

# LINCOLN'S POLITICAL FAITH

## Does It Still Have a Place in Presidential Leadership?



Joseph R. Fornieri

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### Introduction

**Mitch Pearlstein, Founder & President, Center of the American Experiment:** Today's program is part of a year-long series of exquisitely nonpartisan American Experiment activities marking the Republican National Convention to be held down the highway in September and aimed at vitalizing conservatism in Minnesota and the nation. A number of these events have been—or will be—held under the rubric of “Learning from Lincoln,” who was, indeed, our first Republican president. But since the IRS officially classifies him as “Iconic” for tax-exempt purposes, everything about today's lunch is kosher, so to speak.

As for Professor Joseph Fornieri's labors today, my American Experiment colleagues and I have long been interested in religion's proper place in American public squares, as witness, for example, the Center's 1988 prospectus. As a state and nation, it argued, we needed to take greater advantage of our religious institutions and traditions if we were to adequately help people in need—while fully respecting, it emphasized, both the Constitution and American variety.

Despite assurances like this, as well as my own minority status, some people nevertheless feared we were hell-bent on blasting away at the wall separating church and state, with one very good friend actually having a rabbi check me out. Suffice

it to say we've never been intent on demolishing what might be described as Thomas Jefferson's wall and I would like to think, especially after all these years, the rebbe is finally sleeping peacefully through the night.

Yet while we were and remain wholly innocent of any charge of wanting to radically breach the wall, that doesn't mean we don't want to sculpt it a bit—say, in the spirit of the Founders, and then nearly a century later, Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln used biblical references and allusions beautifully and frequently. How beautifully?

“With malice toward none; with charity for all,” he wrote in his Second Inaugural, “with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right.”

How often did he use such language?

Well let's just say if George W. Bush employed anything like it as frequently, three-quarters of the leadership of the ACLU would have been carted away in mass apoplexy years ago.

The question is often asked whether Lincoln, being the gangly fellow he was, could be elected president in an age of television. It's a fine, speculative question, but a more germane one this afternoon is whether a theological worldview and rhetorical

style such as his would bring more comfort or nervousness to American voters?

Joe Fornieri is an associate professor of political science at Rochester Institute of Technology and already the author of four books on Lincoln, including *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* and *Lincoln's American Dream*. A fifth, on Lincoln and patriotism, is in train.

He did his undergraduate work at the State University of New York at Geneseo (making him the second SUNY alumnus at this podium this afternoon), and earned his Ph.D. in political philosophy at Catholic University in Washington. He and his wife have two young daughters and live in Fairport, New York.

Please welcome someone who in a very short period of time has become one of our country's most important Lincoln scholars, Joe Fornieri.

**Joseph Fornieri:** In his *Lyceum Address* of 1838, a young Abraham Lincoln called for a “political religion” to perpetuate the nation’s political institutions. He urged that this political religion be “taught in schools, in seminaries; and in colleges;” that it “be written in Primers . . . in spelling books and in Almanacs;” and that “it be preached from the pulpit . . . .”

Some of the hateful messages we have heard preached from the pulpit in this election season of 2008 present an altogether different vision of religion and politics from that which Lincoln prescribed in 1838. On the far Left, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright repeatedly curses “God damn America”; denounces the apartheid of the “U.S. of KKK”; claims that Americans were responsible for 9-11; and alleges a governmental conspiracy to exterminate blacks through the invention of the AIDS virus. In a nutshell, the core of Wright’s message is summarized by his pronouncement, “Racism is how this country was founded, and how this country is still run.”

Not to be outdone in style or sophistication, Fr. Michael Pflieger, who shares Wright’s ideology of Black Theology, preached a sermon at Trinity Church in Chicago that likened the telling of a black person to get over slavery to telling “a woman who has been repeatedly raped over, and over, and over and over and over and over . . . to get over it. ‘The hell I do!’ ‘Get the sucker who’s raping me and make him pay.’ Well America has been raping people of color, and America has to pay the price for the rape.”

Perhaps more disturbing than these hate-filled messages, was the congregation’s hysterical approval of them. Their reaction forces one to ask: “Is this what so many church-going people think of their country, and of their fellow Americans?”

