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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Katerina Apostolides

Suffering and Redemption in the Eyes of Lincoln

by Katerina Apostolides

An examination of Abraham Lincoln’s speeches and writings throughout his lifetime will, and has, provoked considerable discussion as to the role of providence in his thought. To many this is still an enigma; it is unclear whether Lincoln believed in a God at all, or whether, as some allege, he employed Biblical language merely in order to sway his audiences. Others believe Lincoln to have been a religious man, but influenced by so many contrasting faiths and theologies as to have been confused and inconsistent in his thought.

In this paper, I intend to further the literature on the role of providence in Lincoln’s worldview, by proposing my own answers to what I consider to be the most pertinent questions on this subject. In short, I will address the question of how Lincoln understands both moral agency and moral responsibility, thereby clarifying what Lincoln considers to be the relationship between God and men, nations and men, and among men themselves. I will argue that Lincoln understands not only individuals, but nations as well, to have souls—and hence, that he believes nations may be both responsible for grave injustices and capable of self-redemption. This moreover complicates his notion of moral agency and moral responsibility, since they may be exercised and borne communally in addition to individually. Finally, because nations do not, like individuals, have after-lives, this best explains Lincoln’s apparent belief in the inevitability of God’s will prevailing on earth—at least as far as “justice to nations” is concerned.

I. Preliminary discussion: the nature of Lincoln's religion.

Before approaching these questions, it is appropriate to begin by addressing the question of whether or not we can reasonably believe that Lincoln was a religious man. I have both heard and read arguments to the contrary. Twentieth century scholars of his work, in addition to recent ones such as David Donald in *Lincoln* (1995), have argued that Lincoln maintained a secular perspective throughout his life, and that even his patently theological Second Inaugural Address was a translation of his personal secular fatalism into terms that could be more widely understood.¹ They have sought evidence of secular fatalist influences in utilitarian thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham from Great Britain. The idea that Lincoln employed Biblical language in order to appeal to his audiences was echoed by a few of my classmates as well. There is perhaps some support to be found for this argument in the disparity between the extent to which Lincoln employs Biblical language in his most public speeches and the extent to which he employs it in his more regular messages to Congress—the former significantly more heavily coated in religious imagery.

It would be wrong to argue that Lincoln was a religious man by trying to locate him within a particular religious tradition. For one thing, Lincoln's writings contain hardly any, formal or informal, proclamations of such a nature. Moreover, as Richard Carwardine points out, the thought of doing so is rendered ridiculous by the number of religious denominations who have tried to claim him: in Carwardine's words, "Friends have pointed to his Virginia Quaker forebears, Baptists to his parents' faith, Methodists to a supposed conversion at a camp meeting, Catholics to a surreptitious joining of their church, and Presbyterians to a public attendance at theirs. Masons, Unitarians, and Universalists have each clasped him to their bosoms. Following

¹ See Richard Wightman Fox. "Lincoln's Religious Quest: Why His Faith Won't Suit Either Side in the Culture Wars."

the visits of two or three mediums to the wartime White House, the Spiritualists claimed him as one of theirs, though Lincoln himself was facetiously dismissive, remarking that the contradictory voices of the spirits at these séances reminded him of his cabinet meetings.”²

It is not only true that Lincoln received influences from multiple traditions and denominations, but also that he was inclined to jest about mainstream Christian teachings. For example, in his Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions, of February 11, 1859, he jokes about Adam, saying, “As might be expected he seems not to have been a very observing man at first; for it appears he went about naked a considerable length of time, before he even noticed that obvious fact. But when he did observe it, the observation was not lost upon him; for it immediately led to the first of all inventions, of which we have any direct account—*the fig-leaf apron*.”³ According to certain contemporaries of his, including a friend of his, James Matheny, Lincoln would sometimes shock those around him by his irreverent contempt for the Bible: “[Matheny] had heard Lincoln “call Christ a bastard,” how he “would talk about Religion— pick up the Bible— read a passage— and then Comment on it— show its falsity— and its follies on the grounds of Reason— would then show its own self made & self uttered Contradictions and would in the End— finally ridicule it.”⁴

But while it could not be aptly said that Lincoln emerged from a particular religious tradition, there is certainly enough evidence to support the idea that Lincoln was a religious man. For the most part, such evidence is to be found in his more private correspondence with others. For example, in his letter to Thurlow Weed, subsequent to his Second Inaugural Address, he comments on the latter, saying, “Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case, is to

² Carwardine, Richard. *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*, 33.

