

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

HIS RELIGION

BY ROBERT N. REEVES.

SOME years ago Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll engaged in a controversy with General Charles H. T. Collis over the religion of Abraham Lincoln. Colonel Ingersoll contributed but two short letters to the discussion, as it soon became apparent to him that General Collis knew little or nothing of the real life of Lincoln. These two letters, however, together with the letters of General Collis, have recently been published by the latter in a little pamphlet entitled, "The Religion of Abraham Lincoln," in which is included also a letter from General Daniel E. Sickles and one from the Hon. Oliver S. Munsell, both of whom, like General Collis, attempt to prove that Abraham Lincoln was a Christian.



ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

I have read carefully these letters of General Collis and his friends, and, beyond finding that Lincoln had great faith in God, that he prayed occasionally, and attended church now and then while in Washington, I am unable to discover any positive evidence that Lincoln was a Christian. On the

contrary, from the weakness of the evidence presented, and upon which they base their belief that Lincoln was a Christian, I am convinced that General Collis, General Sickles, and Mr. Munsell are in much the same position as those orthodox Christians who, as soon as a man has attained some degree of fame in the political, scientific or literary world, insist on making him a Christian in spite of all evidence to the contrary.

We are told by the most authoritative biographers of Lincoln that in boyhood he showed no signs of that early piety such as many Sunday school biographers; like Arnold and Holland, have since ascribed to him. As a boy he was much like other boys, save possibly that he was a little more studious and liked to lie about under shady trees and read such books as Aesop's Fables, Robinson Crusoe, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, and the Bible. There is no indication, however, that the two latter books impressed his youthful mind sufficiently to make a Christian convert of him. He took the stories that he read in them only for what they were worth. His step-mother—herself a devout Christian—once said that she could remember no circumstance in Lincoln's boyhood that would support the hopes she had of making him a Christian.

As Lincoln grew to manhood he became more and more pronounced in his religious opinions and often showed his contempt for the creeds and dogmas of the Christians. In 1834, when first elected to the State Legislature, Lincoln was living at New Salem, Illinois, in a community noted for its Freethinkers. These Freethinkers were looked upon by the orthodox Christians of the town as persons whose society should be shunned by all who wished to succeed here and hereafter; yet Lincoln associated intimately with the Freethinkers of New Salem, imbued their ideas, and read with eagerness such books as Volney's Ruins, Paine's Age of Reason, and certain of Voltaire's works which they loaned to him.

If there is anything that will broaden a man's mind it is to read the works of great poets. Lincoln read Shakspeare. He read Byron and Burns; and it is interesting to note, too, that the most blasphemous poem ever written by any of these poets—Burns' "Holy Willie's Prayer"—Lincoln committed entirely to memory. Lincoln's love of poetry was responsible in a measure for his poor success in business. In 1832, prior to his election to the Legislature, Lincoln was keeping a grocery store at New Salem with one William F. Berry. In the running of the store both Lincoln and Berry displayed little business capacity. For, while Berry, a good-natured but reckless sort of a fellow, squandered the profits of the business in riotous living, Lincoln, who loved books as fondly as his partner loved liquor, would stretch himself out on a counter, or under a shade tree, and read Shakspeare or Burns.

It is natural that such books, and the people with whom he associated, should have considerable influence on Lincoln. He began to take an earnest part not only in the political but religious discussions that animated the little circles which gathered evenings at the town tavern

and in the village stores of New Salem. But Lincoln, whose mind was always full of any subject he took hold of, wished to put his thoughts on religion in a more logical and permanent form than mere oral discussion. In 1834, at the age of 25, he prepared a lengthy essay, which he always afterward referred to rather proudly as his "little book." In this essay Lincoln reached conclusions similar to Volney and Paine; and demonstrated, to his own satisfaction at least, that the Bible was not God's revelation, and that Jesus Christ was not the son of God. This essay Lincoln intended to have published, but his employer, a Mr. Samuel Hill, though a skeptic himself, questioned the propriety of so young and promising a man maintaining such hostile and unpopular ideas. Hill took the manuscript that Lincoln had so carefully prepared, destroyed it and cautioned Lincoln that if he wished to succeed politically he would have to abandon his attacks on the Christians.