On the other side of the aisle, the far Right has its own share of controversial preachers. Take for example the Rev. John Hagee’s reference to the Roman Catholic Church as “the whore of Babylon” and his contention that the Holocaust was part of Divine Providence’s plan to bring forth the state of Israel.

Whether it emanates from the far Left or the far Right, the mixture of religion and politics is a potentially volatile combination that may be explosive. Contrary to what Lincoln had hoped, in the cases above, the union of religion and politics undermines rather than perpetuates the nation’s political religion. The effect of such preaching is to destroy patriotic affection, to alienate the common bonds of citizenship, and to sow bitterness and resentment towards the government.

Both candidates Obama and McCain were forced to disavow their associations with the controversial preachers just mentioned. Yet neither candidate envisions a purely secular culture where religion has no place in the public square. Both candidates have attempted to establish their *bona fides* with religious voters. Both seem to understand the prominence of religion in American public life and its hold on people’s hearts. For better or worse, leaders who ignore the faithful do so at their political peril. Thus Obama and the Democrats

have attempted to make inroads with religious voters (as evinced by his recent support for faith-based initiatives), while McCain and the Republicans seek to maintain the evangelical coalition that had so faithfully supported George W. Bush. Both candidates make room for religion in politics within the context of the separation of church and state that preserves the integrity of both the secular and sacred.

In our current debate over the proper role of religion in American public life, we can find no better guide than our 16th president, Abraham Lincoln. Indeed, among the many reasons Lincoln is of enduring significance is his ongoing ability to provide an ultimate moral justification for American public life and democracy. I refer to this ultimate moral justification as his political faith. The pillar of this faith rests upon the core spiritual principle of our common humanity as affirmed by the Natural Law teaching of the Declaration of Independence.

In what follows, I seek to articulate Lincoln's political faith and to show how it was formulated as a response to the competing political religions of his time that likewise appealed to the authority of the Bible and religion to justify their proslavery policies. Subsequently, I will consider the contemporary relevance of Lincoln's political faith and its compatibility, or lack thereof, with alternative religious interpretations of American public life issuing from the pulpit today.

In particular, I want to consider the Black theology of James H. Cone that Reverend Wright has extolled as an important influence on his own political religion. Remarkably, in an issue devoted to Obama's faith and politics dated July 21, 2008, *Newsweek* omitted any reference to Cone's Black theology and its admitted influence on Wright and Trinity Church. A closer look at this theology is warranted by Obama's 20-year association with Wright. As Obama himself acknowledges, Wright was the man who converted him to Christianity, who inspired the title of his book (*The Audacity of Hope*), who baptized his children, who Obama

candidly admitted was his spiritual mentor, and that he was "like an uncle" to him. [An ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, James H. Cone is the Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York.]

## Mixed message

In his speech on race in March, 2008, Obama walked a political tightrope between defending and disavowing Wright. The result was a mixed message. Obama must be given credit for saying that his pastor's remarks, "expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees White racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America . . . ." However, he then equivocated by seeking to excuse Wright's remarks as mere sound bites taken out of context by hostile reporters. He went further by validating Wright's message as a reflection of legitimate discontent within the wider black community. "I can no more disown [Reverend Wright]," he said, "than I can disown the black community."

In the spectacle at the National Press Club a month later, Wright would likewise contend that an attack upon his preaching represented an attack upon the black church as a whole. Wright's racial pandering sought to transform and expand the issue from a question about public disapproval of his outrageous remarks as an individual preacher to one of unfounded prejudice against the entire African-American community as a whole. The next day, again to his credit, Obama publicly disavowed Wright. Whether he did this out of principle or political expediency, one thing is certain: Although Obama's support of his pastor has been inconsistent, Pastor Wright's message has been perfectly consistent all along, as he himself has claimed. What we have heard from Wright's pulpit is not rhetoric taken out of context but the outlines of a worldview consistently reflected in the Black theology of James Cone that Wright so admires.



