle” to argue that he had ever been a Christian. Those hero-worshipping biographers who had turned him into a declared follower of Christ had indulged in self-deluding romantic fiction. Herndon’s propositions and the trenchancy with which he advanced them threw Springfield into a fever of excitement. Spread countrywide as a broadside, and in the newspaper press, Lincoln’s Religion drew down onto Herndon’s head a storm of obloquy. His black treachery, snorted the New York Herald, revealed “the heart of Judas beating beneath an exterior of friendship.”

It was not the first time Herndon had put this case before the public. What was new was his appetite to do it in person, before a hometown audience, with a fanfare, and without concessions to the finer feelings of Christian churchgoers. What prompted Herndon’s bold action, given that he knew it would invite hostile fire? I shall address that question first, before turning to examine the evidence that Herndon drew on and then to reflect on his conclusions.

1. W. H. Herndon, Lincoln’s Religion (Springfield, Ill.: Illinois State Register, 1873); David Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon (New York: Knopf, 1948), 279.

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The genesis of Herndon’s lecture on Lincoln’s religion

Herndon would have sympathised with the contemporary journalist who drily remarked that John Wilkes Booth’s fatal bullet had “made it impossible to speak the truth of Abraham Lincoln hereafter.” He watched with concern the torrent of uncritical eulogies that followed his partner’s assassination. Within a few weeks of Lincoln’s death he was driven to protest that the martyred president “was not a God—was man: he was not perfect—had some defects & a few positive faults: [but] he was a good man—an honest man.”

Herndon soon came to see the need for a biography that would show Lincoln “in his passions—appetites—& affections—perceptions—memories—judgements—understanding—will . . . just as he lived, breathed—ate & laughed in this world clothed in flesh & sinew—bone & nerve.” He began his own researches and set about collecting—through correspondence and interviews with Lincoln’s family, friends, and associates—the materials that would become what he called his “Lincoln Record.” Early on in this enterprise, in December 1865, he delivered two lectures “without humbug statements, & fussy flourishes” on Lincoln’s “grand and predominating elements,” including his religion. Eager to avoid criticism, Herndon said only that Lincoln, though not “a technical Christian,” had been deeply religious, with an “exalted idea and sense of Right & Equity” and an “intense love and worship of what was true & good.” The lectures were well received and made Herndon a celebrity, but one straw in the wind was the decision of some newspapers to omit what he had cautiously said about Lincoln’s religion on the grounds, as one put it, that his picture differed “materially from that generally conceded as characterizing Mr. Lincoln’s later years.”

Herndon’s concern at this process of deification turned to alarm with the appearance early in 1866 of the Life of Abraham Lincoln, the work of Josiah Gilbert Holland, a Massachusetts editor, loyal Republican, and pious Christian. An immediate best seller, the book was

3. Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon, 170.
6. Cincinnati Commercial, January 29, 1866, quoted in Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon, 206.
an unashamed exercise in hero worship. Although Herndon recognised its merits, he hated how the author had turned Lincoln into "a true-hearted Christian." Holland had visited Springfield soon after the assassination and, while acquiring useful biographical material from Herndon, had asked him about Lincoln’s religion. "The less said the better," Herndon replied. "‘O never mind,’" Holland apparently retorted: ‘I’ll fix that.’”

Convinced that such “sacred lies” would do lasting damage to his former partner, since the discovery of the truth “when we are dead and gone” would play into the hands of Lincoln’s detractors, Herndon abandoned his caution. As he supplied the basic materials for the biography that Ward Hill Lamon and his amanuensis, Chauncey F. Black, would publish in 1872, Herndon urged them to be forthright. "On Mr Lincoln’s Religion be bold. Tell the truth—that Mr Lincoln was an infidel—a Deist—wrote a book . . . in favor of Infidelity &c.—that sometimes . . . he was an atheist . . . He held in contempt the Idea of God’s Special interference &c. &c. . . . Tell the truth and shame ‘old Nick.’” Reveal that Lincoln ridiculed the virgin birth and “scorned the idea that God seduced, even by a shadow, a lovely daughter of His own.”

The appearance of the Lamon-Black *Life of Abraham Lincoln* caused a sensation. In David Donald’s words, “For the first time the stories about which Herndon had been gossiping for years in his ‘indirect language’ were now revealed in their ugly nakedness—the illegitimacy of Lincoln’s mother, . . . the jilting of Mary Todd, domestic difficulties in the Lincoln household, Lincoln’s ‘shrewd game’ in deceiving preachers by pretending to be a Christian.” And, as Rodney Davis observes, “arguably the most controversial portion of this controversial book” was the case the authors made for Lincoln’s infidelity. Lamon and Black cited Herndon as a key authority, and reprinted in full a letter he had first published in the *Index*, an Ohio free-thought journal.

