

## THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

BY R. C. ROPER.

A Methodist minister once said that Abraham Lincoln was too great a man to belong to any Church. This sentiment is far more charitable than some of the printed speculations on the simple faith of our martyred president. But it is preeminently true. Lincoln was too great a man to belong to any sect whose creed would force a single soul outside its fold; too broad a man to confine his religious life within denominational barriers; too simple to enjoy the pomp and show of forms and ceremonies; too sympathetic to affiliate himself with any Church less inclusive than the brotherhood of all men.

No sooner had death sealed his lips, than Lincoln became the victim of a spirited religious controversy. While he said very little himself about his own beliefs, and wrote still less, some men have tried to meet the deficiency by manufacturing opinions for him.

Because Lincoln was the standard bearer in a great struggle involving questions of a moral and religious nature, in which orthodox Christians joined with all their hearts, some thought that he must have been a technical Christian himself. Because he believed with them on some great questions, Church people thought that he stood with them on other questions in which they were almost as vitally concerned. Because he believed that slavery was wrong, he must have believed that Christianity was right. Because he believed in God, he must have believed that Christ was God. Because, on grave occasions, when the nation seemed trembling in the balance and his very soul was wrought with fear, when, bowed down by gloom and despondency, he called upon the people for prayers to the "Divine Being who determines the destinies of the nations," Christians were satisfied that he was one with them in all their doctrinal beliefs. They longed to believe him a Christian

with them. They craved something to satisfy this desire—to know that he “believed.”

To some people, Christianity is always the cause, and not the result of a righteous life. To such it is difficult to account for the goodness and greatness of the great Lincoln in any other way than by proving him to have been a disciple of orthodoxy. There are those who believe that we cannot be good or great unless we are doctrinal Christians; that we cannot live an upright life unless we believe something; that to be something is to believe something; that character consists in believing, not in being; that a man is not what he is, but what he believes he is, and calls himself.

Lincoln's beliefs, therefore, have been greatly distorted, not only by Church zealots but by extreme liberals as well. The former have considered it their Christian duty to bring him within the gates of orthodoxy in order to secure his immortal reputation from the attacks of defaming heretics, while the latter have tried to build upon him a defense for their own opinions.

Some dogmatists declare that he believed everything; the atheists tell us that he believed nothing. A certain Rev. Dr. Smith asserts that he once converted him; Lincoln's two law partners, Stuart and Herndon, ridicule him for his failure. One Bateman states that Lincoln once said “Christ was God”; a personal friend of Lincoln affirms that he denied the very existence of God. Noah Brooks says that “any suggestion of Lincoln's skepticism is a monstrous fiction—a shocking perversion”; Mrs. Lincoln declares that Mr. Lincoln had “no faith and no hope in the usual acceptance of those words.”

What, then, did Lincoln believe?

When a boy—his biographers all agree—Lincoln was practically without faith or piety. It is stated that his closest friends at New Salem were freethinkers and he accepted Volney, Paine, and Voltaire as his text-books in the frequent religious discussions in which he engaged. Lincoln was then at that age in young manhood when reason is apt to run rampant; when the boy spirit will not tolerate persecution without at least making a bold fight in self-defense.

Lamon in his *Life* states that Lincoln when a boy had a very poor opinion of the “article”—religion; that, “when he went to church at all, he went to mock and came away to mimic” (p. 487).

Considering the narrowness of Church-life it is not strange that Lincoln, urged on and encouraged by his atheist associates, became so imbued with the spirit of antagonism that he too be-

came unreasonable when he thought he was reasonable, illiberal when he thought he was liberal, intolerant and scoffing to the sacred beliefs of others. We must excuse the boy and blame the environment for the extreme to which Lincoln was actually forced in self-defense.

It is interesting to know that Lincoln went so far as to write a book on the Bible. Mr. Herndon, in his biography, tells us that the purpose of this book was to demonstrate, first, that the Bible was not God's revelation, and, second, that Jesus was not the Son of God. The pamphlet was similar, in its treatment, to Paine's *Age of Reason*. One day while Lincoln and his usual friends were discussing its merits around the old wood stove, one Hull, who was just then more anxious to protect the future of the young Lincoln than Lincoln was himself, seized the manuscript and threw it into the stove. It had been Lincoln's intention to publish and circulate this pamphlet, which, fortunately, thus went up in a cloud of smoke.