A closer look at Wright's political religion of Black theology is further warranted by the defense of public intellectuals on the Left. There was the predicable defense of Frank Rich at the *New York Times* in "The All White Elephant in the Room" (May 4, 2008). However, as a Lincoln scholar, I am forced to point out how the Rev. Martin Marty and Pulitzer Prize winner Garry Wills have used their reputation as Lincoln scholars to lend credibility to Wright's teaching. Marty defended Wright in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in an essay entitled "Prophet and Pastor" (April 11, 2008), where he compared Wright's Afrocentric theology to the Celtic-centric traditions and worship of Irish Catholics.

Furthermore, in the *New York Review of Books* (Volume 55, No. 7), Garry Wills compared Obama to Lincoln and Wright to the martyred abolitionist John Brown. In his effort to link the two radicals, Wills fails to distinguish between the actual evil of slavery in John Brown's time and the imagined racial conspiracy theories in the mind of Jeremiah Wright. He thereby invites a moral equivalence between the two, which lends further credibility to Wright's outlandish claims. John Brown gave his life to end the actual evil of slavery; Wright denounces apartheid in the "U.S. of KKK" and claims that our government invented AIDS to exterminate black people—but then lives in a 10,000-square-foot house adjacent to a golf course in a predominately white, affluent suburb.

It is worth noting that these scholars have not yet reconsidered their defense of Wright despite Obama's public disavowal. In response to those who would claim that I am targeting the Left unfairly, it is further noteworthy that there was no such comparable defense of Haggee on the Right by Lincoln scholars or by established public intellectuals. One can hardly imagine Bill Moyers granting an interview with Haggee or, in the event that he did, treating him with the same fawning deference as he did Wright.

## Equality as inclusive

Before proceeding further with current events, however, let us first explore more carefully Lincoln's political faith as a standard to judge religion and politics of our own time. It is well known that Lincoln was an avid reader of Scripture and that he sought to apply its wisdom to his own life and to public life, explaining that "the good old maxims of the Bible are applicable, and truly applicable to human affairs." Noteworthy in this regard was Lincoln's penchant for describing the first principles of American republicanism in terms of a sacred creed. Indeed, he often spoke of America's "political religion," its "Political Faith," the "Ancient Faith," the "Old Faith," "the early faith of the republic," "the National Faith," and the "sacred principles" of "Our Fathers."

Lincoln's biblical view of the Declaration of Independence as a moral covenant is fundamental to his political faith. He saw the Declaration as an "American Ten Commandments" that enshrined the articles of the nation's political creed, as when he proclaimed that: "My ancient faith teaches me that all men are created equal and that there can be no moral right in connection with one man's making a slave of another." He further likened proslavery doctrines as forms of idolatry that betrayed this political faith.

Contrary to Wright and others, Lincoln maintained that the Founders understood equality in the Declaration as an inclusive principle, one that applied universally in the abstract to all human beings, regardless of race, class, creed, or color. In declaring that "all men are created equal," Lincoln argued that the Founders affirmed a moral standard to be approximated in practice even though they could not apply the principles fully under the circumstances of their own time.

In a speech at Lewiston, Illinois in 1858, he offered a powerful defense of the Founders' inclusive view of equality, speaking of the political faith in the Declaration as the Founders' "majestic interpretation of the economy of the universe," as a "lofty, and wise, and noble understanding of the

justice of the Creator to His creatures.” He then paused to emphasize the Founders’ universal intent: “Yes, gentlemen, to *all* His creatures, to the whole great family of man. In their enlightened belief, nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted by its fellows . . . .” Here Lincoln clearly affirms equal human dignity as created in the image of God.

Significantly, Lincoln’s view of equality is also informed by the Christian doctrine of original sin and man’s fallen nature. He believed that the equal depravity of mankind was just as relevant to democracy as the equal dignity of mankind. Thus, at Peoria in 1854 he defined “the leading principle, the sheet anchor of American Republicanism,” as the belief that “no man is good enough to govern another man, without that other’s consent.” Lincoln would likewise say in this same speech that, “Slavery is founded in the selfishness of human nature.”

