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**“Blowing out the Moral Lights around us”:  
Abraham Lincoln, Political Religion, and the Declaration of  
Independence**

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Dear Miller Center Fellows, Mentors, and Distinguished Guests:

This paper is drawn from the third section of the fourth chapter of my dissertation, “Paving the Rights Infrastructure: Civic Education in the Presidencies of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt.” My fourth chapter examines Lincoln’s view of the role religion should play in shaping the character of citizens in a liberal democracy.

The overall thesis of the chapter, introduced in Section 1, is that throughout his career Lincoln drew selectively upon religious sources, particularly Protestant Christianity, in developing a “political religion” that put religious feeling in the service of liberal aims. According to Lincoln, religion, when properly fused and blended with liberal democratic norms, could protect the state from certain potentially destructive tendencies present within liberalism itself.

In Section 2 I examine Lincoln’s early call as a young Whig politician in the 1830’s for a “political religion” that wed citizens to the state by encouraging reverence for the laws and the Constitution. Responding to what he considered to be the lawlessness and “mobocracy” associated with the age of Jackson, Lincoln’s political religion fused together the evangelical Christian call for a “moral community” grounded in faith with the legal profession’s call for a “procedural community” grounded in respect for law.

In Section 3 I analyze Lincoln’s appeal to religion in his confrontation with Stephen Douglas and Roger Taney in the 1850’s. Douglas and Taney, Lincoln worried, were encouraging the public to accept a “don’t care” policy regarding the justice or

injustice of slavery. In response to the moral antinomianism inherent in their doctrine of popular sovereignty, Lincoln made three sets of arguments against slavery. While Lincoln occasionally made some arguments against slavery that could be characterized as exclusively secular and others that could be characterized as exclusively religious, the majority of his public arguments blended the secular and religious, grounded in the secular reasoning of natural rights liberalism but overlaid with religious allusion.

Finally, in Section 4 I argue that throughout his career Lincoln demonstrated an awareness that political religion itself was prone to certain problems. Whether it was the temperance advocates of the 1840's, the abolitionist crusaders of the 1850's, or northern and southern preachers/theologians commenting on the Civil War in the 1860's, Lincoln acknowledged that religious fervor in political life could lead to the poison of moral arrogance and self-righteousness. In these moments, Lincoln responded by pointing out that a more genuinely theological view of moral reform, abolitionist activity, and the Civil War yielded *less* ground for self-satisfaction and moral opprobrium on all sides of the debate. Biblical religion, in this sense, served as a check upon the tendency within political religion itself to degenerate into political pride.

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**“Blowing out the Moral Lights around us”:  
Abraham Lincoln, Political Religion, and the Declaration of Independence**

From 1854 to 1860, Lincoln's focus shifted from the unruly excesses of Jacksonian democracy to the doctrine of popular sovereignty. Whereas the former represented what might be called an antinomianism with respect to civil or man-made

law, the latter represented to him an antinomianism with respect to natural or universal moral law. It was no longer principally the fate of the U.S. Constitution that worried Lincoln in these years (although his respect for the Constitution continued to play a decisive role throughout this period), but rather the fate of the Declaration of Independence that became his new preoccupation. And as we shall see, Lincoln rallied to the defense of the Declaration by developing and encouraging a new iteration of political religion uniquely suited to his new task.

In 1854 Lincoln was roused from his domestic slumbers. Having served just one term in Congress from 1846-1848, Lincoln in 1848 returned to his hometown of Springfield, reunited with his young family, and resumed his thriving legal practice. In January, 1854, Stephen Douglas, the chair of the Senate's Committee on Territories, introduced to the U.S. Senate a bill for the territorial organization of new settlements along the Kansas and Platte Rivers in a region called Nebraska. In its ultimate form, the bill divided this region into two separate territories, Kansas and Nebraska, and left "the people thereof perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way, subject only to the constitution of the United States."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the people of these territories were left free to decide for themselves whether they would enter the union as slave states or as free.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act thereby voided the pre-existing arrangement that had been in place for a generation for the admission of territories into the union. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 stipulated that for the new territories acquired through the Louisiana Purchase, Missouri would enter as a slave state, Maine as a free state, and that slavery would be prohibited in all remaining territory north of lat. 36° 30'. The territories

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Guelzo, 180

of Kansas and Nebraska fell within the territory north of lat. 36° 30' and consequently, under the Missouri Compromise, should not have even been given the freedom to enter as slave states.