³ *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865*, 5.

⁴ Carwardine, Richard. *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*, 36.

deny that there is a God governing the world.”⁵ While it might be argued that Thurlow Weed was a supporter of Lincoln’s whom Lincoln was attempting to impress, Lincoln reveals that his use of Biblical language in the Second Inaugural was chosen by him *in spite* of the fact that it would offend his audience, rather than because he thought it would win them over.

More importantly, those who believe that Lincoln employs religious language for purely political reasons have to explain why it pervades even his private meditations. For example, in his Meditation on the Divine Will, written previous to his Second Inaugural, Lincoln meditates that “The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to be acting in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong.” He continues, “I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet.”⁶ In examples like these, it becomes mulish to insist that Lincoln maintained a privately secular worldview, unless one were to insist it was so private that he refrained from sharing it even with himself.

I have thus established that Lincoln was a religious man, albeit religious in a way that was personal, rather than mainstream, and influenced by multiple religious traditions, rather than one. However, I have not yet discussed what role Lincoln’s belief in God and providence played in his thought, and how he understood questions of moral agency and moral responsibility. “Moral agency” refers to the issue of *who* is capable of bringing about change in the world, for better or worse; the determinism implied earlier, and somewhat evidenced in his Meditation on the Divine Will, would mean that God was the primary force behind change. Did Lincoln believe this? As far as moral responsibility is concerned, I intend to discuss *on whom* Lincoln believed

⁵ *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865*, 689.

⁶ *Ibid*, 359.

that moral guilt rested, and to whom punishment ought be delivered; I will also include a discussion about where and how Lincoln believed that such punishment should come about.

II. Moral agency; the role of man and God in moral action.

The question of moral agency is probably the one that provokes the most interest and confusion among Lincoln's scholars. What is Lincoln's perception of the relationship between God and man? It is evident in his Meditation on the Divine Will that Lincoln believes it is important that men try to *carry out* the will of God; he says, "In great contests each party claims to be *acting in accordance* with the will of God."⁷ This idea is further evident in the Second Inaugural: in speaking of the North and the South in the Civil War, he says, "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged."⁸ Thus, Lincoln takes it for granted that it is the purpose of man to bring about the enactment of God's will.

To complicate this relationship further, Lincoln seems to believe that God *empowers* those who are acting according to his will. In his address to the Cooper Institute, and speaking to his anti-slavery supporters, in 1860, he ended famously with the line, "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."⁹ This idea is also visible in his Farewell Address at Springfield, Illinois, on February 11, 1861:

"Without the assistance of that Divine Being, who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him, who can go with me, and remain with you and be every

⁷ Ibid, 359 (italics added).

⁸ Ibid, 687.

⁹ Ibid, 130 (modified to lower case).

where for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well.”¹⁰ Arguably, such a belief is also implied in his Message to Congress in Special Session, in which he declares, “And having thus chosen our course, without guile and with pure purpose, let us renew our trust in God, and go forward without fear and with manly hearts.”¹¹ The notion is thus pervasive in Lincoln’s speeches that those who serve the will of God acquire the latter’s support and protection.

But while it is clear that, in Lincoln’s worldview, good men need the support of God in order to effect their purpose, it would be wrong to think that God requires the efforts of men in order to effect his own. The claim, for example, that Lincoln perceives there to be a danger of God’s will *not* triumphing if men choose not to comply is peremptorily denied in Lincoln’s statement, “The will of God prevails,” in his Meditation on the Divine Will; it is further rendered invalid by Lincoln’s assessment that “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.”¹² Thus, the indispensability of God’s approval to men who desire justice is not reciprocated on the other side; God can accomplish his purpose, if he wants to, with or without the assistance of these men; indeed, with or without a human contest.

