

## A New Birth of Freedom

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### Introduction

The years have muted the devastation and horror of the Civil War, and the frightening prospect that the American experiment in ordered liberty would shatter from the paradox of its divine principle and the sin of man. Liberty was paid in blood. Providence seemed cruel. And Union? Was it worth this much?

The Civil War was by far the bloodiest conflict in our history, with a death toll of six hundred thousand men....One out of fifty Americans died in the Civil War, including a quarter of Southern white males of military age. There were four times as many casualties at Antietam as there were on D-Day. Even the figures for individual attacks were fearsome. Of the fourteen thousand Confederates who charged with George Pickett at Gettysburg, only half returned. At Shiloh, Grant later recalled casualties covered the field so thickly that "it would have been possible to walk across the clearing in any direction stepping on dead bodies without a foot touching the ground." At Cold Harbor, realizing that the attack was doomed, Union soldiers pinned their names onto their uniforms so that their corpses could be identified. They suffered seven thousand casualties, most in the first few minutes....At the "Bloody Angle" at Spotsylvania, bodies were piled four layers deep, and the wounded and dying were trapped beneath layers of decaying corpses.<sup>1</sup>

Abraham Lincoln's assassination rocked a nation hopeful that its civil fratricide was over. President James A. Garfield was killed the Saturday before Independence Day, McKinley the Friday before Labor Day, and Kennedy just before Thanksgiving. Lincoln's assassination was near no day of national import, but something far greater. Shot on Good Friday, April 14, 1865, four years to the day after Fort Sumter had fallen, Lincoln's death meant preachers would ascend their pulpits on Easter morning to address hearers stunned by the murder of Father Abraham.

Henry Ward Beecher, the voice of his generation, began his sermon by reading the account of Moses looking on a Promised Land he would not enter. It was not an original analogy. Rev. Charles Chiniquy, a Roman Catholic priest, reported that upon being warned of an assassination plot, Lincoln himself made a similar association: "Now, I see the end of this terrible conflict, with the same joy of Moses, when at the end of his trying forty years in the wilderness....But, do you know, that I hear in my soul, as the voice of God, giving me the rebuke which was given to Moses?"<sup>2</sup>

Beecher, raised by "a Puritan of Puritans," had for decades offered the nation "an emotional 'gospel of love' that challenged the sober Calvinism on which he and most other American Protestants had been raised." Lincoln thought none in history

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<sup>1</sup> Farber, *Lincoln's Constitution*, 92–93.

<sup>2</sup> Barton, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln*, 189–90.

possessed “so productive a mind,”<sup>3</sup> and it was from Beecher’s pulpit that Lincoln’s Cooper Union speech was originally to have been delivered. Likening Lincoln to the Hebraic lawgiver, Beecher crafted a contemporary analysis of the state of the Republic that ended with a flourish depicting a rail-splitting Alexander for the ages: “Four years ago, oh, Illinois, we took from your midst an untried man, and from among the people. We return him to you a mighty conqueror.”<sup>4</sup> Strangely, though, nary a word on Jesus and not a thing about the resurrection! Beecher fled to Athens and the twin tasks of the *Epitaphios Logos*, the Greek state Funeral Oration, to “laud the dead and lead survivors,” as befitted the role of a Greek civic rhetorician.<sup>5</sup>

In stark contrast the Unitarian Henry Whitney Bellows, after reading from the Gospel of St. John, began by interpreting the days’ events through a language of reverence aimed at opening up creation’s native promise of spiritual transformation:

So, Jesus, in view of his own approaching death, comforted his disciples! He was to leave them, robbed by violence of their accustomed leader; he whom they had believed should redeem Israel, snatched wickedly and ignominiously from their side; all their hopes of prosperity and power in this world utterly destroyed. He was to leave them a dismayed and broken-hearted band, terror-stricken and scattered abroad, the enemies of their beloved Lord triumphant over him; his words and teachings as yet involved in obscurity and mystery; their souls ungrown in his likeness; the nature of their Master’s errand in this world not yet understood—nay, misunderstood....

We understand now, looking back nineteen centuries, how truly Jesus spake. We see that without that death there could not have been that resurrection from the dead; that Jesus Christ was revealed to his disciples as a spiritual prince and deliverer, as Lord over the grave and King of saints immortal, in the defeat of all ambitions having their seat in this world; that he died to prove that death was not the end of being, but the real beginning of a true life; rose again to show that if it was “appointed unto all men once to die,” it was not because fate and matter were stronger than spirit, or because death was inevitable, but simply because thus man broke out of fleshly garments into a higher mode of existence. We see now that he finally left his disciples, and ascended into heaven, to show them that absence in the flesh is often only a great nearness of the spirit....The Crucifixion which darkened the heavens with its gloom, gave way to the Resurrection, which...slew the Angel of Death himself, leaving him only the mock dignity of a name without reality...[and] began the new era....

Thus alone could Jesus keep the minds and hearts of his disciples wide open and stretched to the full compass of his spiritual religion—keeping them from closing in again with their narrow earthly horizons—keeping them from falling back into schemes of worldly hope—from

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<sup>3</sup> Kazin, “The Gospel of Love.”

<sup>4</sup> Bancroft, *Our Martyr President*, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, 59.

substituting fondness for and devotion to his visible person, for that elevated, spiritual consecration to his spirit and his commandments....His nearest friends never knew him till he had wholly gone away....His death, his resurrection, his ascension rehearsed and symbolizes the common and sublime destiny of humanity. Man is mortal, and must die; man is immortal, and must rise again; man is a spirit, and must quit the limitations of earth and sense, to dwell with God in a world of spiritual realities.<sup>6</sup>

The two sermons that Easter morning submitted differing propositions as to what is stronger than death, and the substance of things permanent. Ironic as it may seem to Unitarian Universalists today, when the trembling voices of fearful mortals rang out that day seven score and one year ago, America's preeminent Protestant Henry Ward Beecher placed laurels on the grave of the country's departed leader in his memory, while "the infidel" Bellows spoke of the everlasting Spirit! Beecher gave them a "thought of him I love," while Bellows offered living water.

Abraham Lincoln's life precipitated enormous changes in American culture, and signified many more. He stood upon the bridge of time between presidents elected from the East Coast and the West. He linked the epoch of slavery and abolition with the advent of emancipation and Jim Crow. The development of his writing, while retaining the Romanticism of his time, helped ferry American rhetoric from the Greek oratorical revival of the nineteenth century to the modern staccato of everyday speech. And he led a nation to an overlook between an old identity and a new era. Henceforth, it would be possible again for the American experiment in ordered liberty to find its footing more in the Jeffersonian promise of divinely endowed rights, and less in the Lockean right of private property. This first "modern" President reset the foundation for democracy's arc from the soil of one nation to the ground of universal human rights.