Douglas defended this departure from the Missouri Compromise in three ways. First, he argued that the Compromise of 1850, which, among other things, allowed New Mexico and Utah to choose whether to enter the union as slave states or free, had already effectively voided the Missouri Compromise. Second, by allowing the territories to decide for themselves whether to become slave states or free, the Kansas-Nebraska Act would remove the highly divisive slavery question from the halls of Congress, where it was only exacerbating sectional tensions, and place it at the local and state levels, where it would be less likely to stir up such discordant passions.

Third, Douglas argued that the doctrine of “popular sovereignty,” or, as he sometimes called it, the “sacred right of self government,” stipulated that individuals and territories had the natural right to arrange their affairs and their property in the way most congenial to their desires. This doctrine of political self-possession, according to which one had the right to be governed according to laws of one’s own making, was, according to Douglas, at the heart of the American political creed. It inspired the American Revolution, was at the core of the Declaration of Independence, and given concrete expression throughout the Constitution.

Three years later, the U.S. Supreme Court further confirmed the trajectory of the Kansas-Nebraska Act with its 1857 landmark decision of *Dred Scott v. Sanford*. The case involved Dred Scott, a slave from Missouri who had twice been taken by his owner to the territory of Illinois and who sued for his freedom on the ground of having been a

resident of free soil under the terms of the Missouri Compromise. In his decision, Chief Justice Taney made two rulings that decisively affected the brewing controversy over slavery. First, he ruled that Scott, as a Negro, could not be a citizen of the United States and therefore had no right to sue in a Federal Court. "We think they [Africans] are... not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word 'citizens' in the Constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides for and secures to citizens of the United States." Second, Scott's presence in territory north of lat. 36° 30' did not emancipate him because Congress had no right to deprive citizens of their property without 'due process of law.' The Missouri Compromise, therefore, was ruled unconstitutional and void. Where the Kansas-Nebraska Act had violated the Missouri Compromise in the name of popular sovereignty, the Dred Scott decision voided the Missouri Compromise in the name of popular sovereignty.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Supreme Court decision in Dred Scott pulled Lincoln back into the political fray. As he would report in the third person in his pre-presidential autobiography: "In 1854, his profession had almost superseded the thought of politics in his mind, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused him as he had never been before." As a practical minded politician, he was undoubtedly motivated by the political and personal advantages he could derive from the new situation. The Illinois Whigs had never secured a permanent majority in the state legislature. Lincoln the Whig politician may have sensed that the Kansas-Nebraska Act provided an opportunity to split the Democrats between those who supported and those who opposed the act and possibly lure some anti-Nebraska Democrats into Whig ranks. Furthermore, a split among

Democrats in Illinois could potentially weaken the support for the incumbent Democratic U.S. Senator James Shields, who was up for reelection in 1856, and open the way for a Whig candidate to win the seat.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond these practical motives, however, Lincoln was aroused by the Kansas Nebraska Act and later by the Dred Scott decision on constitutional and philosophical grounds as well. On constitutional grounds, Lincoln saw the act of Congress and the ruling of the Supreme Court as steps along the way to the eventual nationalization of slavery. The trend, in Lincoln's judgment, was towards requiring all states to eventually permit slavery. As he explained in his House Divided speech in June, 1858, the Kansas Nebraska Act left the people of a territory "perfectly free" to decide for themselves the question of slavery, yet oddly omitted an explicit declaration of the right of the people to exclude slavery. This odd omission, Lincoln said, formed "an exactly fitted niche" for the later ruling of the Dred Scott decision which held that neither Congress nor a territorial legislature could exclude slavery from any territory. The Dred Scott case, in turn, had its own curious omission. While it ruled that neither Congress nor a territorial legislature could exclude slavery from a territory, it said nothing about whether a *state* or its people could exclude slavery. Lincoln drew the following inference:

In what cases the power of the states is so restrained by the U.S. Constitution, is left an open question, precisely as the same question, as to the restraint on the power of the *territories* was left open in the Nebraska act. Put *that* and *that* together, and we have another nice little niche, which we may, ere long, see filled with another Supreme Court decision, declaring that the Constitution of the United States does not permit a *state* to exclude slavery from its limits.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Guelzo, 182.