In that long letter, dated February 1870, Herndon described how Lincoln’s logical and practical mind was naturally sceptical when it came to “faith in the unseen and unknown.” Mixing in New Salem with a
“jovial, healthful, generous” company of “bold, daring, and reckless sort of men . . . of great common sense,” he shared in their skepticism and appetite for debating Christianity. He seized keenly on the rationalist works of Tom Paine and Constantin Volney, which “became a part of Mr. Lincoln from 1834 to the end of his life.” Their immediate influence led him to write a short but “able and eloquent” essay attacking “the idea that Jesus was the Christ, the true and only-begotten Son of God” and showing the internal contradictions of the scriptures. A close friend, to prevent the publication of what he judged would have brought an end to Lincoln’s political prospects, snatched the book and “ran it into an old-fashioned tin-plate stove, heated as hot as a furnace.” The book itself “went up in clouds of smoke,” but even after moving to Springfield in 1837 Lincoln did not conceal his views, sharing them with other freethinkers. In essence, he did not believe in a special creation, in the Bible as a special revelation from God, in miracles as understood by Christians; he did believe in “universal inspiration and miracles under law,” that “all creation was an evolution under law,” and that “all things, both matter and mind were governed by laws, universal, absolute, and eternal.” Even when Lincoln left for Washington in 1861 he continued to hold “many of the Christian ideas in abhorrence,” including its doctrine of forgiveness through repentance, since God’s law meant that punishment had to follow sin. But he “believed in no hell and no punishment in the future world.” Herndon was clear: “In one sense of the word, Mr. Lincoln was a Universalist, and in another sense he was a Unitarian; but he was a theist, as we now understand that word: he was so fully, freely, unequivocally, boldly, and openly, when asked for his views.” Those in Springfield who thought Lincoln an atheist were mistaken, although it was true that “in his moments of melancholy and terrible gloom, . . . living on the borderland between theism and atheism,—sometimes quite wholly dwelling in atheism . . . he would doubt, if he did not sometimes deny, God.”

Christians like Holland were appalled at what they judged the “insidious malignancy” and “violent and reckless prejudice, and the utter want of . . . decency” of the Lamon-Black biography, in which they saw the powerful and cooperative hand of Herndon. No one was more outraged by the book than the pastor of the Springfield Presbyterian Church where Lincoln had worshipped. The Reverend James A. Reed had not known the president personally, but he drew on the testimony of those with claims to firsthand experience to lecture in Springfield with

a speech titled “The Later Life and Religious Sentiments of Abraham Lincoln.” His stated purpose was to disprove Lamon’s twin charges that Lincoln “was born a bastard, and ... died an infidel.” He ridiculed Lamon for what he considered his inconsistency in lauding Lincoln’s natural honesty while also calling him, in effect, a religious hypocrite. Drawing on the testimonies of ministers and lay associates who had known Lincoln during his later life in Springfield and Washington, Reed was sure his subject had by then long shed his youthful skepticism and “stood firmly and avowedly on the side of the Christian religion.” Repeated by invitation, within and beyond Illinois, and published in Holland’s *Scribner’s Monthly*, Reed’s lecture was acclaimed by Christians and staunch Republicans as an authentic and unchallengeable portrait of a president sound in Christian thought and action.13

Reed’s forceful intervention was what provoked Herndon’s bold lecture of December 1873. Black had urged Herndon to respond to what he called Reed’s “flood of falsehood and calumny,” a libel not just on Lamon but on Herndon himself: its “substance is that you, being an infidel and therefore an immoral man, yourself have resorted to the basest means of proving that Mr Lincoln was like you.”14 Herndon, who by now had largely given up the law to work the six hundred acres that he had inherited on the Sangamon bluffs, was determined that his reply to Reed and his allies would “crush the scoundrels.” His lecture, he boasted, was the product of thoughtful investigation, not the credulous hero worship of those who would “hush up and smother out” the evidence of Lincoln’s infidelity. Thanks to the “facts, truths, realities” that “resolute men” had provided, the only honest inscription for Lincoln’s tomb was “He died an unbeliever.”15

**Herndon’s sources**

A question then arises: who were these “resolute” witnesses on whose evidence Herndon relied? Of the scores who responded to his inquiries about Lincoln, thirty or so had something to say that reflected on his religion and the religious world he inhabited (by my count, thirty-seven different sources, or about 15 percent of his informants as a whole). Herndon had the recollections of all but a few of these particular contributors available to him when he wrote his 1873 lec-


ture. Some of these comments on Lincoln’s faith and practice were scanty; many acknowledged their authors’ ignorance and uncertainty; almost all related to Lincoln’s years in Indiana or Springfield; very few were in a position to draw on firsthand knowledge of him during his presidency. None declared him an outright atheist; barely any a believing, orthodox Christian.  