A number of philosophers and scholars have had trouble coming to grips with Lincoln’s apparent determinism (which some people term “fatalism,” perceiving in his thought the idea of inevitable doom). This problem is raised in Carwardine’s book, *Lincoln: Life of Purpose and Power*, in which Carwardine describes his well-known “Doctrine of Necessity,” according to which, Lincoln believed, “that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control.”¹³ The problem thus becomes, how can human

¹⁰ Ibid, 199.

¹¹ Ibid, 261.

¹² Ibid, 359.

¹³ Carwardine, Richard. *Lincoln: Life of Purpose and Power*, 39.

beings possess a meaningful moral agency, if they are not in control either of their actions or of their successes? This becomes a relevant concern, for example, when reading Lincoln's letter to Albert G. Hodges, where he tells the latter, "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."¹⁴

The obvious question a philosopher might ask is what is the motivation for men to pursue goodness, or greatness, if the possibility of them accomplishing this is not within their control? The question, on the other hand, that a scholar would ask, is why did this outlook not induce passivity in Lincoln? One would think that a man who believed in a determinist worldview would not think his participation in the world was at all crucial. However, Lincoln was an enterprising and goal-oriented man. To borrow Carwardine's words, "He was scarcely inert politically. How, then, does one square the circle?"¹⁵

One possible answer is to say that Lincoln was inconsistent in his thought on the subject of the inevitability of the triumph of God's will. This is suggested, first, by his continued and energetic political activity, and second, by his frequently voiced fears, during his campaign, that America was veering in the wrong direction, in a way that was becoming increasingly irreversible. As he said in his renowned House Divided speech, "Either the *opponents* of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its *advocates* will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in *all* the states, *old* as well as *new*—*North* as well as *South*. Have we no tendency to the latter condition?"¹⁶ By pitting the moderate option he desired against the extreme option he was fighting, Lincoln makes it clear here that he feared a *radical* development in the wrong

¹⁴ *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings: 1858-1865*, 586.

¹⁵ Carwardine, Richard. *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*, 40.

¹⁶ *Abraham Lincoln: Great Speeches*, 24.

direction. Indeed, the Nebraska Doctrine and the Dred Scott decision were both reasonable grounds for believing that America was on the path toward total slavery. Thus, one might claim, it is questionable how likely it is that Lincoln actually believed in the ultimate triumph of divine will.

Perhaps, however, one does not need to presume an inconsistency in Lincoln's thought in order to explain the paradox of believing simultaneously in struggle and inevitability. Even in the above example, it is *possible* that Lincoln thought God's will would inevitably triumph, and only feared that, if the South was not stopped, it would be much *longer* before this occurred. Thus, I will try to seek out an alternative explanation for why, given his determinism, Lincoln sensed such a great urgency in fighting to restore and preserve freedom in America.

Carwardine tries to solve this puzzle by showing how Lincoln believed in the doctrine of necessity while simultaneously regarding himself as an *instrument* of it. Carwardine justifies this by reference to a quote of Lincoln's in which he told Joshua Speed, his newly married friend, "I believe God made me one of the instruments of bringing your Fanny and you together, which union, I have no doubt He had fore-ordained."¹⁷ As Melvin B. Endy puts it, "Lincoln never lost completely the sense that God's ultimate control of history was a *summons* to battle, not a cause for complacency."¹⁸ In the eyes of Endy and Carwardine, this combination of instrumentalism and pre-ordainment can explain why Lincoln fought so adamantly in a struggle that he already knew would be won. Carwardine quotes John Gillespie, in whose judgment, Lincoln believed "that he himself was an instrument foreordained to aid in the accomplishment of this purpose as well as to emancipate the slaves."¹⁹ Thus, while the purpose can be attained with or without his

¹⁷ Carwardine, Richard. *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*, 44.