<sup>3</sup> Lincoln I. 433

In Lincoln's judgment, then, the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott decision were exactly fitting pieces that lacked just one final piece before slavery was nationalized through law.

Congressional enactment and judicial decisions, however, were by themselves insufficient to bring about this result. In Lincoln's judgment, the essential precondition for the nationalization of slavery was a transformation in public opinion or "public heart." In the same speech in which Lincoln warned of this conspiracy, he added that the state of public opinion was crucial to its success or failure. Discussing the likelihood that the Dred Scott decision would enable all slaveholders to bring their slaves into free states and territories without thereby relinquishing their property in them, Lincoln said: "Auxiliary to all this, and working hand in hand with it, the Nebraska doctrine, or what is left of it, is to *educate* and *mould* public opinion, at least *Northern* public opinion, to not care whether slavery is voted *down* or voted *up*."<sup>4</sup> And after predicting that another Supreme Court decision might nationalize slavery, Lincoln said, "And this may especially be expected if the doctrine of 'care not whether slavery be voted down or voted up,' shall gain upon the public mind sufficiently to give promise that such a decision can be maintained when made."<sup>5</sup> Finally, Lincoln states what he considered to be Douglas' ultimate ambition: "His avowed mission is impressing the 'public heart' to care nothing about it."<sup>6</sup>

Public opinion was for Lincoln a matter of the utmost political significance. The individual who could shape public opinion had the proverbial keys to the kingdom. In an

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 430

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 432

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 433



August, 1858 draft of a speech and in his first debate with Douglas in Ottawa that same month, Lincoln offered his view on the subject:

In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the Kansas Nebraska Act and Dred Scott decision, though inherently problematic from Lincoln's perspective, were not nearly as threatening as those who could convince the public to embrace these enactments and decisions

Lincoln was above all troubled by the influence Douglas and Taney were exerting upon the public mind regarding slavery and the Declaration of Independence. In his judgment, they were encouraging a moral indifference to slavery and a disregard for the Declaration as a universal statement of the equality of all men. In his speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he said,

This *declared* indifference, but as I must think, covert *real* zeal for the spread of slavery, I can not but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world – enables the enemies of free institutions with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites – causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty – criticising the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but self-interest.<sup>8</sup>

Lincoln's "hatred" of the indifference to slavery implicit in the act was grounded in the injustice of slavery, the poor example this provided the world, but *especially* in the effect it had upon public opinion. The "don't care" policy of popular sovereignty, according to which the procedural right of the people to govern themselves displaced the substantive

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 493, 524-525.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 315

question of the morality of slavery, was leading “good men” into open war with the Declaration of Independence. It was encouraging them to reject the “fundamental principles of civil liberty” and leading them to embrace a political philosophy based squarely upon self-interest. This effect upon public opinion, according to Lincoln, was the greatest problem with the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

The Dred Scott case was having a similarly pernicious effect. While the “don’t care” policy of the Kansas-Nebraska Act was encouraging citizens to reject the governing ideals of the Declaration of Independence, the Dred Scott decision was leading citizens to accept a new reading of the Declaration which wrote those ideals out of the document. Taney ruled that though the words of the Declaration “would seem to embrace the whole human family... it is too clear for dispute, that the enslaved African race were not intended to be included, and formed no part of the people who framed and adopted this declaration.”<sup>9</sup> For African slaves and their descendants were judged at that time to be “so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently, as Lincoln summarized, Taney and Douglas accepted and promulgated a new view of the Declaration that read: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all British subjects who were on this continent eighty-one years ago, were created equal to all British subjects born and then residing in Great Britain.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, Taney and Douglas were downgrading the Declaration from a philosophical statement of universal rights to an historical statement of conventional and particular rights. Appealing to his audience in his speech on the Dred Scott decision, Lincoln asked “are you really willing that the Declaration shall be thus frittered away? – thus left no more at most, than an

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<sup>9</sup> Dred Scott handout, 5