To say that no man is good enough to govern another without that other’s consent means that no fallible human being can be entrusted with absolute power over another—as in the case of a master over a slave, or Divine Right monarch over his subjects. Given the equal fallibility of our common human nature, no one is entitled to a godlike superiority over his fellows. To claim such a superiority of kind would be tantamount to elevating oneself above the rest of humanity, thereby exempting oneself from the same moral laws that apply to everyone else. This is the very principle behind the idolatry of the Divine Right of Kings, which was decisively rejected by the Founders during the Revolution. Indeed, Lincoln equated the principle of the Divine Right of Kings with the principle of proslavery theology. In both cases, he noted, the “master . . . governs by a set of rules altogether different from those which he prescribes for himself.” Notice that this statement is likewise an expression of the Golden Rule in Matthew 7:12, as well as Kant’s categorical imperative.

## Lincoln’s rivals

Lincoln’s political faith was not formulated as an abstract doctrine or a systematic theology like Calvin’s *Institutes* or Aquinas’s *Summa*. Rather, it developed over time as a concrete, historical response to rival interpretations of American public life vying for the nation’s soul. The struggle over slavery in the mid-19th century raised ultimate questions about the moral meaning and moral destiny of the Union. Indeed, the Civil War took on the character of a religious conflict fought over competing interpretations of the Bible and Christianity. Both sides invoked the same God, the same Bible, and the same Constitution to vindicate their policies. Lincoln pointed to this irony in his *Second Inaugural Address*, where he observed, “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other.”

To be sure, Southern clergymen like Frederick Ross invoked the Bible in support of their claim that “Slavery was ordained of God”—an allusion to Romans 13:1. (“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”) Ross was representative of a new generation of Southern Divines who no longer apologized for slavery as a necessary evil, but affirmed it as a positive good—a Divine blessing to both master and slave. “[S]lavery, according to Ross, was found to be in absolute harmony with the word of God.” In a fragment that has come down to us entitled *On Pro-Slavery Theology*, Lincoln explicitly mentioned Ross by name and scornfully replied to his argument that slavery was willed by God.

Genesis 9:18-27, also known as the “Curse of Ham,” was perhaps the most commonly cited biblical passage in defense of slavery. Genesis 9 chronicles the fate of Noah’s three sons—Shem, Ham and Japheth. Based on their reading, southern clergy interpreted Noah’s three sons in allegorical terms as representatives of the three races of mankind: White, Black, and Asian. They then drew the conclusion that God had willed the perpetual enslavement of the black race on account

of Ham's transgression against his father. Had had impudently gazed at a naked Noah after the latter had passed out from drinking too much. Most notably, Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy, appealed to this reading of Scripture in defense of slavery.

That slavery was an institution sanctioned by the Bible was an idea held by some Northerners as well. Lincoln's rival, for example, Stephen Douglas, exploited the Bible in defense of popular sovereignty—the freedom of territorial settlers to decide whether to have slavery. During a famous speech in Peoria in 1854, Lincoln was interrupted by Douglas who claimed that the principle of popular sovereignty could be traced to the Garden of Eden where God had placed good and evil before man, bidding him to choose one or the other. For Douglas, good and evil in the Garden of Eden were analogous to slavery and freedom in the territories—a matter of choice.

Lincoln's impromptu response demonstrates, once again, his superior command of Scripture. Whereas Douglas incorrectly read the story from Genesis as an affirmation of man's autonomy to decide for himself what was good and evil, Lincoln correctly saw the injunction against eating the fruit as a moral imperative, imposing a binding duty and obligation upon Adam and Eve. Indeed, if taken to its logical conclusion, Douglas' argument would abolish the objectivity of all moral claims. Lincoln thus scornfully replied, "God did not place good and evil before man, telling him to make his choice. On the contrary, he did tell him there was one tree the fruit of which he should not eat upon the pain of certain death." Here we clearly see the context of Lincoln's political faith in terms of competing political interpretations of Genesis and the Fall as they relate to the extension of slavery in mid-19th century America.

The fact that the Bible was exploited in defense of slavery did not lead Lincoln to repudiate its moral authority. The misuse of something does not abolish its proper use. Lincoln observed that Scripture itself warns against twisting of the Word

for evil purposes. In a letter to a Baptist group, dated May 30, 1864, Lincoln compared the Southern clergy's manipulation of the Bible to Satan's temptation of Jesus Christ, as related in Matthew 4. He explained, "When a year or two ago, those professedly holy men of the South met in semblance of prayer and devotion, and . . . appealed to the Christian world to aid them in doing to a whole race of men, *as they would have no man do unto themselves* [Matthew 7:12], to my thinking, they condemned and insulted God and His church far more than Satan did when he tempted the Savior with the kingdoms of the earth. The devil's attempt was no more false and far less hypocritical."