For his lecture Herndon chose to draw explicitly on just a handful of these testimonies, albeit key ones, which he selected for their intrinsic importance, for their place in the argument of Reed’s lecture, and for the standing of the informants themselves. They comprised John T. Stuart, Lincoln’s senior law partner between 1837 and 1841; James H. Matheny, a personal friend from 1834, the groomsmen at Lincoln’s wedding, and a fellow Whig and lawyer; John G. Nicolay, Lincoln’s senior private secretary in the White House; Lincoln’s wife, Mary; James Smith, the Old School minister of Springfield’s First Presbyterian Church, whom Lincoln later appointed American consul in Smith’s native Scotland; and Newton Bateman, the state superintendent of public instruction, who occupied an office adjacent to Lincoln’s room in the State Capitol during the presidential campaign of 1860. Herndon did not quote their recollections in full in his lecture, but much of their record had already appeared in print in 1872, in the Lamon-Black biography. Each merits our attention.

In an interview with Herndon a few years earlier, John Stuart had provided rich material. Lincoln, he stated, “was an avowed and open Infidel—Sometimes bordered on atheism. . . . [He] went further against Christian beliefs—& doctrines & principles than any man I ever heard: he shocked me. . . . [He] always denied that Jesus was the Christ of God . . . the son of God as understood and maintained by the Christian world.” When the Reverend James Smith “tried to Convert Lincoln from Infidelity so late as 1858 . . . [he] Couldn’t do it.”  


17. Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s Informants, 576 (WHH interview, not later than March 2, 1870).
Herndon drew with similar confidence on the testimony of Jim Matheny, whom he interviewed five times between 1866 and 1873. Matheny confirmed that in the late 1830s Lincoln talked dismissively of “the miraculous Conception, inspiration—Revelation” and confided “that he did write a little Book on Infidelity.” In the Clerk’s office he often listened to Lincoln, Bible in his hand, ridiculing the Scriptures, “1st From the inherent or apparent contradiction under its lids & 2dly From the grounds of Reason.” He heard him “call Christ a bastard” and quote freely from Robbie Burns, “a like thinker & feeler.” Lincoln, he said, “was Enthusiastic in his infidelity”; it sometimes “bordered on absolute Atheism: he went far that way & often shocked me. I was then a young man & believed what my good Mother told me.”

Matheny also called attention to the political danger of holding unorthodox beliefs. “In 1834 & 5, my father [Charles R. Matheny] being a strong Methodist—a Kind of minister and loving Lincoln with all his soul hated to vote for him because he heard that Lincoln was an Infidel.” Then, in Lincoln’s successful congressional race in 1846 against the Methodist warhorse, the Reverend Peter Cartwright, “Many Religious—Christian whigs hated to vote for Lincoln on that account.” According to Matheny, Lincoln grew more discreet with age: “didn’t talk much before Strangers about his religion . . . held them off from Policy,” but to his “close and bosom . . . [friends] he was always open & avowed—fair & honest.” After 1854 “Lincoln Knew that he . . . was a rising man . . . looking to the Presidency &. and well Knowing that the old infidel, if not Atheistic charge would be made & proved against him . . . tramped on the Christian toes saying—“Come and Convert me”: the . . . Ministers &c flocked around him & . . . it was noised about that Lincoln was a seeker after Salvation &c in the Lord.” Matheny recalled “that letters were written more or less all over the land that Lincoln was soon to be a changed man &c and thus it was that he used the Revd Jas Smith.” Herndon reflected, “I have often thought that there was something in this, but cant affirm it to be so. . . . This is Matheny’s honest opinion and no man is superior to Matheny’s judgments . . . of human nature—actions & motives . . .: he knew Lincoln as well as I did I think.” He would later record that Matheny had told him that “he thought Lincoln played a sharp game on the Christians in 1858 to 1860, and I somewhat coincide with him.”

18. Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s Informants, 431–32 (WHH interview, November 1866); 576–77 (WHH interview, not later than March 2, 1870).

19. Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s Informants, 431–32 (WHH interview, November 1866); 576–77 (WHH interviews, by 2 March 1870); 582–83 (WHH interview, December 9, 1873).
Reed claimed that both Stuart and Matheny had later substantially retracted their statements and conceded that though they had no first-hand knowledge, they thought Lincoln had subsequently become a Christian. Herndon spent much of his lecture standing by the accuracy and purport of what he had recorded in his interviews but without impugning the integrity of these two key informants.