Our democratic Republic was the result of a political embodiment of a covenant of liberty. The concept of civic covenant had its origins in Hebraic and Puritan experience. It is the religious foundation of this lineage that dissipated between the construction of the U.S. Constitution and its Civil War deconstruction. Yet it was the characteristics of the concept of covenant to which Lincoln returned and sought to return the country. As the chief interpreter of the meaning of this covenant through the events of his life and time, Lincoln called the nation back to an understanding of Union, Liberty, and Providence rooted in the bonds of affection that formed a national community devoted to freedom. He used a rhetoric that combined the language of Western faith with the symbolic meaning and history of this civic covenant, passed through the fire of the issues of his times. Yet, his voice on these matters is hardly audible today.

Thus, for the inheritors of the Free Church tradition as we are, with a history that includes the prospect of a spiritual freedom borne of communal covenant, Lincoln could be a bridge figure for us, too. He might be able to point us towards a theological articulation of how such a thing as a communal agreement can give shape and meaning to the spiritual life. If "The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom,"<sup>7</sup> perhaps Lincoln's articulation of the American "bond of love" that yielded political Liberty and

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<sup>6</sup> Bancroft, *Our Martyr President*, 49–52.

<sup>7</sup> Lovely, "The Gates of Freedom." No. 510 in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*.

Union under the guidance of Providence might serve to usher us towards a theological understanding of our common life as Unitarian Universalists.

Abraham Lincoln was not part of our faith tradition. He was born into a Calvinist, Baptist family, and was in early adulthood a Free Thinker. Yet, in the latter decades of his life the writings of Channing and Parker were as much his spiritual guide as was Scripture. And he stands on the bridge of time between the theological sprouting of Unitarianism from Puritan covenantal community into Channing's "Likeness to God," and a faith tradition now characterized by an absence of a "language of reverence"<sup>8</sup> and the presence of "theological illiteracy."<sup>9</sup> In other words, symbolically, he stands between the "flowering of New England" and the theologically inaudible deconstructionist movement Unitarian Universalism has become.

Our ability to do liberal *theology* has vanished. The result is that we do not interpret national events as revealing or thwarting God's ways. There are many factors that when combined have created this inability to engage in public theological discourse out of our particular wing of the liberal religious tradition. But we are theologically bereft by our own admission. And without language or literacy we have no capacity to consider personal, national, and international events as the work of God in the world, and offer them as such. Perhaps Father Abraham, who repaired the Republic so it might regain its course, might help us regain our theological voice. He was called our nation's greatest theologian by Reinhold Niebuhr. Perhaps Lincoln might help us ponder what he helped our spiritual forbear to grasp, that *man is a spirit, and must quit the limitations of earth and sense, to dwell with God in a world of spiritual realities.*

## Lincoln and Rhetoric

What makes a person want to stand in front of a group and make a speech? It is a delicate, subtle, but very powerful and profound communal exchange whose nature is indiscernible to those unfamiliar with the ways of the spirit. Since the Enlightenment the meaning of human life has involved unfolding individuality in ways it had not before; "becoming a self" existentialists explain. And individuals drawn to pursue "becoming a self," through this peculiar public medium include the con man, the salesman, the lecturer, the prophet, the preacher, and the politician.

Abraham Lincoln was a politician who traded in rhetoric and bartered for the affection, loyalty, and confidence of others for political principles and political gain. He was a gregarious storyteller, as was his father. He told jokes, fables, and parables to unlock the deeper, symbolic ways of human existence, to create empathy in his hearers, and to enjoy a good laugh. He tried his hand at poetry, but resigned interior monologue as a means to refine his ideas. It was a wise move.

How Abraham Lincoln came to write and speak as well as he did remains a mystery worthy of Mona Lisa's smile. By his own reckoning and the estimation of scholars, he had no more than twelve months of formal education. "The boyhood home of Abraham Lincoln had six books—The Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Aesop's Fables*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Weems' Life of Washington*, and *A History of the United States*."<sup>10</sup> He

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<sup>8</sup> Sinkford, "The Language of Faith."

<sup>9</sup> Hogue, "The Call for a New Liberal Religious Reformation."

<sup>10</sup> Barton, *Abraham Lincoln and His Books*, 7.

read what he could, and in early adulthood read for the law from the limited volumes available. He was a self-made man, independent-minded, self-differentiated, seeking out intellectual transformation. It would yield more than knowledge. “The prime quality of his mind was not speed...[and] not breadth....It was purposive—personally, politically, morally.”<sup>11</sup> He was ambitious in all ways.

There is no proof that Abraham Lincoln ever read Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. When in 1858 Charles Lanman requested biographies from all former members of Congress, Lincoln summed up his education as “defective.” “Lincoln’s real interest was in the structure and use of language.”<sup>12</sup> But he lived during the time of America’s admiration for all things Greek, and one cannot discount the influence of acculturation. He exhibited an Aristotelian rhetorical sensibility, defined as:

...the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. This is not a function of any other art. Every other art can instruct or persuade about its own particular subject-matter....But rhetoric we look upon as the power of observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us; and that is why we say that, in its technical character, it is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects.<sup>13</sup>

While rhetoric may not concern a definite class of subjects, it is concerned with demonstrating something. “[Rhetoric’s] function is not simply to succeed in persuading, but rather to discover the persuasive facts in each case.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is the moral endeavor of weighing facts. In rhetoric’s capacity as rational speech, “a man can confer the greatest of benefits by a right use of [it], and inflict the greatest of injuries by using [it] wrongly.”<sup>15</sup> In rhetorical exchange something is at stake.

Rhetoric is distinguishable from conning. While the aim of both is to persuade, conning uses persuasion to exploit the hearer’s self-interest. But in both the character of the speaker is at issue because, as Aristotle noted, character is a mode of persuasion: “Persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, for example, it could be argued that as the priest and the preacher officiate over their respective liturgies—as dispensing the Eucharist in one setting and preaching the Word in the other—only in the latter is individual character inherently involved in the exchange. The preacher must know something deep about herself as a means of being in relationship with God, the Other.

Lincoln possessed a deep knowledge of his own complex character. He echoed his Calvinist Baptist background when calling Americans the ambiguous “almost chosen people”<sup>17</sup> and exhibited it in his brooding melancholy over his and his nation’s failures. But his originality exercised the freedom of the mind consistent with the label friends gave him, a Free Thinker, though not religion’s Cultured Despiser: “[I could never]

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<sup>11</sup> Miller, *Lincoln’s Virtues*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Donald, *Lincoln*, 48.

<sup>13</sup> *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2155.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2154.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2155.

<sup>17</sup> Lincoln, Address to New Jersey Senate, 21 February 1861. *The Language of Liberty*, 563.

support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoff at, religion.”<sup>18</sup> And his broad-mindedness concerning spiritual matters spoke from a confidence and perspective rooted in the piety of Channing’s Arminianism: “The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”<sup>19</sup> Suffice it to say that Lincoln’s grasp upon human nature was so forceful and distinctive that many mistakenly read their religion into his.

