

Civil religion at Gettysburg

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A Pennsylvania newspaper made headlines last week when it [ran a public retraction of its negative “review” of the Gettysburg Address](#), which President Lincoln gave at the dedication of the battlefield cemetery 150 years ago today. The *Harrisburg Patriot and Union*’s derisive notice—dismissing Lincoln’s “silly remarks” that should “be no more repeated or thought of”—has become infamous as an instance of editorial blundering and myopia.

But the editors’ dissent regarding Lincoln’s rhetorical greatness was the least significant part of this editorial. The paper’s publishers had been detained by the Lincoln administration for printing materials—in a racially charged hoax—that seemed calculated to incite anti-black violence. So the editors panned the speech as part of unsurprising longer argument about the president’s supposedly partisan motives for speaking in the first place, and for emphasizing the principle of “freedom” so strongly.

Then last week, just as this notorious dissent was being retracted, Richard Gamble decided to [re-litigate the significance of the Gettysburg Address](#). Gamble charges Lincoln’s words with nationalism, German idealism and “democratism,” citing the

fame and influence of the speech as evidence that those words hastened America's transition from "a regime of law that allows individuals and local communities to live ordinary lives and to find their highest calling in causes other than the nation-state" to a "propositional nation" defined by abstract ideals and transcendent purposes, bound together by a pseudo-Christian civil religion.

Gamble's argument is not much different from many others in the genres of Lost Cause romanticism and Lincoln revisionism. And while it feels pedantic to point this out at this late date, it wasn't Lincoln who started a war in defense of the proposition that the right of white people to own black people must never be infringed. Indeed, the idea that antebellum America had "a regime of law that allow[ed] individuals and local communities to live ordinary lives" is only remotely intelligible if one erases slaves from this history.

Still, it's not easy to dispute that Lincoln was the foremost poet and prophet of American civil religion—nor that the Gettysburg Address summarizes that civil religion with particular grace and force. I acknowledge as much in [my recent *Century* article on my family's "civil religion vacation,"](#) in which among other things I reflect on the battlefield and its famous dedication. The article notes the complex reaction any confessionally inclined Christian may have to the religious rhetoric of the place and the speech. A critical view of civil religion is seasonable, too: a fresh skepticism of the state's religious significance grows in both the progressive and traditionalist wings of American Christianity.

The suspicion that Christianity has been repurposed and redefined lingers in the background at every stop on American democracy's *via dolorosa*, from the Revolution to the Civil War, to the battle for inclusion and liberation embodied by the Statue of Liberty, to the biblical echoes in the speeches of Franklin Roosevelt. It's a series of bloody obstacles promising not a spiritual afterlife but the continual becoming of a nation uniquely situated to value—and develop—each human life's dignity and unfathomed power.

Gamble and others criticize the identity Lincoln makes between the American founding writ large and the "proposition that all men are created equal." But it is unthinkable that America should have ever become a great or a good nation without that proposition, however imperfectly realized, and the explosion of latent human genius it has unleashed.

Lincoln was the rare leader with the skill to publicly interpret the war he prosecuted. And the option was open, until the Emancipation Proclamation or later, to give the war a very different interpretation. He could have spoken as a more orthodox Christian, as many Puritan abolitionists did. Or he could have described the conflict in narrow, constitutional terms, de-emphasizing the role and end of slavery.

For that matter, New York Harbor could have remained naked of any symbol of welcome. FDR could have claimed that the Depression was just a technical crisis, not a moral one. All the biblical language could have been left to the church, which had long since translated the historical faith of Judaism and of Jesus into a language of postmortem bliss.

But Lincoln's unsought war turned toward the philosophical case for abolition for the same reason that Roosevelt's turned toward the Four Freedoms: so much death and destruction could not possibly be allowed to leave the world untransfigured. If this transfiguration had some unhappy consequences, then they must be charged to the account of the slave power—which staked everything on the survival of its monstrous social order—rather than to Lincoln or his speech. That this transfiguration has been clothed in and pushed forward by the words of biblical faith is not a measure of how that faith has been betrayed. It's a measure of how it has, however partially, triumphed in history.