Thomas Paine wrote the *Age of Reason* and the managers of the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia refused to allow his bust to be placed among the heroes and patriots of the Revolution. Abraham Lincoln wrote a similar book and fate decreed that it should be destroyed and he should live in the hearts of his countrymen.

During his life, Lincoln's views, little as they were known, had some influence in his political career. The following extract is from a letter written by Lincoln to his friend Morris in 1843, when he was running for Congress:

"There was, too, the strangest combination of Church influence against me. Baker is a Campbellite; and therefore, as I suppose, with few exceptions, got all that Church. My wife had some relatives in the Presbyterian Churches, and some with the Episcopal Churches, and, therefore, wherever it would tell, I was put down as either the one or the other, while it was everywhere contended that no Christian ought to go for me, because I belonged to no Church, was suspected of being a deist, and had talked about fighting a duel." (*Works*, ed. by Nicolay & Hay, Vol. 1, 79.)

During the struggle of the Civil War, Lincoln placed great dependence upon the Churches, for they were heart and soul in the cause. Mr. Lamon in his *Life* says that Lincoln was a "wily politician," that, aspiring to lead Christian people in a cause, he was wise enough not to appear to be an enemy among them; that he even allowed himself to be misrepresented by some ministers with whom he came in touch. He was suspected of being an un-

believer in many of the prevailing dogmas and there were those who would turn this to his injury. Preachers frequently tried to convert him. Intriguing political enemies, seeking to discredit him with the people, tried to work out some expression from him that would aid them in their sinister work. But in vain. He refrained from expressing his inmost convictions to any curious seeker who applied. Yet to his friends he was frank and honest. But he grew more and more cautious as the responsibilities of the nation pressed harder and harder upon him. Hon. David Davis, a personal friend, is quoted by Herndon as follows :

"The idea that Mr. Lincoln talked to a stranger about his religion or his religious views, or made such speeches and remarks about it, is to me absurd. I knew the man so well ; he was the most reticent, secretive man I ever saw or expect to see. He had no faith in the Christian sense of the term."

Lincoln understood human nature well enough to know that it is not always best nor always right to tell what one believes. It is not courageous to place one's self in unnecessary danger when there is nothing to be gained by the risk. Lincoln was so situated that to give utterance to his religious views, in so far as they were unpopular, would have been a grave mistake. He improved every opportunity to express those views which he held in common with the Churches, but he kept to himself those opinions on which he and the Churches disagreed. It may have been mere policy on his part, but it was not wrong, and good policy under the circumstances.

And so Lincoln depended upon the Churches. In a response to a Methodist delegation, May 14, 1862, he said :

"Nobly sustained as the government has been by all the Churches, I would utter nothing which might appear invidious against any. Yet, without this, it may fairly be said, that the Methodist Episcopal Church, not less devoted than the rest, is by its greater numbers, the most important of all. It is no fault in others that the Methodist Church sends more soldiers to the field, more nurses to the hospital, and more prayers to heaven, than any. God bless the Methodist Church. Bless all the Churches, and blessed be God, who, in this our great struggle, giveth us the Churches." (*Works*, II., 522.)

In a response to a delegation of Evangelical Lutherans, May 16, 1862, he used these words :

"You may all recollect that in taking up the sword thus forced into our hands, this government appealed to the prayers of the pious and the good, and declared that it placed its whole dependence upon the favor of God. I now humbly and reverently, in your presence, reiterate the acknowledgment of that dependence, not doubting that if it shall please the Divine Being, who determines the destinies of the nations, this shall remain a united people, and that they will, humbly seeking

the divine guidance, make their prolonged national existence a source of new benefits to themselves and their successors, and to all classes and conditions of mankind." (*Works*, II., 148.)