¹⁸ Endy, Melvin B. "Abraham Lincoln and American Civil Religion," 223 (italics added).

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 44.

assistance, he must nevertheless participate in the struggle for it because a part in the script has been relegated to him.

This may be a compelling answer to the question of what Lincoln's motivation for participating in the struggle was—in other words, he believed that this role had, in some sense, been assigned to him by God. However, it fails to explain why such instrumentalism was necessary in the first place. In other words, if God could have enacted his will in whichever way he desired, why did he choose a way that involved the use of human beings as instruments in enacting his will? The *value*, as well as the degree, of moral agency residing in human beings, is still unknown.

III. The importance of human beings as instruments of moral action.

Perhaps some hint as to the value of human beings bringing about the will of God can be found in Lincoln's description of the tragedies and disasters wrought by the Civil War. As he proclaimed a National Fast Day, Lincoln asked, "And, insomuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subject to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole people?"²⁰ In speaking about the "national reformation" of the American people, Lincoln seems to be implying that the sufferings induced by the Civil War are part of the way in which America can seek redemption for her sins. This idea also surfaces in the Second Inaugural, in which Lincoln declares, "Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the

²⁰ Anderson, David D. *Abraham Lincoln*, 174.

wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as it was said three thousand years ago, so still must it be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.'"²¹

There seem to be two important elements to the redemption Lincoln envisions. The first is the extent of the suffering, which he alludes to in his description of the "awful calamity of civil war" and of the amount of money and blood wasted in it. The other important element to this is that the suffering is *self-inflicted*. This is evident in Lincoln's stipulation that the war must continue "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, *shall be paid for* by another drawn with the sword..."²² In this sense, because Americans are at war with themselves, rather than being punished directly by God, their *self*-punishment enables them to acquire a certain kind of redemption. Thus, it becomes important that men be the instruments of the will of God, rather than God actualizing his will himself, so that they can, in so doing, cleanse themselves of their sins.

However, two things must be true in order for this to happen. The first is that men seek to bring about this change because they *want* it, and not against their own will. The second is that "right (actually) makes might". If the first does not hold, then moral agency does not exist, and no meaningful redemption can take place. If the second does not hold, then the will of God to redeem mankind will remain unrealized. These two conditions seem to be consistent with everything that has been said thus far; however, the first is of course qualified by the second condition, in that while men may think and act according to their own wills, only the good shall ultimately prevail.

²¹ *Lincoln: Great Speeches*, 107.

²² (italics added).

IV. Moral responsibility, moral agency, and collective persons.

Broaching the topic of moral responsibility may help to clarify the earlier idea of American redemption for past sins. What is really interesting about Lincoln's notion of moral responsibility is its transferable, indeed its *communal*, quality. For example, in his letter to Albert G. Hodges of April 4, 1864, he says, "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 and goodness of God."²³ It is very interesting that Lincoln assumes "complicity" of the North in the wrongs perpetrated by the South, and it is unclear whether the complicity is derived from the previous existence of slavery in the North, or simply from the fact of the North being part of an intimate union with the South. In either case, however, the sins of a nation are considered to extend to all members of that nation in common, whether across generations or across the country.

This idea frequently emerges in his writings and speeches. In his proclamation of National Fast Day, he said, "it is peculiarly fit for us to recognize the hand of God in this terrible visitation, and in sorrowful remembrance of our own faults and crimes as a nation and as individuals, to humble ourselves before Him and to pray for His mercy..."²⁴ Again there is the idea that crimes are not only individual but may also be national in character. Because they are national, and not just individual, people who may not have directly performed them become complicit in, and share in the moral responsibility for, them.

²³ *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865*.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 264.