This well-meant act of his older and somewhat more sagacious friend in no way diminished Lincoln's skeptical views. Lincoln was never known to have afterwards denied or regretted the writing of his anti-Christian essay. After he was elected to the Illinois Legislature and had removed to the capitol at Springfield, he continued to attract attention by the liberality of his religious views; and often in conversation with his friends he referred to his "little book," and seemed to take delight in stating its origin, its object, and its arguments.

Unlike Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, Lincoln left little behind to indicate his religious opinions. We must, therefore, rely almost entirely upon the testimony of his neighbors and friends—those amongst whom he lived. Franklin lived to be eighty-four years old, and Jefferson eighty-three. The writings of each fill ten large volumes, and are made up of much that proves conclusively their unbelief in orthodox Christianity. Lincoln lived to be but fifty-six years old. The first half of his life were years of poverty and toil—years in which he struggled to secure the mere rudiments of an education. These he had scarcely obtained when he was hurled into that whirlpool of American political life, known as the anti-slavery agitation. Lincoln had little time, therefore, to devote to art, science, literature or religion—subjects that give life and flavor to the writings of Franklin and Jefferson. Lincoln's writings—and they comprise but two short volumes—are made up for the most part of proclamations and war messages. Still here and there among the mass of political literature we find something that shows the trend of Lincoln's mind in matters of religion. Thus, in one of his earliest addresses,

an address delivered before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1837, Lincoln, speaking on the "Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," refers to Napoleon, Caesar and Alexander, to the greatness of our laws, our Constitution and Declaration of Independence, but there is no reference to Christ, to the church or to Christianity, things which most orators, speaking on similar subjects, generally work into their speeches in order to tickle the fancies of Christian friends. Only once in this address did Lincoln refer to the Bible, and that in a rather doubtful way, when he said he hoped that the history of the American Revolution would be read at least as long as the Bible.

Again, in an address to the Washingtonian Temperance Society, delivered in the Presbyterian Church of Springfield in 1842, Lincoln spoke slightly of the sincerity of those Christians who, to use Lincoln's own words, "professed that Omnipotence condescended to take on himself the form of sinful man, and as such die an ignominious death for their sakes." These and other remarks caused considerable dissatisfaction amongst his audience on this occasion. William H. Herndon, one of Lincoln's biographers, says that he stood at the door of the church as the people passed out and heard many openly express their displeasure. "It is a shame," he heard one man say, "that he (Lincoln) should be permitted to abuse us so in the house of the Lord." The sentiments expressed by Lincoln in this address were the sentiments of a skeptic, and the Christians did not forget it. Besides, there were other things to arouse the antagonism of the Christians. Lincoln, while in Springfield, rarely attended church. He was in the habit on Sundays of taking his two boys, William and Thomas, or "Tad," down to his office, where he remained all day reading, writing and playing with the children, while his wife, who was considerable of a churchgoer, went to church unattended. This unchristianly conduct of Lincoln's was remembered by the Christians of Springfield, and when he became a candidate for Congress against the noted Methodist preacher, Peter Cartwright, and later, in 1846, a candidate for the Whig nomination for Congress against General John J. Hardin, one of the arguments used against Lincoln was that he was a deist and an infidel. In 1843, too, when Lincoln also tried to obtain the Congressional nomination, he was forced to withdraw in favor of his opponent, Edward D. Baker, on account of the opposition of the Christians. In a letter to his friend, Martin M. Morris, dated March 26, 1843, Lincoln describes the situation as follows: "There was 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 has some relations in the Presbyterian churches, and some with the Episcopal churches; and, therefore, wherever it would tell, I was set 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."