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>11</sup> Lincoln, 400

interesting memorial of the dead past? thus shorn of its vitality, and practical value; and left without the *germ* or even the *suggestion* of the individual rights of man in it?”<sup>12</sup>

Douglas and Taney had thus carefully laid the groundwork for the eventual nationalization of slavery. In Lincoln’s words, they were making the execution of their statutes and decisions possible through the careful molding of public sentiment. In his fifth debate with Douglas, Lincoln quoted his beau-ideal of a statesman, Henry Clay, to point out the centrality of public opinion in the debate over slavery. Clay had said that,

“those who would repress all tendencies to liberty and ultimate emancipation must do more than put down the benevolent efforts of the Colonization Society – they must go back to the era of our liberty and independence, and muzzle the cannon that thunders its annual joyous return – they must blot out the moral lights around us – they must penetrate the human soul, and eradicate the light of reason and the love of liberty.”<sup>13</sup>

Lincoln then added that Douglas was attempting precisely this task:

And I do think... that Judge Douglas, and whoever like him teaches that the negro has no share, humble though it may be, in the Declaration of Independence, is going back to the era of our liberty and independence, and so far as in him lies, muzzling the cannon that thunders its annual joyous return; that he is blowing out the moral lights around us, when he contends that whoever wants slaves has a right to hold them; that he is penetrating, so far as lies in his power, the human soul, and eradicating the light of reason and the love of liberty, when he is in every possible way preparing the public mind, by his vast influence, for making the institution of slavery perpetual and national.<sup>14</sup>

For Lincoln, then, his debates with Douglas, and the debates between the newly formed Republican Party and Democratic Party, were ultimately reducible to a debate over how the public mind should be formed with respect to the question of slavery.

According to Lincoln and the Republicans, slavery was wrong, and therefore its opponents should “use every constitutional method to prevent the evil from becoming

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<sup>12</sup> 400

<sup>13</sup> 717

<sup>14</sup> 717-718

larger and... if possible, place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate peaceable extinction.”<sup>15</sup> According to Douglas and the Democrats, slavery was not wrong (according to some Democrats, was even a positive good) and should therefore be left “to the arbitrament of those who were immediately interested in it, and alone responsible for its consequences.”<sup>16</sup> How one viewed the great *moral* question of slavery decided how one viewed the great *political* questions of the day such as popular sovereignty, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Dred Scott decision.

Consequently, Lincoln focused his energies on making arguments for the immorality of slavery that challenged the moral indifference encouraged by Douglas and Taney. From the earliest fragments he had penned on slavery immediately following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 to the various speeches he delivered while seeking the presidency in 1860, Lincoln put forward a variety of arguments intended to show both the injustice of slavery and the problems associated with popular sovereignty. Some of these arguments were cast in exclusively “secular” terms, appealing to facts and moral principles accessible to all his listeners, religious or otherwise. Other arguments were cast in exclusively religious terms, arguing against slavery and popular sovereignty on the grounds that they were in violation of some elements of Biblical and religious orthodoxy. But many of the arguments Lincoln made between 1854 and 1860 were a synthesis of the secular and the religious that constituted a new iteration of political religion formulated this time to encourage adherence to both the ideals of the Declaration and the policies of the American founders with respect to slavery. In the case of these arguments, Lincoln infused otherwise secular arguments based upon the doctrine of

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<sup>15</sup> 581-582

<sup>16</sup> Douglas, Special Senate Report, January 4, 1854, quoted in Jaffa, *Crisis*, 155.

natural rights, human reason, innate moral feeling, and American history with Biblical references, imagery, and cadences designed to ensure their maximal persuasiveness. Their substance was essentially secular or liberal. But their formal properties, the manner in which they were presented and the effect they were intended to have upon the listener, were essentially religious.

The first category of arguments, the exclusively secular, appealed to both reason and innate moral feeling. In an 1854 fragment on slavery, Lincoln argued against slavery by showing how the available grounds for its rational justification could, in principle, redound against those making the argument.

If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B. – why may not B. snatch the same argument, and prove equally, that he may enslave A? –

You say A. is white, and B. is black. It is *color*, then; the lighter, having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own.

You do not mean *color* exactly? – You mean the whites are *intellectually* the superiors of the blacks, and, therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with an intellect superior to your own.