Perhaps one reason why the idea of *national* crimes and sins makes sense for Lincoln is that he regards nations as “collective persons” of a kind. This is apparent in his repeated use of the metaphor of a human body for the nation. For example, in the Proclamation of National Thanksgiving, he spoke of the Almighty Hand healing “the *wounds* of the nation” and restoring America to “peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.”²⁵ The *physical* union of America is in this sense seen as very important to the intactness of her identity, in the same way that a body would be to a person. The motif of wounds appears in the Second Inaugural as well, where Lincoln says, “let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds...”²⁶ Thus, because nations are perceived to represent the collective identity of the people, they are considered to consist both in a body (susceptible to wounds and disunion), and a soul (capable of “crimes”).

The fact that Lincoln understands moral responsibility to be held communally and nationally, as opposed to merely on the part of the individual perpetrators of crimes, can be seen as an analogy for his perception of moral agency. In other words, it is not just that the guilt of a few is borne on the part of America at large; it is also the case that those who bring justice (that being, the North), do so on the part of America as a whole. It is for this reason that the idea of redemption, understood as self-inflicted suffering, is possible. For if America were made to suffer at the hands of an external party, she would merely have been punished; but because she was made to suffer at her own hands, she can be both punished *and* redeemed—redeemed because she herself *sought* that punishment.

This is not, of course, to imply that Lincoln intended for the Civil War, and all the damages and casualties that came with it. Ample evidence may be summoned, and some has

²⁵ Ibid, 521 (italics added).

²⁶ Ibid, 687.

been already, to show that Lincoln was in favor of avoiding violence and disaster to the extent possible. Lincoln insisted, for instance, that the first blow would not come from him in his First Inaugural Address of March 4, 1861, saying, “In doing this [executing the laws] there needs to be no bloodshed or violence; and there shall be none, unless it is forced upon the national authority.”²⁷ He moreover spoke with trepidation of the atrocities and horrors that befell ancient Egypt: “Pharaoh’s country was cursed with plagues, and his hosts were drowned in the Red Sea for striving to retain a captive people who had already served them more than four hundred years. May like disasters never befall us!”²⁸ Thus, to the extent that it was within his power, Lincoln wanted to minimize the amount of violence and catastrophe that were necessary in order to restore freedom and unity. However, there is a good argument to be made that, once the blood was actually spilled—and *to the extent* that it was spilled—Lincoln believed that the country was undergoing a “national reformation,” or a necessary *repentance* of some sort.

It is important also to note the difference between the hardships suffered by the Pharaoh’s country and those which befell the United States. I mentioned before that there is a difference between punishment and redemption, which is that the former entails a retribution for previous wrongs, whereas the latter—as it has been understood so far—must also consist in punishment, but demands further that the punishment be inflicted on the guilty by the guilty agent *himself*. In this sense, Egypt was merely punished, whereas the American Civil War performed the distinctive task of rejuvenating—or redeeming—her soul. Thus might we interpret Lincoln’s last lines in his Gettysburg address, that “we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died

²⁷ *Abraham Lincoln: Great Speeches*, 56.

²⁸ Carwardine, Richard. *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*, 25.

in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new *birth of freedom*...”²⁹ These deaths thus contribute to the beginning of a new life of innocence for the nation.

One might mention, with perhaps a little irony, that Lincoln’s view of moral agency allows him to take pride in good things, and avoid blame for bad ones. In other words, because America is inflicting this punishment on herself, her moral agency is allowing for the possibility of redemption. On the other hand, because the *degree* and the duration of the punishment are in the hands of God (who can prolong the victory as long as he likes), Lincoln transfers his responsibility for human tragedies to the divine, and away from himself.

The fact that, in his eyes, America has a *national* moral character would also explain why Lincoln places such value in public and communal actions of repentance. For example, he says, “And I do earnestly recommend to all the people, and especially to all ministers and teachers of religion of all denominations, and to all heads of families, to observe and keep that day [National Fast Day] according to their several creeds and modes of worship, in all humility and with all religious solemnity, to the end that the united prayer of the nation may ascend to the Throne of Grace, and bring down plentiful blessings upon our country.”³⁰ In this, one can discern Lincoln’s perception of the nation seeking goodness and forgiveness from God as a collective moral person.