Rhetoric is distinguished from propaganda. While the aim of both is to persuade, propaganda distorts the empathy reciprocated in rhetorical relationships, something derived from presence. In rhetoric there is an implicit covenant between speaker and listener borne of their mutual presence, part of an ethic in conversation. In both propaganda and rhetoric the emotions of the hearers are at issue because, as Aristotle pointed out, empathy is another mode of persuasion which “may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions.”<sup>20</sup> But in a rhetorical exchange, when the emotions of the hearers are stirred, it underscores a link between conversation and the human bonds that form relationships.

Abraham Lincoln was remembered as “uncommonly tenderhearted”<sup>21</sup> by those who knew him personally. “Anecdotes about his rescuing animals and birds...extend beyond his boyhood into his adult life, and include terrapin turtles, wandering kittens, a pet dog...a little squealing pig that was being eaten by its mother, and a hog mired in the mud.”<sup>22</sup> This empathy was the basis for the development of the deep moral sense in Lincoln, and the construction of his view of human nature. Sympathy elicited a natural sense of justice, rendered rhetorically by “a device we may call wounding from behind... to shake [a proposition’s] foundation by exposing contradictions”<sup>23</sup>:

[In requiring the extension of slavery into the new territories] while you thus require me to deny the humanity of the Negro, I wish to ask whether you of the south yourselves, have ever been willing to do as much?...In 1820 you joined the north, almost unanimously, in declaring the African slave trade piracy, and in annexing to it the punishment of death....If you did not feel that it was wrong, why did you join in providing that men should be hung for it?...[You] never thought of hanging men for catching and selling wild horses, wild buffaloes, or wild bears.<sup>24</sup>

Something within human nature led Southerners to make a distinction between horses, buffaloes, bears, and the Negro. By his actions the Southerner admitted a distinction between the hog mired in mud and the slave in chains. It was that innate human connection, that implicit covenant among humanity, whereby through empathy and sympathy, like recognizes like and questions of liberty and justice arise. “The ties of

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<sup>18</sup> Donald, *Lincoln*, 114.

<sup>19</sup> Lincoln, First Inaugural Address. *The Language of Liberty*, 574

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, 2155.

<sup>21</sup> Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 103.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, *Lincoln’s Virtues*, 27–28.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>24</sup> Lincoln, Peoria speech, 16 October 1854. *The Language of Liberty*, 166–67.

covenant are the concretization of the I–Thou relationship which, when addressed to God, makes man holy and, when addressed to one's fellows, makes men human.”<sup>25</sup>

Lincoln’s empathy yielded not only an attachment borne of sentiment, but also an intellectual empathy that is the foundation for comprehending human self-interest which, when measured by Ultimacy, becomes the basis for prophetic pronouncement. In the throes of sentiment human beings can adhere to the self and its interests as if adhering to a moral benefit for all. To Aristotle, “all men are persuaded by considerations of their interest, and their interest lies in the maintenance of the established order.”<sup>26</sup> Lincoln exhibited an Aristotelian rhetorical sensibility:

...they [Southern white slave owners] are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up....When it is said that the institution exists; and that it is very difficult to get rid of it, in any satisfactory way, I can understand and appreciate the saying. I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself.”<sup>27</sup>

Throughout his adult life Lincoln could not shake the vision of slaves in chains. They were human beings, mortals who must die, immortals who must rise again, for human being *is a spirit, and must quit the limitations of earth and sense, to dwell with God in a world of spiritual realities*. And, “No man is good enough to govern another man, without that other’s consent.”<sup>28</sup> Empathy yields a truth about the nature of human relationships and an implicit covenant in human existence, and the contradictions in the human heart that thwart existence’s aim.

“[Persuasion] is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question....[A]nd something is persuasive either because it is directly self-evident or because it appears to be proved from other statements that are so.”<sup>29</sup> Persuasion is a moral endeavor that affirms an individual’s capacity to articulate, receive, and measure truth, fallible as our faculties are, mired in self-interest. Persuasion can be lifted up as a theological endeavor characteristic of covenanted religious community, because it can become a vehicle for ultimate meanings traversing relational connections:

For Whitehead, persuasion is the authentic energizing power in human affairs, persuasion in the sense of persuasive attraction. More than that, it constitutes the essential relationship between God and human being. Although God cannot force human action, he can affect it by the lure of persuasion. So it is that Whitehead affirms the crucial, creative significance of persuasion in the history of religion and civilization. “The

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<sup>25</sup> Elazar, “Covenant & Polity in Biblical Israel,” 6.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, 2155.

<sup>27</sup> Lincoln, Peoria speech, 16 October 1854. *The Language of Liberty*, 158.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, 2155–56.

creation of civilized order,” he says, “is the victory of persuasion over force.”<sup>30</sup>

Classical rhetoric and the qualities associated with it—persuasion, consent, empathy, self-interest—are characteristics of a particular theological hermeneutic and faith perspective. “In contrast to the right wing principles of domination and hierarchy, the institutional principles of persuasion and coarchy became the signature of the speech of the Free Church.”<sup>31</sup>

But, rhetoric is an art that is learned—as a hermeneutic and faith tradition are learned—and in the case of both there is no excuse for not learning. “Again, it is absurd to hold that a man ought to be ashamed of being unable to defend himself with his limbs, but not of being unable to defend himself with rational speech, when the use of rational speech is more distinctive of a human being than the use of his limbs.”<sup>32</sup> By the measurement of rhetoric, lacking language or being illiterate appears indefensible.

Lincoln learned to speak publicly in a manner that was consistent with his character, which accounted for his success despite his gawky physique, his backwoods Midwestern appearance, and his mildly screeching tenor voice. Yet he also learned to speak publicly in a manner consistent with the virtues of a covenantal view of human nature and existence liberally conceived.

Liberal religion’s attitude of mind we generally characterize as a critical stance before mere tradition, impatience with creeds once-for-all delivered, the rejection of coercion in religion, freedom of conscience, open-mindedness, tolerance—the liberation of the human spirit from heteronomous authorities....Indeed, the liberal attitudes mentioned appeared initially in the seventeenth century in connection with a power struggle undertaken in order to change social structures. This struggle was a revolutionary struggle....Congregational polity was the new conception of a covenanted church that gave form to this struggle, a polity separating the church from the state, placing responsibility upon the members (the consent of the governed), and giving rise to a self-governing congregation.<sup>33</sup>

Abraham Lincoln’s political achievement was to shepherd the nation through a crisis central to its identity and into a new founding for a new day. Lincoln’s rhetorical achievement was to tell the story of this democratic Republic’s experiment in ordered liberty as a deeper and broader parable than was previously conceived. To the chief crisis of his time, “Lincoln fashioned a solution...[that] did all this in a language that retained a commitment to *both* individuals and their communities....Lincoln’s achievement was not merely a patching together of various elements; rather, his outlook

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<sup>30</sup> Adams, “The Lure of Persuasion: Some Themes from Whitehead.” *The Prophethood of All Believers*, 187.