We know that Lincoln had the reputation of being a deist, because, while a resident of Springfield, attempts were made time and time again, by the preachers and exhorters of that city, to convert him to the Christian faith. One enthusiastic preacher, the Rev. Mr. Smith, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, was particularly anxious to make a Christian of Lincoln. Mr. Lincoln always listened respectfully to Smith's arguments, but never seemed to be especially impressed by them. Thereupon Smith wrote a pious pamphlet, made to fit Lincoln's case, which he presented to Lincoln and asked him to read it. Lincoln took the pamphlet to his office, threw it in an obscure corner of his desk, and gave no further attention to it. Afterwards Smith pressed him for his opinion of the "work," and Lincoln, never having read it, replied with his characteristic humor, "Mr. Smith, your argument is unanswerable."

As Lincoln grew older, and became more deeply involved in the political life of the nation, he became less enthusiastic in his unbelief. To strangers he seldom talked about religious matters, but to close friends he was as frank and open-hearted in stating his religious opinions as before. It is true that in many of Lincoln's later speeches we find that he made use of such expressions as "Divine Providence," "Justice of God," etc., etc. But these indefinite expressions are in no way inconsistent with the character of a deist. They are, however, the very expressions that have been seized upon by Christians and distorted out of all their real significance in an effort to save Lincoln from that fate, which, according to Christian creeds, his deistic opinions would have consigned him.

We know, however, that Lincoln did not believe in a personal God; that he did not believe in the God of the Bible—but a God such as Voltaire, Paine and Theodore Parker believed in. In 1854 his law partner, William H. Herndon, read Lincoln a speech which he intended to deliver, and asked Lincoln to criticise it. In this speech, as written, there occurred the word God, and to this word Lincoln objected, advising Herndon to erase it, as it indicated a personal God, whereas Lincoln insisted that no such personality existed.

So, too, the Proclamation of Emancipation—the greatest document of his Presidency—as originally drawn by Lincoln contained no mention of God; but when this omission was pointed out to him by the members of his Cabinet, Lincoln made no comment, but carelessly incorporated into the text of the proclamation the religious paragraph offered him, as though it was a matter of little consequence one way or the other.

Again, when a convention of clergymen passed a resolution requesting President Lincoln to recommend to Congress an amendment to the Federal Constitution, recognizing the existence of God, Lincoln prepared a first draft of a message to that effect. "But," says Mr. Defrees, then superintendent of public printing, "when I assisted him in reading the proof, he struck it out, remarking that he had not made up his mind as to its propriety."

In 1863-64, when the war was on, and the Union forces were marching through the South, occupying chapels, churches and cathedrals, whenever and wherever they found it necessary to use them as barracks, a cry of horror went up from the clergy of the South, and even the clergy of the North, that Lincoln was sacrilegious in thus permitting the holy temples of God to be used for such unholy purposes. To the protests of the clergy Lincoln answered: "Let the churches take care of themselves. It will not do for the United States to appoint trustees, supervisors and agents for the churches."

As I said before, there is little in the works of Lincoln beyond what I have quoted, to prove that he was or was not a Christian. We must, therefore, in arriving at Lincoln's religious belief, rely almost entirely upon secondary evidence—upon the evidence of those who knew Lincoln and associated with him. In law, when primary evidence cannot be produced, secondary evidence becomes on that account the best of evidence. The value of secondary evidence, however, depends greatly upon the characters of those who give it. I shall give here the testimony of some of those who were lifelong friends of Lincoln, and who were well acquainted with his religious opinions. The characters of the persons whom I shall quote are above reproach. Some of them are persons who have attained national prominence and are known, therefore, to most of the readers of these pages. I shall not give all the evidence of this kind that can be brought forward, but I shall give enough, I think, to convince even the most orthodox that Lincoln was not a Christian. Those who desire more evidence of the kind I refer to Colonel Ward H. Lamon's excellent biography of Lincoln, which I have read, and to John E. Remsburg's

book, "Abraham Lincoln, Was He a Christian?" which I have not read, but which Colonel Ingersoll especially recommended to all persons interested in the religious views of Lincoln, because of the clear and complete manner in which Mr. Remsburg gives the evidence of both sides.

