

Political Religion

Abraham Lincoln and American Political Religion, by Glen E. Thurow, *Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1976. xiii plus 133 pp. \$10.00.*

AMERICAN POLITICAL RELIGION, as the contradictory decisions of the Supreme Court, *Zorach v. Clauson* and *Abington School District v. Schempp*, demonstrate, is a cloudy and controversial matter. It is clear however that Americans in spite of secular liberalism are an incorrigibly religious people. Indeed they are more religious in their belief and behavior than any other people in the modern world with the exception of the people of India. Moreover, their religiosity is intimately connected with their politics. One need not be reminded that the Latin root, *religo* means to bind back, to fasten up, to bind fast. Though the theology of the state papers and the American public is fuzzy it is amply clear that Americans have always believed that only the cement of religion could bind the American people into an enduring union.

Washington was explicit in affirming in his "Farewell Address" that,

Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

Tocqueville was even more emphatic in *Democracy in America*, (he is, oddly, never referred to on the question of political religion by Professor Thurow), where he wrote:

For my own part, I doubt whether man can ever support at the same time complete religious independence and entire political freedom. And I am inclined to think that if faith be wanting in him, he must be subject; and if he be free he must believe.

In the political rhetoric of no other president is the connection between religion and politics so clear as it is in the speeches of Abraham

Lincoln. Professor Thurow has set himself the task of explicating these speeches and of demonstrating that Lincoln had a coherent political theology. Indeed, Thurow goes farther and shows that Lincoln's political theology not only prescribed political action but also established necessary limits; limits beyond which the political community in its actions must not go. It is interesting to note that one of the most important functions of the *sacred* is to set limits, to define boundaries, to recognize those things which lie beyond the reach of human competence. As Thurow points out this is precisely what Lincoln sets out to do in his brief but great Second Inaugural.

Last year Daniel Bell in his *Hobhouse Memorial Lecture* delivered at the University of London noted:

We stand, I believe, with a clearing ahead of us. The exhaustion of Modernism, the aridity of Communist life, the tedium of the unrestrained self and the meaninglessness of the monolithic political chants, all indicate that a long era is coming to a close. The theme of Modernism was the word beyond: beyond nature, beyond culture, beyond tragedy—that was where the selfinfinizing spirit was driving the radical self. We are now groping for a vocabulary whose keyword seems to be limits. . . .

Because Lincoln's political rhetoric was rooted in the theology of the Bible he was acutely aware of the importance of limits to political action. In arguing in such a fashion he was perennially relevant.

This book has both the merits and the defects of its method. Mr. Thurow reads his texts in the fashion of the followers of Leo Strauss. Because he reads closely and attentively and because he believes that there must be an intellectual structure in the body of the texts which will explain apparent contradiction he has much to teach us. However, it must be said that *no prophet, no poet, no statesman* ever wrote a body of doctrine, poetry or state papers in which all the nuances are subsumed into one grand pattern and all the shades and hues are chromatically scaled into one great pointillist masterpiece. There are always, in the messy

business of life, some loose ends and to have them all fitted like joints in a Chinese cabinet leads to skepticism and amusement.

Nevertheless, this is a fine book and the argument is vigorous, coherent and important. It is however, too ramified to be reproduced here. At an important point, it must be said, Thurow goes off the rails in his interpretation of Lincoln's Second Inaugural.

Thurow makes Lincoln's quotation from Matthew 18:7 a pivotal point in his larger argument. St. Matthew is quoting Jesus: "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" Thurow asks, "How can men be justly given woe for offences which 'must needs' come?" The implication is that the offense is a part of God's plan. The important point to be made here is that God does not will the offense. God recognizes that man in his free but fallen state will sin. Offenses must "needs come" because of man's universal condition. The offense is not a part of God's providential order as Thurow seems to indicate. *To be sure men are equal in their fallen state; a condition which Ernst Troeltsch described as a kind of "negative equality."* This condition of "negative equality" provides the basis for the restoration of unity and reconciliation which Lincoln seeks to bring about at the end of the Civil War.

While it is important to recognize that God does not will the offense it is even more important that God's providence transmutes the evil into good. That is the essence of the incarnation and redemption. And this precisely is what Lincoln is arguing. "Man proposes and God disposes"; "*Der Mensch denkt und Gott lenkt.*" Now, what man proposes even when he wills the good is vainglory and a reflection of his creaturelyness. It is God's transforming providence which redeems the action and orders history. Lincoln understood this better than Mr. Thurow.

It is for this reason that Lincoln's view of history is, as Edmund Wilson pointed out and Thurow denies, a view which to Wilson seems strangely compatible with Marxist historiography. What is the "cunning of reason" and the "invisible hand" if not a secularized version of

Divine Providence. The great difference between Marx and Lincoln lies not in the way in which the tragedy of history is transformed into ultimate good but in the fact that Marx believed that he knew the goal of the process and the mechanics by which history is ordered. Lincoln was humbly ignorant of the purposes of Providence.

Reviewed by **STEPHEN J. TONSOR**