<sup>31</sup> Adams, “Our Responsibility in Society.” *The Prophethood of All Believers*, 158.

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, 2154.

<sup>33</sup> Adams, “From Cage to Covenant.” *The Prophethood of All Believers*, 136



was a distinctive reinterpretation and reformulation—a refounding....[He] retained the moral concern of the abolitionist and the political whole of the union.”<sup>34</sup>

Lincoln’s life achievement was to speak of America’s origins and its historic, founding paradox, to answer the central question posed by liberalism: How does liberty arise from a relational group, through certain relationships that yield distinctive understandings of human nature and the destiny of God and man?

### Liberalism, Covenant, and Constitution

Abraham Lincoln was a politician and a classical liberal. He was not a political liberal in the narrow sense we use the term, and as a Republican he wasn’t a conservative as we know it. The meaning of political liberal and conservative, classically understood, has been lost in our times’ neglect of history. Lincoln and his party, Stephen Douglas and his, Jefferson, Calhoun, Webster, Clay, up to and including Clinton and Bush, deal in ideas rooted in classical liberalism. It is the political conversation of this nation.

America is an experiment about how to create and sustain social relationships borne of a shared agreement to uphold individual rights, protect and maintain the ownership of private property, and sustain a government by popular consent. Over against Old World Europe’s feudal concept of Lord and serf, and its divine right of monarchy and bloodline and papacy and apostolic succession, America was a New World aimed at “the protection and development of ‘the concept of personality’ against the power of the state and other monoliths.”<sup>35</sup> Today we do not comprehend the extent to which we exist in a “New World,” and within an order characterized by the promises and tensions of liberalism.

In his seminal work on the political idea of America, Louis Hartz identified the “substantive quality of the natural liberal mind”<sup>36</sup> as a “Lockean doctrine...which everywhere in the West has been a glorious symbol of individual liberty.”<sup>37</sup>

[Dr. Hartz’s] liberal—the “American Democrat”—is one who believes in individual liberty, equality, and capitalism and who regards the human marketplace, where a person succeeds or fails by his or her own efforts and ability, as the proper testing ground of achievement.<sup>38</sup>

The advent of the American people, observed Alexis de Tocqueville, was the result not of the wrenching upheaval of societal revolt as in old Europe, but of something self-evident: “they are born equal, instead of becoming so.”<sup>39</sup> This culturally normative, new view of human nature and social existence had incubated in the Free Church tradition for numerous generations:

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<sup>34</sup> Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion*, xxxi.

<sup>35</sup> Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, xii.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 10–11.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Hartz, x.

We of the Free Church tradition should never forget, or permit our contemporaries to forget, that the decisive resistance to authoritarianism in both church and state, and the beginning of modern democracy, appeared first in the church and not in the political order.<sup>40</sup>

The “New World” order was given a divine legitimation because political liberty was not primarily a secular product but the offspring of the spiritual practices and communal disciplines emerging from covenantally formed community. The covenant between God and man that made men holy made human beings human and siblings in the Spirit. But like all concepts, “covenant” has a biography.

In his essay “The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern,” James Luther Adams explained how some concepts “become” religious concepts, and thereby, in part, how some language “becomes” sacred language, the language of reverence:

Human social existence requires the achievement of a means of communicating about social existence, a characteristic feature of which is the invention of concepts. Concepts do not come down from heaven; they have to be invented....[Theological] discourse...picks up a concept from ordinary experience and gives it a new and expanded meaning. A concept that originally applies to one aspect of existence is reinterpreted to explain the whole of existence. We call this process the radicalizing of a concept.<sup>41</sup>

The congregation I work with, All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, talks about “walking together” to describe the community’s spiritual life, so the two words become invested with new meanings that bear upon the whole of existence and expand the possible experiences of God such that a neighborhood stroll isn’t the same again! John Winthrop tells of a “city upon the hill,” and thereafter can any town so located not be conceived of differently? Jesus likens the “kingdom of God” to a landowner hiring laborers for his vineyard, and invests ultimate meanings into a political (kingdom) and then a pastoral (vineyard) word. And the ancient Hebrews long ago took the concept of a treaty between political entities and radicalized it into the concept of “covenant” to describe the relationship between God and the Hebrew people. It was a theo-political concept.

Politically, a covenant [in the Jewish tradition] involves a coming together (con-gregation) of basically equal humans who consent with one other through a morally binding pact supported by a transcendent power, establishing with the partners a new framework or setting them on the road to a new task, that can only be dissolved by mutual agreement of all the parties to it....They have their beginnings in the need to establish clear and binding relationships between God and humans and among humans, relationships which must be understood as being political far more than

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<sup>40</sup> Adams, “Our Responsibility in Society.” *The Prophethood of All Believers*, 57.

<sup>41</sup> Adams, “The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern.” *An Examined Faith*, 237–38.

theological in character, designed to establish lines of authority, distributions of power, bodies politic, and systems of law.<sup>42</sup>

As a radicalized concept, covenant makes bonding and connection essential to the fabric of existence and Ultimate reality. Because it is not a “personal” metaphor, but a social one drawn from the political realm of community life, it applies to all. All persons are part of some matrix of social relationships and all things are connected to distinct “others” in some fashion. The word used within religious community and tradition radicalizes relationships by investing them with ultimate meaning.

Viewing human existence through a social lens of meaning gathers individuals into a “people,” a group identity that *adds* to the personal identity of individual members; it does not supplant or replace it. Ironically, William James opened the twentieth century by viewing religious experience as a subjective phenomenon, yet defined the “Self” as including all its external relations: “*In its widest possible sense, however, a man’s Self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account.*”<sup>43</sup> And Whitehead considered religion what “an individual does with his own solitariness,”<sup>44</sup> but conceived of the universe as a social pattern of relational, connective attractions! Today it is both ironic and dangerous to conceive of religion’s personalism as primary or exclusive when its power to drive social and cultural change is so in evidence for weal and woe.

Because covenant originates in connection it ushers the religious adherent into questions of obligation and responsibility, and the nature of justice as the right kind of relationship amongst persons. At most, a covenantal view implies that behavior is greater than codified belief, and at the least, that they mutually influence one another. It measures faith more by “regard” relative to “others” than by one’s loyalty to metaphysical “truth.” Therefore, it supports a realistic view of human nature by circumscribing human finitude relative to truth. It conceives of individuals as moral agents and activity as a moral event. Therefore, it matters what you do as much, if not more, than what you say you believe. A covenantal view anchors religious pragmatism.

