

# Civil War Book Review

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## Abraham Lincoln, Christianity, And Civil Religion

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## Review

### Abraham Lincoln, Christianity, and civil religion

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**Guelzo, Allen C.** *Abraham Lincoln*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing, ISBN 802838723

Allen C. Guelzo's new book fills a distinct void in modern Lincoln literature: it is an authoritative and rewarding study of Lincoln's evolving relationship to God and to ideas. And while the character who emerges may be a less-than-great Emancipator, he is also a greater-than-ever Unionist, and a far deeper disciple of moral and political philosophy than previously imagined.

The author, who has written on both the evangelical movement and the Civil War, aims for "something ... which virtually no modern Lincoln biographer has managed to do, which is to read Lincoln seriously as a man of ideas." Guelzo does not "baptize" Lincoln "literally or figuratively" as a devout religious thinker. But he does invite modern readers to consider Lincoln's core beliefs as a "bridge" that may unite the mysterious personal side of the Lincoln story with the heroic public side.

Guelzo is at his most original setting the paradoxical Lincoln in the context of Victorian-era fixations on reason, economic rationalism, and natural law. As a boy, the author reminds us, Lincoln regularly attended church with his family, yet became more a doubter than a believer. Lincoln later famously refrained from joining churches either in Springfield or in Washington, inviting charges that he was an infidel.

He seldom invoked the name of Jesus Christ as Savior, though he did develop a growing respect for his Maker. Perhaps best defined as a religious fatalist, Lincoln was reverent enough to believe that "the will of God prevails," but uncertain enough to wonder precisely what that will might be. In the end, as Guelzo very adroitly points out, Lincoln proved sufficiently independent to treat April 14, 1865, as the fourth anniversary of the fall of Fort Sumter, and not merely as Good Friday -- hence his decision to visit Ford's Theatre the night he

was shot, rather than attend church. Guelzo is particularly good in recalling how much Lincoln's love for theater marked a "departure" from standard religious belief, which held the theater to be only slightly less hideous than hell itself.

Guelzo previously edited a reissue of J.G. Holland's *Life of Lincoln* -- notable for its claim that Lincoln was a "true Christian" -- and in a way, this book is Guelzo's expansive response. Certain of his chapters -- "Whig Jupiter," "Malice Toward None," and a fine epilogue -- ring with original thought and deft prose. In noting that Lincoln ad-libbed "under God" into the Gettysburg Address, for example, the author points out that while the president felt free to "borrow the vocabulary of Christian re-birth as the scaffolding for the new national rededication, there was characteristically no effort on his part to import any formal recognition of Christian theology into that rededication." We tend to forget what a departure such thinking represented among American politicians -- and how decisively Lincoln substituted the civic religion of the Union for the evangelical traditions of the culture.

Guelzo does make a few minor errors. Brooklyn was not, for example, a part of New York City when Lincoln was invited to speak at Beecher's Plymouth Church in 1860 (Greater New York was not formed until 1898). The Cooper Union Brady photograph was not full-length, but rather, three-quarter length. Lincoln told his wife of his dream of visiting the Holy Land before their last visit to the theater, not during the performance. And Lincoln posed for those haggard Alexander Gardner photos a month before his second inauguration, not a month after.

More importantly, one might reasonably disagree with the book's interpretation of Lincoln's reply to Horace Greeley's "Prayer of Twenty Millions." Guelzo thinks the famous piece "impatient" and "coldly irritated," but more likely it was a shrewd public relations effort to make imminent emancipation palatable to a predominately racist North. Generally, Guelzo's treatment of Lincoln's slow, steady march toward emancipation is rich and intriguing, and alone worth the price of the book.

Guelzo is perhaps at his least convincing in his analysis of the Lincoln marriage. Here the author relies heavily on the earlier work of historian Michl Burlingame, to whom Guelzo acknowledges a large debt and a warm friendship. Burlingame's capacity for unearthing new sources informs this book, but his sometimes indiscriminate enthusiasm for everything he finds occasionally

impairs it. And one cannot help wondering why an admirer of Burlingame, a noted stickler for high-sourcing standards, did not himself employ a more formal footnoting style for this book. I occasionally searched endlessly for sources and wished often for a more accessible system. Not often enough, however, to break the spell or mar the significance of this important new book.

*Harold Holzer recently published Lincoln as I Knew Him and, with Mark E. Neely, Jr., The Union Image. He is vice president for communications at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.*