Lincoln's reference to those "professedly holy men" was likely a jab at the Southern Presbyterian Church which had recently proclaimed its mission to preserve slavery. The audience also would have recognized the political significance of Lincoln's allusion to Matthew 4:1-11, which refers to Satan's manipulation of God's word to tempt Jesus Christ. Jesus responded to Satan's sophistry by providing an alternative interpretation of Scripture—one that was true in both letter and spirit. Indeed, all of the Great Teachers of Israel—the prophets, Jesus, St. Paul—warned against the twisting of God's word for merely human purposes. By placing himself within this prophetic tradition of biblical exegesis, Lincoln upheld the moral authority of Scripture while at the same time warning against its abuse. In a word, Lincoln provides us with a cogent teaching on the use and the abuse of the Bible in politics.

A summary of Lincoln's biblical opposition to slavery shows that he relied primarily upon the following precepts: "man created in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27); the "Great Commandment" to "love one's neighbor as oneself" (Matthew 22:37-40); the "Golden Rule" to "do unto others" (Matthew 7:12); and God's command that "In the sweat of thy face thou shalt eat bread" (Genesis 3:19).



- We have already seen how Lincoln appealed to Genesis 1:27, man created in the image of God.
- Lincoln appealed to the “Great Commandment” in Matthew 22:37-40, when he stated, “Give to him that is needy” is the Christian rule of charity; but “Take from him that is needy is the rule of slavery.”
- Lincoln’s famous definition of democracy, “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master,” is itself an expression of the Golden Rule in Matthew 7. He also applied the Golden Rule when he warned, “This is a world of compensations; and he would be no slave, must consent to have no slave. Those who deny freedom to others, deserve it not for themselves; and under a just God, can not long retain it.”
- Lincoln relied upon Genesis 3:19, when he explained, “As Labor is the common burthen of our race, so the effort of some to shift their share of the burthen on to the shoulders of others is the great, durable, curse of the race.” This passage from Genesis was perhaps the one most cited by Lincoln against slavery. It views labor as the duty of all human beings as a result of the Fall.

Based upon the above interpretation of Genesis 3:19, Lincoln developed a theology of labor, whereby God ordained “the burden of work, the individual’s duty to engage in it, and the moral right to enjoy the fruits of his labor,” as historian Richard Carwardine explains. Thus, in response to the Curse of Ham in Genesis 9,, Lincoln cited the teaching of Genesis 3, which sanctioned labor as the equal predicament of all human beings—no exceptions. Taking the fruits of another person’s labor was stealing. Again, here we clearly see the context of Lincoln’s political faith in which two competing interpretations of Genesis (Genesis 3 and Genesis 9) were invoked respectively to defend and condemn slavery.

Lincoln’s many appeals to Scripture notwithstanding, his opposition to slavery did not rely solely upon a literal interpretation of the Bible. Lincoln’s political faith was constituted by the mutual influence and the philosophic harmony between the republican teachings of the Founders, the worldview of the Bible, and human reason. In my book, I thus speak of the “The Three R’s” of Lincoln’s political faith: reason, revelation and republicanism. Lincoln harmoniously combined the Three R’s as complementary sources of political order that reinforced one another in vindicating American democracy and condemning slavery. Reason is the common language of the public square, and morality is the common denominator. When they enter the public square, religious teachings must be defended by reasoned argument.

## Black theology

Now let us examine current challenges to Lincoln’s political faith in the form of Cone’s Black Theology, which Wright and others so admire and defend. It is illuminating to juxtapose two quotations from Lincoln and Cone as representative of their distinct political religions. Speaking to immigrants in 1858 about the meaning of the Fourth of July, Lincoln said, “If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none . . . but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence, they find that those old men say that ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’ [They realize that this is] the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.”