But, even greater than this, a covenantal view invites a theology that holds that Ultimate reality and human existence are linked through history; that is, through events whereby God and a “people” connect most deeply, or events where the bond between God and humanity is most threatened. Viewing events in this way and shaping the meaning they may have through covenantally based language “judges” how just relations have broadened and deepened, or have fragmented and withered. History “measures” how a people’s faith has widened bonds of affection or narrowed them. History becomes not just a random accounting of events, nor a subjectively held order of events, nor an order of events that has meaning only from a human perspective, but an unfolding of how true a “people” are to the union, the coarchy with Ultimacy, that characterized the commitments, definitive and ordinary, that gathered them as a people; that is, the covenant with God and with one another that lends a distinctive, theologically based religious identity and purpose to a people. Covenantal relationships give time an

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<sup>42</sup> Elazar, “Covenant & Polity in Biblical Israel,” 1.

<sup>43</sup> James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 291.

<sup>44</sup> Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 16.

aim. God is not “the decider” regarding personal salvation but a partner in making history. And like partners in any agreement, God and human being both have distinct ways.

And it is significant to note for our purposes that a covenant between God and the Hebrew people was formed after the seminal event of the Exodus, an event whose consequence was freedom, and not a little bickering and wandering:

More than anything else, cultures, systems, and humans informed by the covenantal perspective are committed to a way of thinking and conduct which enable them to live free while being bound together in appropriate relationships, to preserve their own integrities while sharing in a common whole, and to pursue both the necessities of human existence and the desiderata of moral response in some reasonable balance. There is a dialectic tension between each of these dualities which adds the requisite dynamic dimension to covenant-based societies, one which makes such societies covenant-informed as well as covenant-based. This dialectic tension is an integral element in covenantal systems, one which provides such systems with the necessary self-corrective mechanisms to keep them in reasonable balance over the long haul, at least so long as covenantal principles continue to inform and shape the polities concerned.<sup>45</sup>

The radicalizing of the concept of covenant elevates ordinary qualities inherent to the concept itself: equality, consent, social bonds, promise, mutuality, conversation, agreement, positions and roles, lines of authority, distributions of power, bodies politic, and the human systems created and consented to, that keep order and continuity through time, and which can atrophy or be improved upon over time. These qualities simultaneously contain ordinary relevance and ultimate meanings. Covenantal relationships prize persuasive discourse over coercive submission, the separation and balance of power, dissent and critique, and distinct individuality as necessary to, and the aim of, a relationship. The bonds created cherish spoken discourse as a spiritual practice and “walking together” as a spiritual discipline. They involve God and human being together in the promise of creation’s possible future fulfillment in freedom.

When our Puritan forbears risked the Atlantic in their own Exodus they brought with them a covenantal understanding. And maybe more than Athens and as much as the contributions by the Enlightenment philosophers, the practice of spiritual communities as covenant-formed groups influenced the birth of the American experiment in ordered liberty.

In the Puritan form of covenanted spiritual community there was hidden a new theology, a new view of human nature, and a new view of the social relationships necessary to influence the unfolding of individual personality as part of God’s will.

The Church and State of their day embodied a complementary form of social organization that competed with their emerging covenantal one. Nations were maintained by the organization of human power through hierarchy and family bloodline; the Church, by hierarchy and the spiritual bloodline to Peter and Paul. Sovereignty was

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<sup>45</sup> Elazar, “Covenant & Polity in Biblical Israel,” 5.

exercised by coercion from the crown or conformity to creed. Freedom was granted or suppressed by the favor of the monarch or the miter, and not by the aim of bonds of affection amongst people, freely entered into. Old World roles were radicalized, too. The King was king over his people as God was king over all. And the Pope was His Holiness. Over against all of this there emerged the idea and prospect of individuality and individual consent as holy:

It [congregational polity] was born in a protest against 'the establishment' of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England and New England. These dissenters could not accept the centralized power of the established church...[And] it has been persuasively argued that it was from those small conventicles that modern democracy was born. Indeed, Lord Acton, a Roman Catholic historian of a century ago, was among the first to say that democracy as we understand it was born in these small congregations rather than in ancient Greece....The principle of the consent of the governed was closely related to a doctrine and discipline of the Holy Spirit according to Scripture....[These] independent congregations promoted the consent of the governed, the responsibility of each member to participate in shaping policy, the separation of powers between church and state and even between congregations.<sup>46</sup>

Their covenants were the yield of the natural liberal mind, though they did not create democratic communities as we know them. Their aim was liberation from monolithic power and authority by establishing the way freedom is expressed through and authorized by social existence created by a radicalized agreement. And eventually, in the formation of the American Republic, there arose a civic agreement that rooted individual personality in divinely endowed rights and human social existence in equality.

But there was this peculiar institution that existed in history alongside of this civic covenant. There was this peculiar institution that judged this covenant as incomplete. Not all were "*born equal*." Some "*had to become so*," if they did at all. As the nineteenth century proceeded, some argued that this covenant did not itself exist, such that this peculiar institution did not stand as a judgment of its adherents' unwillingness to live within the covenant's civic accountability. Others argued that as this peculiar institution had existed alongside the covenant from the beginning, the covenant was in truth a pact with the devil. Lincoln viewed things differently. He looked into history and saw a sacred agreement forming a "people," and called the nation back to it to become it.

The covenantal understanding of the meaning of America, the Declaration of Independence, and the formation of the U.S. Constitution seriously waned during the nineteenth century as the religio-philosophical underpinnings of a covenantal view of time and human existence all but disappeared.

On the face of it we do know that Americans went into the nineteenth century thinking covenantally and left it a hundred years later thinking organically, that is to say, they began essentially thinking of civil society formed by covenant or compact leading to a proper constitutional regime.

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<sup>46</sup> Adams, "The Enduring Validity of Congregational Polity." *The Prophethood of All Believers*, 131–33.

By the end of the century they saw society evolving as a Darwinian organism for which government was merely one segment and constitutions merely arrangements to provide additional protection for preexisting social institutions....The major question that must be posed in any inquiry into the covenant idea as a seminal idea in politics is how was it lost to view in the interval between the completion of the American Revolution and our time. The answer to that lies in the intellectual pace-setters' abandonment of covenantal and contractual thinking in the mid-nineteenth century and its replacement by organic and biological analogies derived first from Romantic and then from Darwinian ideas.<sup>47</sup>

While the scope of this inquiry is not how that happened, or the effect upon the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, suffice it to say that the breakdown of covenantally based views of social existence, the American experiment, and human nature and God was an ingredient in the situation that Lincoln faced. His response in his speeches, writings, and political actions was as a pastoral letter to the nation, calling it back to the original covenant that had formed it into the American people.