Lincoln was an extremely religious man, though not a technical Christian. He thought deeply, and his opinions were positive. His seriousness was a characteristic trait, showing itself even in his genuine good humor. His very jokes were a part of his seriousness. In all his native wit and humor we see some lasting good, and in his hours of gloom and despair we often find a vein of mirth and cheer. So changeable, so vacillating, so varied in all his moods,—he was above all things else a moody man. Now cheerful and hopeful, now gloomy and despairing; again, laughing off his cares and trials in good-natured jokes and jollity, only to return to that gloom which so often hung over him,—despondency. Such was his peculiar nature.

Lincoln was an extremely practical man. He believed not for belief's sake, but for his own sake. He made a practice of religion. He used it. His religion was his life, and his life was his religious service. It was his only public profession. Religion was a part of him. He accepted nothing unless he could use it. He believed in prayer because he found use for it, and when the fate of the Union seemed to waver, when doubt and despair hovered over the land and the future was uncertain, Lincoln often shut himself within his room and offered up his prayer to God. "So many times," he said, "I was forced upon my knees, not knowing where else to go." His faith in God was most implicit and real. Thus far he was truly orthodox. In fact, he held views of God which probably a majority of orthodox people to-day have outgrown. From his own statements it would seem that he believed in a real personal God, though this is denied by Mr. Herndon, his law partner and biographer :

"No man had a stronger or firmer faith in Providence—God—than Mr. Lincoln, but the continued use by him late in life of the word God must not be interpreted to mean that he believed in a personal God. In 1854, he asked me to erase the word God from a speech which I had written and read to him for criticism, because my language indicated a personal God, whereas he insisted no such personality ever existed." (*Herndon's Life*, II., 150.)

But, as we shall see later, Mr. Lincoln did believe in a directing Providence, if not, indeed, in a prayer-hearing God, and we have the best proof that he not only asked for prayers from the people but that he himself believed in and used prayer many times when the burdens of the nation were pressing hardest upon him.

His writings indicate that he believed in a God who actually controlled human affairs; a God who was working in the very struggle then being waged. There is much evidence in his letters, writings, responses, and addresses to bear out this conclusion.

His Thanksgiving proclamations, full of expressions of faith in God, show also his dependence upon a higher power in the struggle through which he passed. In a proclamation of May 9, 1864, he uses these words:

"Enough is known of the army operations within the last three years to claim an especial gratitude to God, while what remains undone demands our most sincere prayers to, and reliance upon, Him without whom all human effort is vain. I recommend that all patriots, at their homes, in their places of public worship, and wherever they may be, unite in common thanksgiving to Almighty God." (*Works*, II., 522.)

Again, October 3, 1863:

"No human counsel hath devised, nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the most high God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy." (*Works*, II., 418.)

Writing to A. G. Hodges in 1864, Lincoln says:

"I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me. Now at the end of three years' struggle, the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man devised or expected. God alone can claim it. Whither it is tending seems plain. If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North, as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice of God." (*Works*, II., 418.)

Again he says:

"That the Almighty does make use of human agencies, and directly intervenes in human affairs, is one of the plainest statements of the Bible. I have had so many evidences of this, so many instances of being ordered by some supernatural power, that I cannot doubt this power is of God." (*Whitney's Life*, 267.)

Still again:

"I do not consider that I have ever accomplished anything without God, and if it be his will that I must die by the hand of an assassin, I must be resigned. I must do my duty as I see it and leave the rest to God." (*Whitney's Life*, 267.)

As to his beliefs concerning other points in the Christian faith, there is not as convincing authority. The best authority is his own words, and while there is considerable in his writings to indicate a strong faith in God and prayer, there is very little to indicate his beliefs regarding Christ, the Bible, etc. But the very absence of anything on these points is good evidence that he did not hold the views which some have attributed to him.

Lincoln accepted the practical teachings of the Bible, especially the New Testament, and was fond of the Sermon on the Mount. The best authorities seem to hold that Lincoln never substantially changed his earlier views regarding the inspiration of the Bible and the divinity of Christ, although there are some who claim he changed in later years.