In this speech, Lincoln explains that American identity is based not on blood or race, but upon the inclusive principles of the Declaration. He uses St. Paul’s imagery of the mystical body in which disparate members are made one in Christ. By analogy, shared fidelity to the Declaration’s principles unites different peoples into one common, political body. The political faith of the

Declaration is the source of unity; it constitutes the *unum* of our national motto *e pluribus unum*—out of many one.

Now let's consider a passage from Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*. "Black theology," says Cone, "refuses to accept a God who is not identified totally with the goals of the black community. If God is not for us and against White people, then he is a murderer, and we had better kill him. The task of Black theology is to kill gods that do not belong to the black community . . . . Black theology will accept the love of only the god which participates in the destruction of the White enemy. What we need is the divine love as expressed in Black Power, which is the power of black people to destroy their oppressors here and now by any means at their disposal. Unless God is participating in this holy activity, we must reject his love."

Cone's theology represents a totalizing ideology that places religion in the service of political transfiguration on earth. Like all ideological thinking, it is reductionist. Accordingly, it views all of history in terms of racial struggle between Whites and people of color.

Lest you think that this is taken out of context, let me provide some highlights from another one of Cone's books, the one that Reverend Wright urged Sean Hannity to read when interviewed by the latter: *Black Theology and Black Power* (similar title, different book). In this book, Cone declares that the task of the aspiring black intellectual is "to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it." He also states that, "Theologically, Malcolm X was not wrong when he called the White man 'the devil.'" It is worth repeating that Cone is the man whom Wright admires and whom Reverend Martin Marty (Wright's defender) also invited to speak at the University of Chicago.

Cone's Black theology combines the teachings of existential philosophy, Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, German theology, liberation theology, Marxism, and Christianity. It presents a dualistic, Manichean view of the world in which White

oppressors and oppressed people of color are locked in an historic, Armageddon battle. It further claims that racism is endemic to American society and that the oppression of blacks will not end until a revolution takes place. Cone welcomes this revolution by "any means necessary." The book ends on a chilling note, with Cone's approval of inner city rioters who kill Whites.

It is no wonder then that Cone calls for a redefinition of Christian love in the book. It is no wonder that he dismisses Lincoln's commitment to equality as a sham, repeating Lerone Bennett's critique of Lincoln as a racist and the Emancipation Proclamation as a sham. And it is no wonder that he is ambivalent about the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. He states, "One cannot help but think that most Whites 'loved' Martin Luther King, Jr., not because of his attempt to free his people, but because his approach was the least threatening to the White power structure."

Today there is a debate over Dr. King's legacy. Some point to his teaching that we should judge others by the content of their character, while others, in defense of Wright, point to his later statement that "America is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world." Wherever one stands on the debate, it should not be forgotten that King condemned forthrightly Malcolm X's teachings and the Black Muslim movement. He described this movement as "one of bitterness and hatred . . . made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the White man is an incorrigible 'devil.'" I suggest that Cone and Wright's message of "bitterness and hatred" is the same, only thinly disguised in Christian garb.

In sum, Cone's Black theology understands people's thoughts and actions as virtually determined by racial consciousness. It views American culture in terms of an inflexible racial divide between oppressors and the oppressed. It perpetuates a privileged victimhood of people of color in history who are innocent and pure in their motives, while it casts their oppressors as fundamentally

contaminated by the evil force of “Whiteness.” To be sure, Cone has a special contempt, as does Wright, for what they call, White “Middle Classness,” which is the sources of all evil in the world. According to Cone, “Whiteness, as revealed in the history of America, is the expression of what is wrong in man. God cannot be White, even though White churches have portrayed him as White . . . . The coming of Christ means a denial of what we thought we were. It means destroying the White devil in us.”

Cone’s political religion of Black theology thus provides the ideological justification for an identity politics that undermines the bonds of common citizenship. In this respect, it is utterly incompatible with Lincoln’s political faith. It should therefore come as no surprise then that Cone rejects the goals of a colorblind society and racial integration as illusions and false consciousness fostered by the White Superstructure. It is ironic that in attempting to achieve justice for blacks and to address some of the real injustices done to them, Cone’s theology undermines the core equality principle that makes this justice possible: the dignity and depravity of our common humanity.