But, say you, it is a question of interest; and, if you can make it your *interest*, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he had the right to enslave you.<sup>17</sup>

This argument, that color, intellectual superiority, and interest, could all be made the basis for the enslavement of the very person making such an argument, rested upon the listener's revulsion against slavery *for oneself*. Lincoln knew he could rely upon such revulsion. As he wrote in another fragment on government in the same year, “although

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<sup>17</sup> Lincoln, Fragment on Slavery, 303

volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, *by being a slave himself*.”<sup>18</sup>

Another secular argument Lincoln made against slavery rested upon the listener’s innate revulsion against slavery *for others*.<sup>19</sup> Responding to Douglas’ argument that northerners should not object to a master taking his slave to Nebraska since southerners do not object to northerners taking their hogs, Lincoln argued that universal moral sense made a critical distinction “between hogs and negroes.”

The great majority, south as well as north, have human sympathies, of which they can no more divest themselves than they can of their sensibility to physical pain. These sympathies in the bosoms of the southern people, manifest in many ways, their sense of the wrong of slavery, and their consciousness that, after all, there is humanity in the negro.<sup>20</sup>

In this same speech, Lincoln observes that the presence of 433,643 free blacks living throughout the United States stood as testimony to something in the southern people that indicated their ultimate disapproval of slavery.

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 – that those who deny it, and make mere merchandise of him, deserve kickings, contempt and death.<sup>21</sup>

Despite a number of rationalizations for slavery produced at the time, the *actions* of many slaveholders freeing their slaves bore witness to an innate, gut-level aversion to the institution Lincoln occasionally appealed to in his arguments against slavery.

The second category of arguments, those based upon exclusively religious grounds, appeared with even less frequency in Lincoln’s speeches and writings than the exclusively secular. On one occasion, in an 1858 speech at a Republican banquet in

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<sup>18</sup> Fragment on Government, 302

<sup>19</sup> Zuckert, *Thinkin’ About Lincoln*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Peoria Address, 326

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 327

Chicago, Lincoln concluded his speech with this stirring claim: “let us reinaugurate the good old ‘central ideas’ of the Republic. We *can* do it. The human heart *is* with us – God is with us.”<sup>22</sup> Typically, as we shall see a little later, Lincoln resisted the easy identification of his purposes, or his party’s purposes, with those of God himself. Here, however, surrounded by friends and party regulars and under no pressure to make an argument persuasive to those with whom he disagreed, Lincoln said that God was decidedly on his and his party’s side. However, it should be noted that God was said to be specifically on the side of those who defended the “central idea” of the Republic. Earlier in this speech, Lincoln described that “central idea” as being “the equality of men.” Thus even here, Lincoln’s invocation of God’s special support for the Republican Party must be read in light of the fact that the *substance* of what God and the human heart are said to endorse is the equality of all men. And this doctrine, while present in Christian doctrine, is equally present in the natural rights liberalism underlying the Declaration. Thus even here, while Lincoln invokes God’s support, he does so on behalf of truths accessible in principle to the religious and non-religious alike.

Another instance in which Lincoln appealed to an exclusively religious argument was when he penned a note entitled “On Pro-Slavery Theology.” Responding to the argument that blacks were naturally inferior to whites and that slavery was therefore an act of Christian charity, he said

Suppose it is true, that the negro is inferior to the white, in the gifts of nature; is it not the exact reverse justice that the white should, for that reason, take from the negro, any part of the little which has been given to him? “*Give to him that is needy*” is the christian rule of charity; but “*take from him that is needy*” is the rule of slavery.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Portion of Speech at Republican Banquet in Chicago, Illinois, 386.

<sup>23</sup> On Pro-slavery Theology, 685.

Clearly, this is an exclusively religious argument made in response to another exclusively religious argument. Lincoln here meets his interlocutor on the interlocutor's very own grounds. And he does so, incidentally, without actually conceding but only temporarily "supposing" the factual premise of the argument that blacks were inferior. He supposes this to be true to illustrate how, even *if* it were true, sound Christian theology would all the more reject the institution of slavery.

