

BOOK REVIEWS

And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle. By Jon Meacham. New York: Random House, 2022. 676 pp.

Do we need another book on Abraham Lincoln? Among the multitude of others, what makes *And There Was Light* stand out is Jon Meacham's remarkable effort to let America's sixteenth President provide an illuminating perspective on a nation that is currently as deeply divided and struggling to survive as a democracy as it was before and during the Civil War. As helpful as this book may be for any American citizen to read, I am motivated to review it for this church-related journal because I believe the historical insights this noted author provides are potentially useful to Lutheran clergy and other ecclesiastical leaders seeking to navigate these same troubled waters and to address the socio-political divisions that continue to wash into their congregations and church bodies.

Aptly subtitled "Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle," Meacham's book covers most of the bases one would expect to find in a comprehensive biography, including Lincoln's family of origin, his hardscrabble upbringing, his first love Ann Rutledge, his turbulent marriage to Mary Todd and the loss of two of their progeny, his elections to office, as well as his anguished presidency and subsequent assassination. But in most every chapter on Lincoln's life, Meacham chooses to give us a measure of insight into the role religion played as the Illinois rail splitter sought to deal with the towering and divisive problem of slavery.

At work in Lincoln's mind, in Meacham's estimation, were history, reason, and faith. For him, the Constitution, which viewed slaves as the property of their owners, took a back seat in America's history to the Declaration of Independence, which unequivocally stated that "all men are created equal." In contrast to historians who have stated that Lincoln's opposition to slavery evolved, Meacham provides ample evidence to substantiate the president's later

conscience-grounded claim that it was always in his nature to believe that “if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.”

As Meacham sees it, what evolved was Lincoln’s continuous search for a reasonable political solution to the problem. While African colonization of slaves piqued his interest, this proposal quickly proved to be less than feasible. Recognizing that various legislative compromises would only extend the Southern slave empire, he felt compelled to oppose them. The political necessity of gaining the support of Whites in order to outlaw slavery prompted his willingness to concede that Blacks were an inferior breed. The “popular sovereignty” solution advocated by Stephen Douglas in his campaigns for office only seemed to fan the flames of self-interest and secession. What Meacham in fact demonstrates is that as Lincoln’s reliance on reason waned and as “war came,” his faith in God took on a much greater role.

According to Meacham, Lincoln’s “creed was of his own making—and it was always evolving with enormous consequences for the nation he led and for the nation he left behind” (xxxv). His piety included regular reading of the King James Bible and, at his most critical hours, getting on his knees to pray to God. At the same time, his reading of Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason* (“my own mind is my own church”) made him a “doubting Thomas” among believers, and for this reason, he never became the member of a Christian congregation. Lincoln found some of the Evangelical Protestant beliefs featured by the Second Great Awakening, such as the divinity of Jesus, too difficult to embrace. Instead, he favored the brand of theology set forth by the New England Transcendentalists. Theodore Parker in particular helped him focus on Nature’s God and to believe that the universe was inherently moral, and that its history arced in the direction of justice.

Nevertheless, Meacham reveals elements of Lincoln’s religion that coincide with those of the Christian faith. For one thing, he recognized the pervasiveness of human depravity. Persistent awareness of his own shortcomings prevented any consideration of himself as a “great man” in the shaping of America’s destiny. During his single term in Congress (1847–49), moreover, he recognized the *simul* of

good and evil and told the House, “There are few things *wholly* evil, or *wholly* good. Almost everything, especially governmental policy, is an inseparable compound of the two; so that our best judgment of the preponderance between them is continually demanded” (112). Influential as well was the theological conundrum that the tragic deaths of Lincoln’s two sons, Eddie and Willie, created for him. Here, Meacham highlights the role of Phineas Gurley, the pastor of Washington’s New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, where he attended services as president with his family. It was Gurley’s care and counsel that enabled him to accept “tragedy in the hope that pain was but a prelude to light and peace” (261). According to Meacham, this experience contributed to Lincoln’s framing of the Civil War as a divine drama engulfing the nation he was elected to serve, one in which “[t]he darkness of Good Friday was but . . . a miserable and bloody gateway . . . to the light of Easter and of resurrection” (368).

In Meacham’s careful exegesis of Lincoln’s iconic Second Inaugural Address one finds several takeaways for today’s churches, often as deeply divided as our society on key social issues. The first is to consistently refrain, as did Lincoln, from identifying God with one’s own position or cause. “Men are not flattered,” he argued elsewhere, “by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world” (364). Even as Lincoln dared to speculate that the high cost of lives for both North and South in the war might be a form of expiation for “every drop of blood drawn from the lash” used on the enslaved, he insisted that only “the judgments of the Lord” could be regarded as “true and righteous altogether” (368).

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, to assert in times of crisis that “God is in charge” is not a warrant for Stoic passivity. On the contrary, what comes with such faith in God is a call to action. Here Meacham takes a deep dive into Psalm 19, from which Lincoln borrowed his reference to the “judgments of the Lord,” and argues that in this context, it points as much to the love as to the majesty of God. With his well-known final words of the Second Inaugural Address about showing “malice toward none” and exercising “charity for all” in an effort to “bind up the nation’s wounds,” or so

Meacham concludes, “[t]he president was summoning the nation to see itself as a player in a divinely charged—and ultimately merciful and just—creation” (369). Acts of this type may still be the best hope of healing and reunion among us in the church as well as the land in which find ourselves today.

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Ministers of a New Medium: Broadcasting Theology in the Radio Ministries of Fulton J. Sheen and Walter A. Maier. By Kirk D. Farney. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2022. 345 pp.

In our multi-media saturated times, it is difficult to imagine the singular importance of radio during its golden age, from the 1920s to the 1950s. During that era before television, the essayist E. B. White described radio as having a “godlike presence” in homes across America. In his book Kirk Farney notes that radio had a range of qualities, from intimate to communal, from democratic to authoritative.

Yet Farney’s study is less concerned with the medium of radio and more concerned with the impact of two men and the messages they spoke to millions during the 1930s and 1940s. The Lutheran pastor Walter A. Maier (1893–1950) and the Roman Catholic priest Fulton J. Sheen (1895–1979) were two of the most popular and prominent broadcasters during radio’s golden age. Both men came from religious backgrounds that were considered on the periphery of mainstream American Protestant religion. Maier came from a German-American Lutheran background and was a member of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, a synod which some saw as an ethnic and theological enclave. Sheen came from a primarily Irish-American Catholic background and sought to counter the historic anti-Catholicism in American society.

Farney explains how Maier and Sheen preached messages rooted in their own religious traditions, yet succeeded in appealing to wider audiences. Both men “combined a traditional theological conservatism with an equally traditional American idealism” (133). Maier and Sheen took to the airwaves after the Modernist and Fundamentalist debates of the 1920s. Both men were vocal critics of modernist