### “Soul of a church”

Perhaps the best response that can be given to Cone and his disciples is the wisdom of the recently deceased Russian dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who noted that “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” Solzhenitsyn’s struggle against the dualistic ideology of communism convinced him that line separating good and evil is not based on class, race or gender; but something that inheres in each human heart. Conspicuously absent in Cone’s Black Theology and black power is St. Paul’s teaching in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ.” This teaching is the foundation of Lincoln’s political faith. And any ideology or identity politics that rigidly divides our common humanity in terms of race, class, or gender is incompatible with it.

G.K. Chesterton once referred to America as “a nation with the soul of a church.” The greatest preacher of that church and of its political faith is Abraham Lincoln. As patriotic citizens, it is our duty to perpetuate the political faith for which he was martyred and to ponder his sermons to discover the true meaning and promise of America.

*After his remarks, Professor Fornieri answered questions from the audience.*

**David Hann:** In your book, you said the Civil War could be viewed as the result of two different understandings of the Declaration of Independence. We have great differences of opinion about the role of natural law as the check on the will of the majority to do certain things. Do you think we can find a way to achieve consensus in today’s world, absent a cataclysm like the Civil War?

**Fornieri:** That’s the task of leadership. If you look at the Civil War era and you look at the different interpretations of the Bible, the Declaration, and the Constitution, “all men are created equal” is often interpreted as referring to men collectively, kind of a sophistic interpretation. Stephen Douglas interpreted “all men are created equal” as all white, property-holding males of Anglo-American ancestry. Lincoln interpreted it universally, and I would argue that Lincoln was truer to the founders’ intent, and that that can be defended factually, given Jefferson’s understanding of equality in the founders’ generation.

What happens when there is no clear consensus on the meaning of something like equality? Well, political disorder results. We see a similar thing in regard to abortion, which on the one hand is a debate about the meaning of life and where life begins. On the other hand, it’s a debate over one’s personal autonomy. You have these mutually exclusive moral claims being invoked in the public square. How do you resolve it? Well, it’s very difficult, and it’s the task of statesmanship to appeal to reason, to appeal to tradition, to garner all

rhetorical resources to evoke a consensus on these core principles.

**Glen Jeffrey:** You mentioned that when Lincoln would take on Douglas and others who would pull forth certain passages from Scripture to justify slavery, he'd refer to other passages that would justify the equality of man and the like. How did he address the specific passages that others would use to justify slavery as being a biblical principle?

**Fornieri:** How do you make sense of Romans 13:1? Or you have Titus. Even Peter's letters, where he says, "Servants, be obedient to your masters with fear and trembling." Lincoln showed—again, here, I think he's using both reason and revelation combined—how this cannot apply to all human beings if our humanity is common. Interestingly enough, he doesn't look directly at these critiques and answer them on a literal basis. He connects them, if you will: the political faith of his teaching on equality with the political faith of the Declaration. He finds biblical passages in support, and he sees them as the true statements. I think he's also saying that the spirit of Matthew 7, the Golden Rule, is completely at odds with slavery. He succeeds, but he does not, piece by piece, directly confront some of those quotations. He quotes other passages and combines them with reason and revelation and then makes a reasoned argument.

**Barry Casselman:** If Lincoln were an observer here today and we were to apply the principles of the way he thought in terms of the themes of your remarks, what would he think about what's apparently going to be a very bitter campaign?

**Fornieri:** I'll speculate a little bit. We know the centrality of the Declaration of Independence to Lincoln and I think, for example, in terms of issues like immigration, Lincoln welcomed the diversity and pluralism of the United States. But that diversity and pluralism was made through fidelity to the principles of the Declaration and an allegiance to what the idea of America meant. I think Lincoln would ask today whether there are teachings that completely undermine any sense of

patriotism or American identity in which disparate elements are united, or whether we are doomed towards balkanization, where we can't speak a common language and where we don't have a political faith. I think you could look at it in regard to this question of diversity: maintaining a balance between pluralism and unity. Those in authority at all levels have a responsibility to preach the political faith.

**Dave Carlson:** Did Lincoln's expertise and knowledge of Scripture guarantee he was a religious, spiritual being, or was it that he was just using it for a typical political tool, as so often happens today?