James H. Matheny, one of Lincoln's earliest and closest friends, in a letter to William H. Herndon, says:

"I knew Mr. Lincoln as early as 1834-7; know he was an infidel. He used to talk infidelity in the clerk's office in this city (New Salem, Illinois), about the years 1837-40. Lincoln attacked the Bible on two grounds: first, from the inherent or apparent contradictions under its lids; second, from the grounds of reason. * * * Lincoln would come into the clerk's office, where I and some young men were writing and staying, and would bring the Bible with him, read a chapter, and argue against it."

Hon John T. Stuart, law partner of Lincoln's in 1837:

"I knew Mr. Lincoln when he first came here, and for years afterwards. He was an avowed and open infidel, sometimes bordering on atheism. Lincoln always denied that Jesus was the Son of God as understood and maintained by the Christian church. The Rev. Dr. Smith, who wrote a letter, tried to convert Lincoln from infidelity so late as 1858, and couldn't do it."

Hon David Davis, Justice of the United States Supreme Court 1862-77, and United States Senator 1877-83: "He (Lincoln) had no faith, in the Christian sense of the term—had faith in laws, principles, causes, and effects—philosophically."

William H. Herndon, law partner of Lincoln from 1843 up to the time of Lincoln's death, says: "As to Mr. Lincoln's religious views, he was, in short, an infidel—a theist. He did not believe that Jesus was God, nor the Son of God—was a fatalist, denied the freedom of the will. Mr. Lincoln told me a thousand times that he did not believe the Bible was the revelation of God, as the Christian world contends."

John B. Alley, member of Congress from 1858 to 1864: "In his religious views Mr. Lincoln was very nearly what we would call a Free-thinker. While he reflected a great deal upon religious subjects, he communicated his thoughts to a very few. He had little faith in the popular religion of the times. While Mr. Lincoln was perfectly honest and upright, and led a blameless life, he was in no sense what might be considered a religious man."

Jesse W. Fell, one of Lincoln's most intimate friends, and for whom

Lincoln in 1859 wrote out a short autobiography, says: "On the innate depravity of man, the character and office of the great Head of the church, the atonement, the infallibility of the written revelation, the performance of miracles, the nature and design of present and future rewards and punishments, and many other subjects, he held opinions utterly at variance with what are usually taught in the church. I should say that his expressed views on these and kindred topics were such as, in the estimation of most believers, would place him entirely outside the Christian pale."

Mrs. Lincoln, wife of the President, and herself a Christian, once said:

"Mr. Lincoln had no faith and no hope in the usual acceptance of these 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 in his nature, and he was never a technical Christian."

The statement made by Christians that Lincoln's views on Christianity underwent a complete change while he was President is contradicted by the evidence of Colonel John G. Nicolay, Lincoln's private secretary at the White House. In a signed statement given out to the newspapers a few days after Lincoln's assassination, Colonel Nicolay said: "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. I do not know just what they were, never having heard him explain them in detail; but I am very sure he gave no outward indication of his mind having undergone any change in that regard while here."

In the face of such evidence it is absurd for people to say that Abraham Lincoln was a Christian. Those who make such a claim prove only one thing—that they are densely ignorant of the real life of Lincoln, a life which should be familiar to every American, rich or poor, infidel or Christian. Had Lincoln never become a great lawyer; had he never become a great statesman; had he lived an obscure lawyer or politician in a country town, and died by the dagger or pistol of an assassin, no Christian would have stepped forth to claim him, but he would have been denounced instead as an infidel whose assassination was the reward of his unbelief. Lincoln was not a Christian. His was a religion of humanity, a religion of sympathy. His was the religion of Voltaire, of Paine, of Ingersoll. Lincoln's whole religion is summed up in a remark he once made to a friend: "When I do good," said Lincoln, "I feel good; when I do bad, I feel bad, and that's my religion."