James Smith’s testimony becomes relevant here. His statement followed an unpleasant exchange with Herndon, who was at best sceptical about Smith’s claim to have converted Lincoln. In a surly letter Herndon asked the Scotsman to produce evidence that Lincoln had embraced the “belief that the Bible was God’s special miraculous revelation.” Smith’s disdainful reply barely concealed his anger: “It is a very easy matter to prove that while I was Pastor of the 1st Presbyterian Church of Springfield, Mr. Lincoln did avow his belief in the Divine Authority and Inspiration [of] the Scriptures,” he declared. He made much of his regular welcome into the Lincoln “family Circle,” having “buried their dead and baptised their living.” He and Lincoln, he explained, discussed religious and secular matters in pleasant conversations “in drives over the prairies.” Above all, “Mr Lincoln gave a most patient, impartial and Searching investigation” to Smith’s six-hundred-page work *The Christian’s Defence*, a guide on how to use the Scriptures to rebut “the arguments of Infidel objectors in their own language.” Lincoln, he said, had told him that he had “examined the Arguments as a lawyer . . . investigates testimony” and had concluded “that the argument in favor of the Divine Authority and the inspiration of the Scripture was unanswerable.” He immediately “placed himself and family under my pastoral Care, and when at home he was a regular attendant on my ministry.”

Herndon’s contempt for Smith’s account is clear from his marginal annotation: “Foolish This man left a bad Character here . . . Knows nothing of Lincoln. . . . gave Lincoln a book of his. Lincoln never condescended to write his name in it.” In his lecture, Herndon was no less disparaging. The minister “came to America an open and avowed infidel, and finding it would not pay he turned Turk or Christian, to suit his purposes. . . . From what I know of . . . his veracity and integrity,

I doubt the whole of his testimony. I have heard good people say: "O, Mr. Smith was a very able man, but a great old rascal." Lincoln was much too busy with law and politics in the 1850s; Smith’s book lay “on our law table . . . unread and unopened, till after Mr. Lincoln’s death. So much for . . . Mr. Lincoln’s sweeping and searching investigation.” Herndon noted that Smith did “not assert that Mr. Lincoln became a Christian—an Evangelical one; does not assert that he became . . . a member of Smith’s or any other church.”

Herndon had also to counter the claim that Lincoln had declared his Christian belief to Newton Bateman, the state superintendent of public instruction, at the State Capitol in 1860. The episode had appeared in Holland’s pietistic biography, Lincoln allegedly declaring, “with a trembling voice and his cheeks wet with tears: ‘I know there is a God, and that He hates injustice and slavery. . . . If He has a place and work for me [in the brewing sectional storm] . . . I believe I am ready. . . . I know I am right because I know that liberty is right, for Christ teaches it, and Christ is God.’” Reed, too, had made use of this episode, in what Herndon contemptuously called his “foolish, not to say insane, lecture.” Herndon explained that having read Holland’s account in disbelief, he had interviewed Bateman. Their several conversations established that Bateman’s exchange with Lincoln (in October 1860) related to the proslavery voting intentions of many of the Springfield clergy: their conversation was about “politics and not religion, nor Christianity, nor morals, as such.” Subsequently, Bateman wrote Herndon a confidential account, which the author was now willing to be made public. “The tone Manner &c of Mr Lincoln was deeply solemnly religious,” Bateman recalled. “He was applying the principles of moral & religious truth to the duties of the hour—the Condition of the Country & the Conduct of public men—ministers of the Gospel &c. I had no thought of Orthodoxy or heterodoxy . . . during the whole Conversation & I don’t suppose or believe he had. The room was full of God & high truths & the awfulness of Coming Events—Sects & dogmas in Such a presence! He was alone with the Great God the problem of his Country’s future & his own & I but heard the Communings of his soul.” Bateman had described Holland’s account of this episode as “colored.” “Yes!” Herndon exclaimed, “colored, highly colored, and stiffly starched.”

Herndon deployed the testimonies of his remaining pair of informants, John Nicolay and Mary Lincoln, to rebut the claim that during his time at the Executive Mansion Lincoln experienced a “change of heart.” Reed had quoted the newspaperman Noah Brooks, a frequent and welcome visitor to the White House, to make that case. Herndon had moved quickly after the assassination to discover for himself how far Lincoln’s religious ideas had evolved after 1860. On May 23, 1865, he wrote to Nicolay, who replied at once, quick to say that Lincoln “did not, to my knowledge, in any way change his religious ideas, opinions or beliefs from the time he left Springfield to the day of his death. I do not know just what they were, never having heard him explain them in detail; but I am very sure he gave no outward indication of his mind having undergone any change in that regard while here.” Herndon, with evident satisfaction, reflected, “Mr. Lincoln loved Nicolay—trusted him. Nicolay was a close observer, and he would have discovered Lincoln’s change, if any. Lincoln would have told him of the change.”

