



Lincoln and the Politics of Christian Love

Grant N. Havers

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America has seen faith-based initiatives and “the audacity of hope” in twenty-first-century politics, but few participants in our political scene have invoked the other Christian virtue of charity as a guiding principle. Abraham Lincoln extolled the merit of “loving thy neighbor as thyself,” especially as a critique of the hypocrisy of slavery, but a discussion of Christian love is noticeably absent from today’s debates about religion and democracy.

In this provocative book, Grant Havers argues that charity is a central tenet of what Lincoln once called America’s “political religion.” He explores the implications of making Christian love the highest moral standard for American democracy, showing how Lincoln’s legacy demands that a true democracy be charitable toward all—and that only a people who lived according to such ideals could succeed in building democracy as Lincoln understood it.

Havers argues that it is simplistic to conflate Lincoln’s invocation of “with charity for all” with his abiding support for the ideal of human equality. The ethic of charity in his view also brought a uniquely Christian realism to the universalism of democracy. He also describes how, since World War I, intellectuals and political leaders have denied that there exists a necessary relation between democracy and Christian love, proposing that democracy is sufficiently ethical without reliance on a specific religious tradition. Today’s neoconservatives and liberals instead posit a universal yearning for democracy that requires no foundation in the ethic of charity. Havers shows that this democratic universalism, espoused by those who believe a “chosen people” should uphold the natural rights of humanity, is alien to the sober thought of both the founders and Lincoln.

This carefully argued work defends Lincoln’s understanding of charity as essential to democracy while emphasizing the difficulty of fusing this ethic with the desire to spread democracy to people who do not share America’s Christian heritage. In considering the prospect of America’s leaders rediscovering a moral foreign policy based on charity rather than the costly idolization of democracy, *Lincoln and the Politics of Christian Love* makes a timely contribution to the wider debate over both the meaning of religion in American politics and the mission of America in the world—and opens a new window on Lincoln’s lasting legacy.

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