Abraham Lincoln was the last great exponent of American covenantalism in the nineteenth century, presenting the Declaration of Independence as a covenant precisely in order to counteract the Southern compact theory and the Northern abolitionist view that the Constitution was, in effect, a pact with the devil. After the Civil War, however, Lincoln's views ceased to be intellectually modish.<sup>48</sup>

Lincoln revived the religio-philosophical underpinnings of a covenantal view as the chief means to repair the Republic so that it might regain its course. But the nature of his errand in this world is not yet understood, nay, misunderstood.

Lincoln's Language of Reverence: Union, Liberty, and Providence

### Two Competing Understandings of Union

Abraham Lincoln "re-radicalized" the concept of covenant through his understanding of Union. To Lincoln, Union was a theo-political concept that forged the American people, conceiving them in liberty and aiming their common life towards a freedom that was the birthright of all. He performed this "re-radicalizing," this "new birth of freedom," by correlating the existential situation of his day with historical revelations that are the yield of covenantal union.

John Winthrop explained the Puritan understanding of the yield of an intentionally created agreement. Called "federated liberty," it stood in contrast with "natural liberty":

There is a two-fold liberty, natural (I mean as our nature is now corrupt) and civil or federal. The first is common to man with beasts and other

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<sup>47</sup> Elazar, "What Happened to Covenant in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century?" 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–8.

creatures. By this, man, as he stands in relation to man simply, hath liberty to do what he lists; it is a liberty to evil as well as to good. This liberty is incompatible and inconsistent with authority and cannot endure the least restraint of the most just authority. The exercise and maintaining of this liberty makes men grow more evil and in time to be worse than brute beasts: *omnes sumus licentia deteriores*. This is that great enemy of truth and peace, that wild beast, which all of the ordinances of God are bent against, to restrain and subdue it. The other kind of liberty I call civil or federal; it may also be termed moral, in reference to the covenant between God and man, in the moral law, and the politic covenants and constitutions between men themselves. This liberty is the proper end and object of authority and cannot subsist without it; and it is a liberty to that only which is good, just and honest. This liberty you are to stand for, with the hazard (not only of your goods, but) of your lives if need be.<sup>49</sup>

Natural liberty exists when men and women are left to their own devices, “free to be you and me,” with least restraint or discipline or boundaries. Federated liberty would be the freedom that becomes a possibility *because* we have evidenced intent and consent in covenanting with one another to create a community whose aim is shaped by the principle and prospect of freedom. Much of the New World’s wild lands attracted those who sought natural liberty. And to the Romantic, including our Transcendentalist forbears, federated liberty would reek of a conforming conspiracy and pious self-righteousness.

But, looking at history as a measurement, the former yielded the “will of the people” in France. The latter yielded the U.S. Constitution, which formed the American people and their destiny in seeking to represent in a lawful order the covenant that is the Declaration of Independence. “The covenant includes a rule of law. It recognizes that meaningful, collective existence involves a consensus and a commitment with regard to what is right. It is a legal covenant. The desire for justice can be fulfilled only through collective concern with law as the major agency of social control.”<sup>50</sup>

The Puritans insisted that liberty is created by human relationships borne of intentional agreements, and is, therefore, a product of time and the aim of union. It is not the fruit of an organic human regard for others, some natural quality the individual naturally possesses and naturally extends to others lest society restrict it. Liberty requires will, not the neglect of human intention. Restraint is part of what constitutes activity as moral. Freedom is a beckoning towards greater life, not a return to a more natural, primitive ideal. To “become” free one has to take time seriously as a product of one’s participation in the meaning of unfolding events, one’s accountability to the covenantal union. The liberty born of covenants so aimed offers the prospect of transformation and the possibility of a “new being,” in the workings of the Spirit, *liberalis*.

And these two different understandings of the origins of liberty yielded two different and competing perspectives on the Constitution, represented by John C.

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<sup>49</sup> John Winthrop, *History of New England*, as quoted in Elazar, “What Happened to Covenant in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century?” 2.

<sup>50</sup> Adams, “The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern.” *An Examined Faith*, 240.

Calhoun, who denied the covenantal creation of the Union, and Abraham Lincoln, who embraced it.

To Calhoun, the Constitution was a document that simply legitimated the previously existing authority of the States. It acknowledged a preexisting sovereignty of the various States that, when they “joined together,” became a federation of States, a better adaptation for States’ rights survival. It was the preexisting States that protected the vital link between property ownership and personal liberty. Slaves were property. Take a person’s property away and you have threatened liberty.

Calhoun and Southerners denied that the advent of the United States via the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution signified a new creation. It was not a creation story but a continuation story. For them it was not a cosmogonic myth, a “*Time of Origin* which...was in some sort the ‘receptacle’ for a *new creation*.”<sup>51</sup> To them, liberty was the result of an organic kind of community that preceded the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence rather than resulting from them. Thus, to Calhoun it was impossible to specify an “American People,” though one could point to the people of South Carolina, the people of Illinois, and any other State that joined the gathering of States. To Calhoun, the “United States” was a plural noun, the Constitution a property rights document defending that organic, preexisting community that was the individual State, and the Declaration of Independence not a covenant but a withdrawal by the various States from the authority of the crown. No new power was created.

To Lincoln, the Constitution was the document that established the order of the new community, the “bylaws” of a new nation, an act that created “the people of the United States,” a new entity and power called the Union. This Union was a new creation in history, from the time of the Declaration of Independence, when the colonies, not yet a nation, declared themselves to be a community covenanted together to liberate the individual from the oppressive bonds of human government as it had existed up unto that time. This new nation was conceived in the declaration that equality and inalienable rights have their origin in God and not humanly created institutions. This covenant preceded the Constitution, and was the origin, aim, and meaning of the Union that formed the American community, the American people. To Lincoln the “United States” was singular, an entity in addition to the existence of the various individual States and which gave an additional identity to the new “American citizen” in South Carolina and Illinois.

In other words, to Calhoun’s South, liberty was the natural yield of an organically evolving community and not the intentional evolving product of a covenant declared and begun at a particular point in time. Therefore, to Calhoun freedom flowed from the least restraint; thus, the more localized state governments and not any national one. To Lincoln, liberty was federated and a principle of the new Union. It originated with the act of “Constitution,” the legal ordering of the covenant of freedom articulated in the Declaration as the agreement between God and his creation to recognize equality and certain inalienable rights, and extend them to all. The Constitution was not a property rights document primarily, but the legal framework protecting a principle. Lincoln returned to the theo-political concept of covenant and the “Time of Its Origin” to redirect the Union and expand its Ultimate meaning towards a “new birth of freedom” for which the deaths at Gettysburg were to be remembered, and to which Lincoln himself would

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<sup>51</sup> Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 30, 34.



give his last measure of devotion. “The Union with him in sentiment, rose to the sublimity of a religious mysticism,”<sup>52</sup> those mystic chords of memory that transcend place and time:

I am filled with deep emotion at finding myself standing here, in this place [Independence Hall], where were collected together the wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle, from which sprang the institutions under which we live....I have often inquired of myself what great principle or idea it was that kept this [Union] so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the Colonies from the motherland; but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but, I hope, to the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weight would be lifted from the shoulders of all men.<sup>53</sup>

### Two Competing Understandings of Liberty

Abraham Lincoln revived the idea that liberty is the principle governing the bonds that formed America’s national community, the Union, and that freedom is the aim of the affection formed by those bonds. Liberty’s extent became the measurement of the American people’s fidelity to its covenant; the fulfillment of our obligations in covenant. The Union was the product of the “natural liberal mind.”