As is well known, Herndon’s feelings for Mary Lincoln fell far short of rapture, but he was happy to present her to the public as an incontrovertible witness. “It will be . . . admitted by all men that the bosom companion—the wife of Mr. Lincoln, should know the secrets of his soul.” She was, he declared, “a woman of intellect, a good judge of human nature” who “knew her husband thoroughly inside and outside.” When Herndon interviewed her in Springfield in September 1866, she told him, “Mr Lincoln had no hope & no faith in the usual acceptation of those words: he never joined a Church.” He was, however, “a religious man always, as I think: he first thought . . . about this subject when Willie died—never before. he felt religious More than Ever about the time he went to Gettysburg . . . he read the bible a good deal about 1864.” She was one of many who often heard a version of Lincoln’s predestinarian maxim, “What is to be will be and no cares of ours can arrest the decree.” But the essential fact remained that “he was not a technical Christian.”

What above all made Herndon’s lecture so significant and attention-grabbing, however, were not the testimonies of others but his

26. Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s Informants, 6 (John G. Nicolay to WHH, May 27, 1865); Herndon, Lincoln’s Religion.
27. Herndon, Lincoln’s Religion.
29. In his lecture, Herndon rendered this as “What is to be will be, and no prayers of ours can arrest the decree,” and asked, “taking Mrs. Lincoln’s words as true-what becomes of the Christian idea of prayer?”
Herndon on Lincoln’s Religion

own standing in the case. Taken alone, Herndon’s witnesses offered the Springfield audience “Hamlet” without the prince of Denmark. Herndon’s sixteen-year professional partnership with Lincoln, and even longer acquaintance, gave him a peculiarly privileged position from which to take a view; it was this that drew the crowds and gave authority to his testy rebuttal of Reed and his allies.

Yet Herndon’s lecture gave only brief concrete examples of his first-hand knowledge and observation of Lincoln’s views, gleaned from their many discussions in their law office on ethical issues and the nature of the universe. Some of what he reported was simply personal disparagement. Herndon brusquely dismissed the testimony of Thomas Lewis, a Springfield merchant and Democrat, and an elder at the First Presbyterian Church, who claimed that Lincoln had “change[d] his views about the Christian religion” after reading James Smith’s work on the evidences of Christianity.30 ‘Mr Lewis’ veracity and integrity in this community need no comment,” sniffed Herndon. “Mr. Lincoln detested this man, I know. The idea that . . . [he] would go to Tom Lewis and reveal to him his religious convictions, is . . . too absurd.”31

More positively, Herndon explained that when Lincoln avowed to James Smith “his belief in the divine authority, and inspiration of the Scriptures,” this was the language that he shared with himself and Theodore Parker, the religious liberal and Transcendentalist, whose works and correspondence Herndon put before Lincoln. “Everything that is good is of divine authority,” Herndon declared. “Every book, every oration every poem that rises to the eloquent, being tinged with enthusiasm, is inspired.” There was nothing special about the New Testament. It was Lincoln’s “life-long idea” that the Scriptures were no more inspired “than Homer’s songs, than Milton’s Paradise Lost, than Shakespeare.”32

Herndon also described what he had often observed at first hand of Lincoln’s modus operandi in dealing with the devout. He concurred with what the president’s Christian hero worshippers described, that “Mr. Lincoln used polite, courteous general language . . . from which

32. Herndon, Lincoln’s Religion; Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon, 54–58.
Christian inferences might be drawn” when he addressed Sunday School and Bible societies. “Lincoln was very politic,” Herndon explained, “and a very shrewd man in some particulars. When he was talking to a Christian, he adapted himself to the Christian. When he spoke to or joked with one of his own kind, he was indecently vulgar . . . ; he was at moments, as it were, a Christian, through politeness, courtesy or good breeding toward the delicate, tender-nerved man, the Christian, and in two minutes after, in the absence of such men, and among his own kind, the same old unbeliever. I have witnessed this it may be a thousand times.” Hastily, Herndon added that this was not hypocritical behaviour “but sprang from a high and tender regard for the feelings of men.”

**Herndon’s conclusions**

What should we make of Herndon’s use of the evidence he had worked prodigiously to collect? Should we endorse the arresting conclusion he delivered to his Springfield audience, that it should be “written in history and on Mr. Lincoln’s tomb—’He died an unbeliever’”?