**Fornieri:** Lincoln was addressing a religious nation. The great historian James McPherson claims that the soldiers of the Union and the Confederacy were the most religious soldiers in the history of the country, so religious language was part of the rhetorical currency of the time. It was a common idiom which Lincoln was invoking and people understood the point he was trying to make, didactically, if you will.

Yet if you look at Lincoln's speeches and writings, especially towards the end of his life, you'll see that there's a great depth there. There's wrestling with the will of God. There are private meditations that he writes while he is agonizing. I think most scholars tend to agree that his faith deepened, especially during the war years. We have evidence that he prayed, that he prayed in a private chapel at Gurney's Church. Again, some of these very touching, personal, private meditations testify to Lincoln's living faith.

There's a great recollection by Elizabeth Keckley, who was the Lincoln family's seamstress, an African-American and a friend to Mary Lincoln. She records in her diary how Lincoln came into the living room and was distraught and looked gloomy, and she asked him, "Mr. Lincoln, what's wrong?" And he said something to the effect that things are dark, things are dark all over. He picked up his Bible and he became engrossed in it, and she

noticed that the countenance of face changed and his disposition changed. She went to the Bible to see what passage he had read, and he was reading the Book of Job, which is very telling.

We know Lincoln read the Bible every day, and I think it's really hard for someone to read the Bible every day and not have some core faith. To

approach it as just literature every day would be very difficult, and combined with what we know about Lincoln in some of his private writings, I think his public expressions of faith were very genuine.

Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.





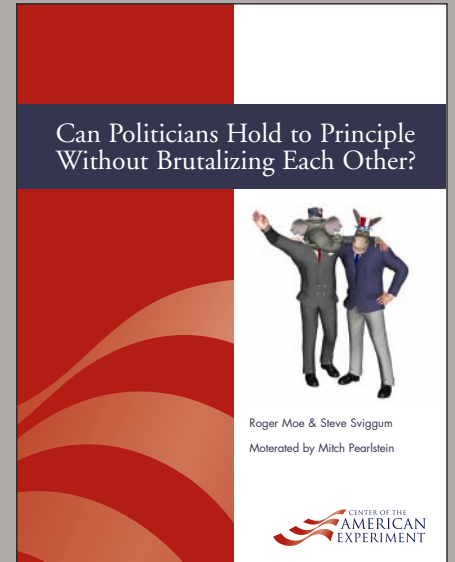
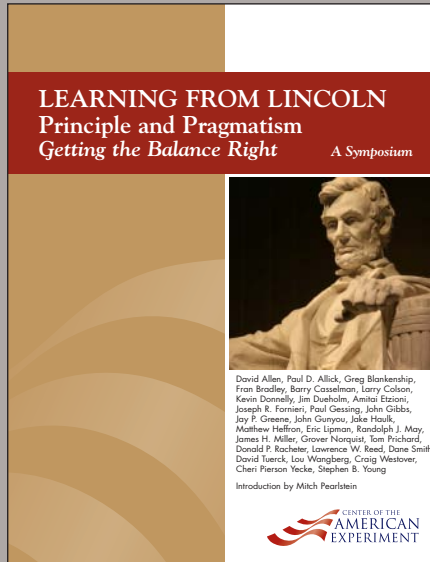
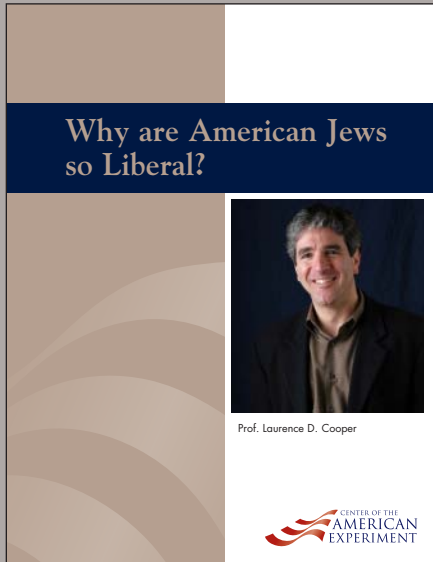
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