When the Union was forged, by the practice of covenant-formed religious community buttressed by Enlightenment philosophies, there were two significant philosophical dilemmas that produced two inherent and differing fissures. These were part of the conflict that produced the Civil War.

The first was ironic. The definition of political freedom by any generation is always relative. One is “free” in relation to those who aren’t. “Who were the first persons to get the unusual idea that being free was not only a value to be cherished but the most important thing that someone could possess? The answer, in a word: slaves.”<sup>54</sup> When the American Republic was conceived, certain persons could exercise the power of individual consent while others could not; and in the most extreme case, enslaved black men and women could not even exercise consent over their own bodies. They were propertied goods. And to some the Constitution was drawn up as a document protecting the rights of individuals to hold property over against the monolithic power of state and church; the irony in our origins.

The second fissure was systemic. While classical liberalism denotes the body of convictions holding to the primacy of individual rights, private ownership of property, and government by popular consent, there emerged two separate paths to this realization, which implied a disagreement over the means to fulfill the purpose of political community covenantally constituted. This fissure supported the impending war:

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<sup>52</sup> Alexander H. Stephens, the Confederate vice president, quoted in Neely, *The Fate of Liberty*, xi.

<sup>53</sup> Lincoln, Address in Independence Hall 1861. *The Language of Liberty*, 565.

<sup>54</sup> Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, 9.

...at its core American political culture is pervasively liberal—but not consensually so, that although American liberalism excludes nonliberal alternatives, it is nevertheless fundamentally divided, philosophically as well as politically. It is divided by an opposition between what I have called reform liberals, who were concerned primarily with the development of the faculties of individuals, and what I have called humanist liberals, who were concerned primarily with the satisfaction of the preferences of individuals. This opposition, this liberal polarity, began to emerge in the 1830s, most starkly in the conflict over slavery that eventually consumed almost all Lincoln's thoughts and energies.<sup>55</sup>

When Constitutional arguments that supported slavery began to emerge with an urgency that led to armed conflict, this innate liberal polarity became explicit. The Lincoln–Douglas debates put it in sharp focus. Is the identity of a free nation expressed primarily by popular consent, the satisfaction of the preferences of individuals? Freedom is the freedom to pursue individual preference, freedom from restraint, give individual ye or nay, hold property or sell it or let it go. Then, let the free persons in the forming States give consent to enter the Union as slave or free.

Or, is a free nation given its identity by a first principle to which it must adhere? Liberty is a God-given freedom, endowed in human nature at its creation, and from which the development of self and personality come about. Liberty is the freedom for every individual to become something, a path leading towards the prospect of transformation, of becoming a “new being,” of releasing “outer chains,” in the past symbolized by monarchical fiat and Church creedal conformity; all so that the individual can fully realize capacities which the covenanted community through federated liberty can protect. If so, then eventually the national community must set all persons free:

Lincoln fashioned a solution that retained the moral concern of the abolitionists and the political whole of the union. He did all this in a language that retained a commitment to both individuals and their communities, and provided a solution that combined a reform liberal outlook with humanist liberal institutions.<sup>56</sup>

Lincoln expanded the meaning of Liberty by rooting it not in popular consent, only a possible evidence and by-product of Liberty; and not a necessary condition of it, but in a view of human nature. The classical liberal holds that it is in divinely endowed human nature that liberty begins its fashioning. Ultimately, freedom is not created by establishing just social arrangements, like popular consent, but only protected, maintained, and sustained by them. The concern of the classical liberal is not whether there is a human nature, but the contending views of human nature latent in our concepts of social good.

Stephen Douglas argued that Liberty was in evidence when the consent of the governed was given; that is, by popular sovereignty, by the satisfaction of the preferences of individuals giving their consent in the new territories, would slavery there

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<sup>55</sup> Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion*, 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxi.

be extended or denied. What his allegiance to the consent of the governed masked was that freedom humanly fashioned is relative. Some had it, others didn't. What his allegiance to the "consent of the governed" did not account for is that individual consent is the expression of self-interest, the satisfaction of the preferences of individuals. So consent could be given only by those to whom human government extended it, each out of his own self-interest. What his allegiance to popular sovereignty could not comprehend is that to be an expression of Liberty and to serve the aim of freedom, consent must be rooted in covenantal community, "the concretization of the I-Thou relationship which, when addressed to God, makes man holy and, when addressed to one's fellows, makes men human."<sup>57</sup> Latent in Douglas's political position was a racist view of human nature which did not consider the Negro human because human government hadn't.

On the other hand, to Lincoln Liberty begged the question of human nature. Was the Negro a human being? If yes, then how could a slave be governed when that individual's consent was not recognized by a government whose first principle was to protect it as a divinely endowed characteristic of human nature?

And yet again, there are in the United States and territories, including the District of Columbia, 433,643 free blacks. At \$500 per head they are worth over two hundred millions of dollars. How comes this vast amount of property to be running about without owners? We do not see free horses or free cattle running at large. How is this? All these free blacks are the descendants of slaves, or have been slaves themselves, and they would be slaves now, but for SOMETHING which has operated on their white owners, inducing them, at vast pecuniary sacrifices, to liberate them. What is that SOMETHING? Is there any mistaking it? In all these cases it is your sense of justice, and human sympathy, continually telling you, that the poor Negro has some natural right to himself....And now, why will you ask us to deny the humanity of the slave? and estimate him only as the equal of the hog?<sup>58</sup>

Lincoln expanded the meaning of Liberty by rooting in not in popular consent, but in a view of human nature. Derived from covenantal relationships, federated liberty begets a freedom that can assist in the unfolding of human personality. It is in the nature of human being as divinely formed that freedom is not seen as created by human agency or social arrangements, but only protected, maintained, and sustained by them. The concern of the "natural liberal mind" is not whether there is a human nature, but how full is our view of it.

### One Vision of Providence

"Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable."<sup>59</sup> It was Webster's Reply to Hayne which Lincoln considered the greatest American speech and to which

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<sup>57</sup> Elazar, "What Happened to Covenant in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century? 6.