In an article in *Scribner's Monthly* (Vol. VI, 333) Rev. J. A. Reed contends that Lincoln was converted in 1848 by the Rev. Dr. Smith, whom he styles "Mr. Lincoln's Pastor." He states in the same article that it was Mr. Lincoln's intention to make a "public profession" later and unite himself with the "visible Church on earth." "It does not appear," says Mr. Reed, "that he had ever seen, much less read, a work on the evidences of Christianity till his interview with Rev. Dr. Smith in 1848."

In a letter to Mr. Herndon written in 1867, the Rev. Dr. Smith states that it was his "honor to place before Mr. Lincoln arguments designed to prove the divine authority and inspiration of the Scriptures," and that Mr. Lincoln, after a careful examination, pronounced them "unanswerable."

But no explanation why he never joined a church.

Mr. Bateman, once superintendent of public instruction in Illinois, claims that Lincoln once used these words in a conversation: "I know I am right because I know that liberty is right, for Christ teaches it, and Christ is God."

Concerning this alleged statement of Lincoln Mr. Herndon says a word:

"Mr. Bateman if correctly represented in Holland's *Life of Lincoln*, is the only man, the sole and only man, who dares say that Mr. Lincoln believed in Jesus as the Christ of God, as the Christian world represents."

Mr. Reed, in his article before referred to, quotes Noah Brooks and others to prove that even if Lincoln was not "converted" in 1848, as claimed, he at least changed his views after he went to Washington. But Mr. Herndon in 1870 denied this, and Mr. J. G. Nicolay, Lincoln's private secretary at the White House, and later his biographer, who would probably have known of Mr. Lincoln's conversion, if true, states:

"Mr. Lincoln did not, to my knowledge, in any way change his religious views, opinions or beliefs from the time he left Springfield to the day of his death."

And now let us look at the words of his own wife. Mrs. Lincoln in 1866, in a letter to Mr. Herndon, stated:

"Mr. Lincoln had no faith and no hope in the usual acceptation of those words. He never joined a Church; but still, as I believe, he was a religious man

by nature. He first seemed to think about the subject when our boy Willie died, and then more than ever about the time he went to Gettysburg; but it was a kind of poetry to him, and he was never a technical Christian."

According to Mrs. Lincoln, he first began to "think about the subject" about the time his boy Willie died, and not, strange as it may seem, when the Rev. Dr. Smith "converted" him in 1848.

Why did Lincoln never join a Church? We find an answer in his own words:

"When any church will inscribe over its altar, as the sole qualification for membership, the Saviour's condensed statement of the substance of both law and Gospel, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,' that church will I join with all my heart and with all my soul." (Carpenter's *Life*.)

I have examined quite carefully Lincoln's works in two volumes, and though I find many references which prove clearly and conclusively his abiding faith in God and prayer, yet I have failed to find one single instance where he ever used even the mere words "Jesus" or "Christ," a fact which I take to be quite significant. If he did entertain such views of Christ and the Bible as are attributed to him by some orthodox Christians, is it not reasonable to believe that he would have expressed those views as he did his beliefs of God and prayer? Mr. Herndon also states that he never once saw in print the words "Jesus" or "Christ" as used by Lincoln.

When his father was on his death-bed, Lincoln wrote a letter to his brother-in-law, J. D. Johnston, which contained the following words of hope and comfort:

"You already know that I desire that neither father nor mother shall be in want of comfort either in health or sickness, while they live. . . . I sincerely hope that father may recover his health, but at all events tell him to remember to call upon and confide in one great and good and merciful Maker, who will not turn away from him in any extremity. He notes the fall of a sparrow and numbers the hairs of our heads, and He will not forget the dying man who puts his trust in Him. Say to him that if we could meet now, it is doubtful whether it would be more painful than pleasant, but that if it be his lot to go now, he will soon have a joyous meeting with many loved ones gone before, where the rest of us, through the help of God, hope ere long to join them." (*Works*, I., 165.)