It is hard to quarrel with David Donald’s crisp assessment of the “furious bickering over Lincoln’s religious views” as “mostly a matter of muddy thinking and inadequate definition of terms.” Semantic confusion and imprecision surface arrestingy in Herndon’s assertion to Lamon in February 1870: “As to Mr. Lincoln’s religious views,” Herndon wrote, “he was in short an infidel, was a universalist, was a unitarian, a theist.” To the modern reader this does not sound like unbelief. What Herndon was aiming to establish, of course, was that Lincoln was not a believing Trinitarian Christian. That Herndon could use the term *unbelief* in this way is a measure of evangelical Protestants’ religious hegemony in early and mid-nineteenth-century America, the power of evangelicalism within the wider society, and the conviction of members of that subculture that their authority was under threat.

35. Emanuel Hertz, comp. and ed., *The Hidden Lincoln: From the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1940), 64. Herndon wrote in similar terms at much the same time to Francis E. Abbot, editor of the free-thought journal the *Index*: “In one sense of the word, Mr. Lincoln was a Universalist, and in another sense he was a Unitarian; but he was a theist, as we now understand that word. . . . Mr Lincoln . . . was . . . sometimes quite wholly dwelling in atheism. In his happier moments he would swing back to theism, and dwell lovingly there.’ Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 495.
from both within and without. The internal challenges of biblical criticism and liberal theology to evangelical churches were matched by the external realities of the growing vigour of non-Protestant religions, through immigration, and the inroads of evolutionary scientific theory. From the perspective of anxious orthodox Christians the denial of Christ’s divinity might well merit the label of unbelief, but that term does not do justice to what we know and can reasonably infer about Lincoln’s religious convictions.36

Herndon was correct about Lincoln’s never becoming a member of, as opposed to being an attender at, a Christian church, which was regarded as the clearest and most definitive public statement of orthodox faith. He was a moderately regular attender at the Old School Presbyterian Church in Springfield and a much more frequent one at the New York Avenue Church of the same denomination in Washington, but unlike his wife he did not enter into membership of either. His religious appetite sought out the intellectual, not the experiential. He had no time for the camp-meeting emotion and revivalist enthusiasm so much a feature of life in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois during his early years. He rarely mentioned, let alone invoked, Christ in public. In this, too, Herndon’s argument rings true. “I do not remember ever seeing the words Jesus or Christ in print, as uttered by Mr. Lincoln,” Herndon remarked in his letter to the freethinker Francis Abbot, adding, “I never heard him use the name of Christ or Jesus but to confute the idea that he was the Christ, the only and truly begotten Son of God, as the Christian world understands it.”37 He was, with reason, disdainful of those who had Lincoln on the threshold of joining an evangelical church at the time of his death.

On the whole, this element of the picture that Herndon painted was consistent with the many testimonies he had collected. The question

37. Lamon, The Life of Abraham Lincoln, 496.
remains, however, as to how far the “Lincoln Record” on which he built his claims was a reliable and fully representative guide to Lincoln’s faith, and whether Herndon was overdependent on them as he drew his conclusions.

Most of his testimonies were written and signed by his informants: this does not necessarily make them reliable, of course, but to the extent that they may mislead, the responsibility lies in the writer’s faulty memory or deliberate calculation, not Herndon’s. In the interviews that he held, on the other hand, Herndon could control the agenda and leave things out: he explained that he was no stenographer and could barely write down “100th part” of what he heard, so his records are unlikely fully to capture the emphases or language of his interviewees; there may have been no conscious spin involved but there were manifold opportunities for him to summarize these conversations in his own words. In his letter to Abbot in February 1870, he wrote, “Mr. Lincoln, in his moments of melancholy and terrible gloom, was living on the borderland between theism and atheism—sometimes wholly dwelling in atheism.” In his notes of interviews with Stuart and Matheny about the same time, he records the first as saying that Lincoln “Sometimes bordered on atheism” and the other that he “Sometimes . . . bordered on absolute Atheism.” Whose words do we hear in this instance? According to both men, in letters to Reed in the wake of the furor over the Lamon-Black biography, the language of the statements was not theirs and did not fully represent their views. Herndon, by implication, had given their words a twist.