<sup>58</sup> Lincoln, Peoria speech, 16 October 1854. *The Language of Liberty*, 167.

<sup>59</sup> Webster, "Liberty and Union."

he returned in preparation for his most memorable addresses. It linked the aim of free community with its perpetuity, embodied hope in this new definition of humanity, and by this intimated that the American experiment in ordered liberty could compliment a spiritual aim in existence itself. It held the tension and paradox inherent in the prospect of freedom as the Ultimate aim of communal bonds, the nature of a covenantal faith:

I hold, that in contemplation of universal law, and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetua...Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope, in the world? In our present differences, is either party without faith of being in the right? If the Almighty Ruler of nations, with his eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North or on your side of the South, that truth, and that justice, will surely prevail, by the judgment of this great tribunal, the American people....Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.<sup>60</sup>

Abraham Lincoln “re-radicalized” covenant not only in the political realm but also in the religious one. He dared to read the tragic events of his time as evidence of divine Providence. His was not a conception of Providence that deified self-interest or made the will of his nation and party God’s will. But he did see how freedom is an Ultimate aim, the activity of God in the world, and how we thwart and distort it through idolatry and selfolatry. And that the only protection human beings have against the evils they are capable of perpetuating in the name of goodness and justice is to see that meaningful human existence involves something more than just a people’s covenant:

The Biblical idea of covenant is what I call a covenant of being...that the people’s covenant is a covenant with the essential character and intention of reality. It is not merely a covenant between human beings; it is a covenant between human beings in the face of reality. The fundamental demands and possibilities of reality are not created by humans but exist in its very nature. The understanding of reality is appropriate only when it is seen in terms of an ethical covenant. The covenant is with the creative, sustaining, commanding, judging, transforming Power.<sup>61</sup>

The only entry for the “natural liberal mind” to this covenant of being is through the recognition of self-interest, and how in the communities and relationships formed by covenants we are fated to mistake human interest for divine aim. When one recognizes the limits of self-interest—economic, racial, political, etc.—one is confronted with the prospect that there is an aim for events, a necessity larger than what humanity can grasp, suppose, or create; a Providence by which the individual through consent can be shaped. It is Mysterious, but not some personal “Locofocoism.” To pose it as possible in history, it must be grappled with in private and seen through our ignorance and shortsightedness:

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<sup>60</sup> Lincoln, First Inaugural Address. *The Language of Liberty*, 573–74.

<sup>61</sup> Adams, “The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern.” *An Examined Faith*, 240.

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong. God can not be for, and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By His mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.<sup>62</sup>

Lincoln sees existence historically and covenantally, and therefore purposively. He came to shape his private meditations and his public rhetoric by it. But the purpose to existence is something human beings read only partially never wholly. Providence is the name he gave when he meditated upon this covenant with being. It is not our ways writ large.

Providence is the manner in which God contributes to the co-creation of history with man, the workings of the divine aim in covenant with his creation. But it is a time and way distinguished from ours. Humanity has its purposes. God has his. It must be thus in every relationship.

Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained....Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other....The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes.<sup>63</sup>

#### Conclusion: A Confession and a Pronouncement

Unitarian Universalism today is in crisis. It is a crisis of identity revealed by the inability to perform the theological task; to analyze the existential situation and correlate it to the revelations our faith tradition represents. So, why do we exist? We are in the midst of a crisis of identity as was our nation a century and half ago. Then, the nation's crisis was precipitated by its unfaithfulness to its first principle, a distortion that necessitated a bloody repentance and a rebirth as yet not fully realized. Today, as religionists we cannot perform the theological task—lack a language of reverence and are theologically illiterate by our own admission—because we have been unfaithful to a covenant of being. Unfaithfulness has driven us into a desert.

Reluctance, hesitation, confusion, ignorance—and not a little bickering and wandering—all of which I am guilty of and more—characterize this desert experience. And it is not just us, but something that extends to all of liberal theology and all

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<sup>62</sup> Lincoln, "Meditation on the Divine Will 1862," In White, *The Eloquent President*, 153.

<sup>63</sup> Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address. *The Language of Liberty*, 795.

institutional churches in our country. We have adapted as the philosophy for our forms of religious and political community a view of organic community that sees natural liberty to be its proper yield. Restraint, boundaries, authority exercised through defined roles, spiritual imperatives, and principled regulations are primarily seen as conspirators against the fullest expressions of individual preference. Our communities and views on freedom are descended from Romantic Transcendentalism's natural liberty and Theodore Parker's proposition of an "Absolute Religion" common to all persons in all cultures in all times. Spiritual community—sometimes called "beloved" community—is seen to be the fullest expression of the widest number of individual preferences. The distinct, historical appearance of a covenant of freedom, as the ongoing revelation of God in history, supported by certain forms of right relationships and thwarted by others, is largely forgotten. It is forgotten in almost all forms of community, from institutional churches of all kinds to our nation as a political whole. It has yielded a wandering in the desert of meaning and purpose for us, and political rancor for our nation. On all fronts the crisis of identity seems remedied by a proliferation of authoritarian forms of political and religious structures. Beware of what passes for a remedy, and view things differently.

Liberal religionists resonate with Lincoln because he "re-radicalized" covenant in a way that liberates the deepest regions of our spiritual selves. We "feel" it, but, considered through a covenantal view, what we "feel" as somehow naturally true is but a summons towards some relationship, a calling towards a creativity through conviction.

It is time for a reformation and a new birth of spiritual freedom. It is time for us to begin the new era, to do for the liberal religious tradition of theology, and with its communities, what Lincoln did for and with the nation. It is time for us to "re-radicalize" covenant as the ground for authentic religious community, the vehicle for a spiritual freedom that is our first principle, and distinguishes and identifies us as a religious people. History reveals that any union that is religious in nature and purpose, and has liberty as its aim—whether springing from a political hope or a spiritual yearning or both—has love as its foundation and justice as its measurement.

One maintains responsibility for the collective, not, finally, because it is the law, but because of love. The responsibility is motivated by affection. Thus the breaking of the covenant is not merely a violation in the sense of criminality but in the sense of breaking faithfulness, of violating the affection that was the ground and nerve of the covenant in the first place. It is through God's love, God's grace, that we receive the covenant.<sup>64</sup>

Love is stronger than death, is in addition to material existence, and is in evidence when we *dwell with God in a world of spiritual realities*. It is time to "re-radicalize" spiritual freedom in the covenant of being that upholds love in the face of human self-interest and its tragic consequences. Father Abraham spoke of it to the crisis of his time, as before him the Son of Man spoke of it to his, and Brother Lovely spoke of it to us a generation ago: *The bonds of love do keep open the gates of freedom*.

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<sup>64</sup> Adams, "The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern." *An Examined Faith*, 240.

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God give us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address. *The Language of Liberty*, 795.

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