This can also shed light on Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. His insistence “that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain...” is more easily comprehended when read in light of Lincoln’s perception that success and redemption are shared, rather than pursued individually.³¹ His stipulation that “It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to

²⁹ *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings: 1859-1865*, 536.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 521.

³¹ *Ibid*, 536.

the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced,” underscores the importance of the living to the dead in justifying the latter’s struggle.

Finally, this would explain Lincoln’s insistence on preserving the Union, even at the expense of the question of slavery. In his letter to Horace Greeley, Lincoln reiterates a stance taken repeatedly in the Lincoln-Douglas debates: “I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution...If there would be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time *save* slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time *destroy* slavery, I do not agree with them.”³² The fact that Lincoln wished to preserve the Union even if that meant forgoing an opportunity to rid the U.S. of slavery has been perceived by some as a concern on his part for the maintenance of the Union to the *exclusion* of any concern for alleviating slavery. However, understood in the context of earlier insights and interpretations, we see that Lincoln’s desire not to destroy the Union in order to destroy slavery amounts to a desire not to destroy the moral agent—that being, the nation—in order to perform the very action that is intended to *redeem* the character of that moral agent.

V. Justice to nations and justice to individuals.

One likely explanation for why Lincoln seems to focus so much on the topic of national punishment and redemption, rather than the punishment and redemption of individuals, is that, for Lincoln, justice to nations and justice to individuals are actually distinct concepts. This, I will argue, is evidenced both in his language and in his perception of the role of the divine will.

³² Ibid, 358.

Some Christians may be struck by Lincoln’s language when reading his letters and speeches. Many Christians today—and presumably then, also—believe that there is a God who is just, and who repays or rewards individuals for their crimes and good deeds in the afterlife. In their theological worldview, God plays no part in the happenings of this world, and his primary interest is in the souls of human beings—that is, of course, the only beings that *have* souls.

Lincoln seems to have an alternative perspective on what God’s primary interests are. As seen above, Lincoln frequently implies with his language that it is not only individuals who have souls, but nations also; and thus, that God is not only interested in the souls of men, but also in the souls of nations. This latter is, for instance, directly implied in his First Inaugural Address, in which he says, “In our present differences, is either party without faith of being in the right? If the Almighty Ruler of nations, with his eternal truth and justice, be on yours of the South, that truth, and that justice, will surely prevail, by the judgment of this great tribunal, the American people.”³³ Entailed in his statement is the notion that God is not only an “Almighty Ruler of men” but additionally an “Almighty *Ruler of nations*.” Thus, God’s attentions are understood to extend beyond the souls of individuals, but even to the souls of “collective persons”.

In fact, in the same speech, Lincoln addresses the Southerners once more, saying, “You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while *I* have the most solemn one to ‘preserve, protect, and defend’ it.”³⁴ Thus, Lincoln implies that God has a direct interest in the preservation of the nation, and that, as President of the United States, he has a personal *obligation* to God that goes beyond the improvement of his own soul, and extends to the collective “soul” of America.

³³ Ibid, 223.

³⁴ Ibid, 224.

Understanding the difference between the concept of justice to nations and justice to individuals complicates God's relationship with the world. After all, it is standard Christian teaching that individuals receive just payment for the right or wrong deeds they commit on earth upon their departure to the after-life. For this reason, it would not matter whether terrible tragedies befell good men while on earth, or whether great boons fell upon evil men. Their worldly fortunes are considered to be irrelevant to their after-worldly ones.

However, because nations do not have an after-life in the same way that people do, it becomes important that justice be delivered to them on earth. This is why it makes sense to say that "God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet," or to claim that the "Almighty Ruler of nations" will ensure that "justice will surely prevail."³⁵ Similarly, Lincoln becomes justified in appealing to his entire nation, saying, "It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness."³⁶ Lincoln wishes to bring about a national repentance that will spare America from the awful punishment that might otherwise be meted to her.