If Lincoln really did entertain such ideas of Christ as some would have us think, is it not reasonable to presume that he would have so expressed himself on this occasion and offered such comfort to his dying father who really did believe this way? But instead, as is characteristic of the man, Lincoln spoke honestly and said what he really did believe when he affirmed his confidence in



one "great and good and merciful Maker" and in the "joyous meeting with many loved ones gone before," but not even a hint that he believed Christ to be God.

There are many of Lincoln's best and closest friends, those who worked with him and knew his life, whose statements bear out this conclusion.

Mr. J. T. Stuart, once Lincoln's law partner, is quoted by at least two of Lincoln's biographers as follows :

"Lincoln always denied that Jesus was the Christ of God—denied that Jesus was the Son of God, as understood and maintained by the Christian Church." (Herndon's and Lamon's *Life*.)

Mr. Lamon says in his *Life* :

"Mr. Lincoln was never a member of any Church, nor did he believe in the divinity of Christ, or the inspiration of the Bible in the sense understood by Evangelical Churches. His theological opinions were substantially those expounded by Theodore Parker." (Lamon's *Life*, 486.)

Mr. J. W. Fell, a close friend in Illinois, is quoted by Lamon thus :

"If from my recollections on the subject, I was called upon to designate an author whose views most clearly represented Mr. Lincoln on this subject, I would say that author was Theodore Parker." (P. 490.)

It is interesting to note in connection with these statements of Lincoln's fondness for Theodore Parker's writings, that in one of Parker's lectures on "The Effect of Slavery on the American People," Lincoln found this sentence which pleased him :

"Democracy is direct self-government, over all the people, for all the people, by all the people."

And so to Theodore Parker is due the inspiration of that oft-quoted phrase first used by Lincoln in his Gettysburg address, "of the people, for the people, and by the people."

As to other opinions held by Lincoln, Mr. Herndon adds :

"He believed in no hell and no punishment in the future world.

"He held many of the Christian ideas in abhorrence, and among them was this one, that God would forgive the sinner for a violation of his laws. Lincoln maintained that God could not forgive ; that punishment was to follow the sin ; that Christianity was wrong in teaching forgiveness ; that it tended to make man sin in the hope that God would excuse, and so forth. Lincoln contended that the minister should teach that God had affixed punishment to sin, and that no repentance could bribe him to remit it. 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."

In conclusion, then, we may sum up his beliefs about like this : He was a firm believer in the "great and good and merciful" God,

but not in a revengeful and cruel God who would consign men to an eternal hell when nothing good to those who suffered could possibly come from such punishment. He believed in and used prayer as a means to bring himself in closer relations with Right in everything. He did not believe that it is best or safe to rely upon death-bed repentance, but that every act will surely reward itself with good or evil. "He believed in universal inspiration and miracles under law," and that all things, both matter and mind, are governed by law. He believed that all creation is an evolution under law, not a special creation of the Supreme Being. He hoped for a joyous meeting in the world to come with many loved ones gone before. He believed that Christianity consists in being, not in believing, in loving the "Lord thy God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself." He believed that the Bible is a book to be understood and appreciated as any other book, not merely to be accepted as a divine creation of infallibility. He believed in the man Christ, not in the God Christ. He believed that it is nobler to be a man and grow to be a God than it is to be a God and descend to be a man.

He was once an admirer of Volney, Paine, and Voltaire; later of Theodore Parker, Emerson, and Channing. He was once a scoffer of religion; later, a supporter.

Lincoln was a man. The stimulus which his life gives to us is greater because we know he was like us; because we know he had his faults and his virtues; because we can comprehend him. His sympathy, simplicity, and humor give us an insight into the secret of his greatness. We see in him some of the requisites and possibilities of human success.

"He knew to bide his time,  
And can his fame abide,  
Still patient in his simple faith sublime,  
Till the wise years decide.  
Great captains, with their guns and drums,  
Disturb our judgment for the hour,  
But at last silence comes;  
These all are gone, and, standing like a tower,  
Our children shall behold his fame,  
The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,  
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,  
New birth of our new soil, the first American."

Lowell, *Commemoration Ode*.