Nonetheless, these two informants stood by their view that Lincoln was “an infidel” in his earlier life, and the overwhelming body of Herndon’s evidence supports his reading of the younger Lincoln as a bold rationalist critic of orthodox Christianity. More problematic, however, is Herndon’s reading of Lincoln’s faith after his departure from Springfield. Both Stuart and Matheny, for example, stated that his views changed over time and that he was “a very different man in later life.” While there remains real doubt about the element of public show in his churchgoing during the 1850s, there are clear indications that as president, he addressed questions of faith with an inquiring and even open mind, and developed a new understanding of the workings of God and Providence. As a younger man, Lincoln

had conceived of a Maker, or Creator God, whose established and
unchanging laws governed and shaped the course of His universe
through time; this was a remote God of reason who by definition had
no further need or purpose to intervene directly in human affairs.
But as the mature Lincoln confronted the desperate and previously
unimaginable suffering inflicted by war, he posed profound questions
about its meaning and its place in the Creator’s purposes and design
for the world, conceiving now of a God of mystery who did indeed en-
ter human history and inflict punishment on his erring people.40 This
was how it seemed to his long-standing friend Joseph Gillespie, who
recalled the president telling him “that circumstances had happened
during the war to induce him to a belief in ‘special providences.’”
Gillespie believed that Lincoln’s mind “was unsettled on religious
matters until his election, and he surveyed the vast responsibilities
cast upon him. After that, it seemed to me that he became religiously
inclined.”41 Herndon, however, had little time for the view that Lin-
coln’s religion evolved in new directions as president. Both his own
personal convictions and the limited range of his sources led him to
reject the idea.

First, a word about his convictions. Herndon was an honest man:
his search for the truth, and the facts to establish it, was sincere and
admirable. But it seems that his engrained freethinking and deep hos-
tility to orthodox Christianity blinkered and imprisoned him when it
came to the empathetic understanding of another man’s faith. His
education at Illinois College (the “New Haven of the West”) at the
hands of liberal New England Calvinists had given him the intellec-
tual basis for a critique of old-school orthodoxy and fed his natural
scepticism. The popular, sectarian evangelicalism of the frontier he
viewed as “simply a feeling that will in the end die out.” He was, he

40. For reflections on Lincoln’s evolving faith during wartime see especially Mark
A. Noll, “‘Both Pray to the Same God’: The Singularity of Lincoln’s Faith in the Era of
the Civil War,” Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association 18, no. 1 (Winter 1997), 1–26;
Nicholas Parrillo, “Lincoln’s Calvinist Transformation: Emancipation and War,” Civil
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Association 33 (Winter 2012), 38–74.

41. Osborn H. Oldroyd, comp. and ed., The Lincoln Memorial: Album-Immortelles;
Original Life Pictures, with Autographs, from the Hands and Hearts of Eminent Americans
and Europeans, Contemporaries of the Great Martyr to Liberty, Together with Extracts from
Richard Carwardine

said, proud to be numbered one of the “free thinkers or free thinking men. . . I was born a skeptic.” Building one of the finest libraries in the West, Herndon read deeply in philosophy and in speculative understanding of the operations of the universe. Although a southerner by birth, and to the distress of his father, he—in his own words—“always turned New-Englandwards for my ideas—my sentiments—my education.” Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker, in particular, nourished his religious liberalism, Transcendentalism, sympathy for the oppressed, hatred of injustice, and—in David Donald’s words—“a noble belief in the innate goodness of the universe and in the perfectibility of human society.” Truth was accessible to all, since the heart could “from the primitive Facts of Consciousness given by the power of instinctive intuition . . . deduce the true notion of God, of Justice and Futurity” [Parker]. In due course “man will be his own Providence and his own Redeemer.” But this was not godlessness: “should I stand still like an Atheist and say this world is only a dancing concourse of atoms bound together by chance—the world is a farce, let it go? I cannot do so. I want a betterment of conditions and circumstances for all classes and all climes—here and everywhere.”

Having considered Lincoln something of a philosophical brother-in-arms, Herndon could not imagine his law partner drawing as president closer, if not to orthodox Christianity, then to the Christian concept of a mysterious personal God who intervened in history.

Herndon met Lincoln only once during the war, when he visited the White House in January 1862 to secure a federal job for a relative by marriage. This was too early in the conflict for him to see for himself what others who were close to Lincoln increasingly saw: namely a president bowed by domestic trials (above all the death of young Willie) and by the carnage on the battlefield. Herndon was dependent on his cast of informants, but those with firsthand knowledge of Lincoln in wartime were too few in number to challenge his own assumptions and take seriously the claims that Lincoln’s faith had evolved during the struggle. He gave no weight to the prompting of Francis Carpenter, who wrote to him late in 1866: “What you say of Lincoln’s, religious experience & belief up to the time of his election I believe.—But during the last four years of his life he passed through what few men could have experienced without growth and change.” Was Herndon aware, Carpenter asked, of what Lincoln had said to Noah Brooks “about the ‘process of chrystalization’ which he passed through (spiritually) after

42. Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon, 9–12, 53–60.
43. Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon, 152–53.
his election”? Carpenter found the claim “rational and truthful,” and proffered Herndon the evidence of John Jay, who had been travelling by steamboat to Norfolk with the president; passing “a corner in an out of the way place, . . . he came upon Mr Lincoln, reading a dog eared pocket copy of the New Testament all by himself. I can but think if you could have resumed your old intercourse with him at the end of his four years you would have found his religious sentiments more fixed, possibly more Christian for ‘deism’ is not Christianity.”44

Mary Lincoln had made a similar point to Herndon (“he felt religious More than Ever about the time he went to Gettysburg”), but there is no sign that Herndon was willing to explore the significance of that remark. He was necessarily ignorant of some of the private sources that would have led him to question his own certainties, acknowledge his lack of empathy for Lincoln’s condition, and register the profundity of the president’s thinking about God. These sources included, notably, the document known as the Meditation on the Divine Will, where the president reflected on the mystery of the Almighty’s purposes and on His power to intervene in human affairs: “In the present civil war it is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.”45

Herndon could have approached those whom he might reasonably have expected to help elucidate the president’s private religious course: Lincoln’s friend and U.S. senator Orville Browning and the pastor of the New York Avenue Church, Phineas D. Gurley. When Browning insisted in the war’s early months that only a Union strike against slavery would open the door to divine assistance, Lincoln replied, “Browning, suppose God is against us in our view on the subject of slavery in this country, and our method of dealing with it?”

44. Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s Informants, 521 (Francis B. Carpenter to WHH, December 24, 1866).
This impressed Browning: it “indicated to me for the first time that he was thinking deeply of what a higher power than man sought to bring about by the great events then transpiring.”46 Equally, as Ronald C. White has shown, Phineas Gurley offered Lincoln pastoral comfort and preaching that examined “the delicate balance between free will and determinism” and saw Providence as “a mysterious dealing.”47 One of Herndon’s Washington correspondents, John DeFrees, suggested that he should ask Gurley for an account of the minister’s conversations with Lincoln at the time of Willie’s death—a suggestion which Herndon chose not to follow up.48

This was probably because Herndon found it hard to believe that Lincoln would reveal his faith to others, given how unforthcoming he had been to Herndon himself. During the 1850s Lincoln quite probably spent more time with his law partner than any other single person outside the family circle, but he did not make Herndon a confidant in matters of faith. Lincoln “[n]ever let me know much about his Religious aspiration[s] from 1854 to 1860,” Herndon told Lamon in 1870.49 Why, then, would Lincoln the president have been any different? When Lincoln used religious language in public, Herndon believed, he was merely meeting the expectations of “the President of a Christian people, and he but used their ideas, language, speech and forms.” (This surely explains why Herndon showed no interest in the theological significance of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural address, the more complete and public outworking of the president’s private Meditation on the Divine Will.) When he met delegations of preachers and gave them a respectful hearing, this in Herndon’s view was a performance. “I could state facts about Mr. Lincoln’s jokes on and gibes at Christianity and committees of ministers, who waited on him while President . . . that would shock a Christian people,” he declared (though he offered no evidence).50

To conclude, there is ambivalence and internal contradiction—possibly even an element of desperation—in Herndon’s discussion of Lincoln’s wartime beliefs. Herndon wanted it both ways: his lecture, he stated, was “only intended to cover Mr. Lincoln’s life in Illinois,” yet he proffered the statements of Mary Lincoln and John Nicolay, and

48. Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s Informants, 497 (John D. DeFrees to WHH, December 4, 1866).
49. Hertz, The Hidden Lincoln, 77 (WHH to Ward Hill Lamon, March 6, 1870).
50. Herndon, Lincoln’s Religion.
made them key evidence for concluding that the president “died an unbeliever.” He could not be definitively sure that Lincoln’s beliefs went unchanged during the presidency, yet in response to the suggestion that they evolved toward Christianity, Herndon used rhetoric of withering disdain. “What! Mr. Lincoln discard his logical faculties and reason with the heart? What! Mr. Lincoln believe that Jesus was the Christ of God . . . ! What! Mr. Lincoln believe that the New Testament was and is of special divine authority and fully and infallibly inspired . . . ! What, Mr. Lincoln believe that the Creator had connection through the form or instrumentality of a shadow with a Jewish girl? Blasphemy!” Herndon was right about Lincoln’s embrace of Christianity being unproven at best, but his prejudices kept him from investigating the possibility that during the trials of wartime, Lincoln’s faith crystalized, deepened, and drew him toward a belief in a God who intervened directly and powerfully in history. Herndon and his Lincoln Record are essential sources for understanding Lincoln’s faith. But whatever else Lincoln was at his death, we can be sure that he was not “an unbeliever.”