In addition, it becomes clear why Lincoln would be comparatively less certain of the triumph of justice on earth as far as *individuals* are concerned. Certainly, in a Civil War in which the soldiers of free-states are dying at an equal, and often a higher, rate than soldiers of slave-states, the best way to explain this would be to say that the soldiers of free-states will receive individual justice in the after-life—even if they receive undeserved fates on earth. Similarly, dissolute slave-owners may profit from their sins in this world, but will be certainly punished for them in the next. One can also see the discrepancy between Lincoln's certainty of earthly justice to nations and uncertainty of earthly justice to individuals in his letters concerning

³⁵ Ibid, 359, 224.

³⁶ Anderson, David D. *Abraham Lincoln*, 174.

particular individuals he cared about. For example, Anderson mentions a quick telegram Lincoln sent to his wife, triggered by a frightening dream; in it, he says, “Think you better put ‘Tad’s’ pistol away. I had an ugly dream about him.”³⁷ Lincoln, with respect to the fortunes and lives of individuals, seems to exhibit a deep *uncertainty*, which contrasts greatly with his conviction in the justice he expects his nation to encounter.

Similarly, in his famed letter to Mrs. Bixby, he tells her, “I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom.”³⁸ Here, Lincoln talks about the deaths of these sons as “a sacrifice,” rather than as a retribution that was owed to them. In this way, he reinforces the idea that nations, on the one hand, can expect certain justice in the course of their lifetimes, whereas individuals, on the other, may be unjustly punished or rewarded while on earth, but justly repaid in their afterlives.

This, of course, in some sense complicates the identity of an individual. For while they may be innocent in their own actions, they may be guilty by virtue of their participation in the character of their nation; alternatively, an individual might be guilty in his own actions, but innocent by virtue of his participation in the innocence of his nation’s character. This may impose punishments on him which he did not directly earn, or rewards on him that he did not directly come to deserve, during the course of his life on earth.

VI. Conclusion

³⁷ Ibid, 174.

³⁸ *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings*, 644.

I have attempted in this essay to shed light on, and provide new insights into, Lincoln's understanding of the role of providence in the dealings and happenings of men. The discussion has surveyed different aspects of Lincoln's thought on the matter, and sought to weave these aspects together, while demonstrating their relation to one another. I began by providing a preliminary justification of the idea that Lincoln was a religious man at all; and I showed that, while it would be wrong to identify him with a particular religious tradition, it is nevertheless manifest that he was a *personally* religious man.

The questions guiding this paper have been: what was Lincoln's understanding of moral agency and moral responsibility? I have established in this essay that, while Lincoln did not have the strongest conception of moral agency as "free will," given that he believed in the triumph of the divine will regardless, his speeches and writings nevertheless offer a meaningful place for moral agency by suggesting the possibility of individual and national "reformation"—or what I have termed, *redemption*—which, in contrast with mere "punishment," demands the exercise of human agency in order to occur.

I have also tried to elucidate Lincoln's unique perception of the nation as a "collective person"—consisting of a body (with "wounds") and a soul (responsible for "national sins" and capable of "national prayer"). Because the nation is a collective person, rather than simply a sum of many different people, the Civil War can serve as a form of redemption, because the punishment is *self*-inflicted, rather than inflicted on Southerners on behalf of the Northerners.

Finally, I have sought to explain why this notion of nations as collective persons requires the implication of God's will on earth. If only individuals had souls, then it would follow that God's justice could be made to prevail in the after-life; however, since nations also have souls, but do not have after-lives, justice must be brought to them on earth. Support for this perception

was found in Lincoln's certainty of justice being brought to America, combined with his lack of certainty as to the fortunes of good and evil individuals in this world. Finally, I hope that this analysis may serve as some answer to one of the most prevalent accusations leveled against him—namely, that Lincoln was concerned with preserving the Union, to the exclusion of the question of slavery; I have argued that Lincoln sought to preserve the Union so that it might *redeem* itself from the sin of slavery.

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