Later in this same note on pro-slavery theology, Lincoln makes an argument that illustrates both why he made such infrequent and qualified use of Scripture in his arguments over slavery and also why at the same time he relied instead upon the stirring appeals of political religion. Pro-slavery theology, he said, ultimately came down to the belief that it is the Will of God that some men should be slaves and others should be masters. Lincoln proceeds,

Certainly there is no contending against the Will of God; but still there is some difficulty in ascertaining, and applying it, to particular cases... The Almighty gives no audible (sic) answer to the question, and his revelation – the Bible – gives none – or, at most, none but such admits of a squabble, as to it's meaning.<sup>24</sup>

Neither God himself nor Scripture gives a clear, unambiguous answer to the question of who should be slave and who free. People on both sides of the slavery debate, of course, quoted Scripture, with no apparent resolution of the argument. Carrying out the argument on exclusively religious grounds, then, produces what Alasdair MacIntyre might have called a rhetorical interminability, in which neither side could make much ground, at least in the context of the dynamics of the political debate.

Consequently, if the Will of God in itself is difficult to ascertain when it comes to specific matters of political debate, individuals will inevitably step into the breach to

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



propose what *they* consider to be the Will of God. And *they*, Lincoln warns, will not always be motivated by the most impartial of perspectives but will likely operate from self-interest.

For instance we will suppose the Rev. Dr. Ross has a slave named Sambo, and the question is “Is it the Will of God that Sambo shall remain a slave, or be set free?”... No one thinks of asking Sambo’s opinion on it. So, at last, it comes to this, that *Dr. Ross* is to decide the question. And while he considers it, he sits in the shade, with gloves on his hands, and subsists on the bread that Sambo is earning in the burning sun. If he decides that God wills Sambo to continue a slave, he thereby retains his own comfortable position; but if he decides that God will’s Sambo to be free, he thereby has to walk out of the shade, throw off his gloves, and delve for his own bread. Will Dr. Ross be actuated by that perfect impartiality, which has ever been considered most favorable to correct decisions?<sup>25</sup>

Unlikely, Lincoln suggests. Dr. Ross’s self-interest is too involved in the situation to render him an impartial judge. And Dr. Ross is not unique in this respect. The self-interest of most slaveholders is likely too involved in the institution of slavery to expect them to render impartial judgments on behalf of its justice or injustice.

All this, in turn, had important consequences for statesmen like Lincoln who aspired to make persuasive arguments against slavery. Lincoln’s secular arguments, based upon reason and feeling, though arguably convincing to impartial minds, were unlikely to be persuasive to those whose reason and feelings were clouded or overwhelmed by their personal connection to the institution. Thus, as Zuckert has observed, “the argument from reason was true, but as such ineffective; the argument from feeling was effective so far as it was true, that is, so far as the feeling, the universal revulsion against slavery, was, in fact, felt... But the feeling against slavery for others is fragile.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 685-86.

<sup>26</sup> Zuckert, 22.

The ineffectiveness of the exclusively secular set of arguments on the one hand was met by the inconclusiveness of the exclusively religious set of arguments on the other. Both sides of the slavery dispute quoted Scripture and both had at least some *prima facie* evidence to support their claims: abolitionists could remind defenders of slavery of the brotherhood of all men in service to a loving God who commanded love of neighbor, while defenders of slavery could remind abolitionists of the unchallenged presence of institutional forms of slavery in both the Old and New Testaments. Lincoln's ultimate judgment, then, was that "the Almighty gives no audible answer to the question."

Perhaps sensing the limitations of both sets of arguments, Lincoln proposed a third distinct set that fused together secular and religious claims, or, more precisely, infused rational and historical arguments with an attitude of piety and religious devotion. The effect was to generate a way of speaking about slavery that combined the intellectual persuasiveness of argument based upon reason and American political history with the emotional power of argument infused with religious sentiment.

Lincoln developed his political religion in the context of two essential questions in the debate over slavery: first, whether the inalienable rights articulated in the Declaration of Independence applied to all men, and therefore also to slaves, and second, what the specific national policy with respect to slavery ought to be. In the former case he encouraged a lively "faith" in the universality of the natural rights of the Declaration and in the latter case adopted a reverent attitude towards the policy of the founding "fathers" with respect to slavery.

Lincoln's transformation of the inalienable rights of self-government in the Declaration into an object of faith served three functions. First, it provided him with an explanation of the "sense of justice" to which he had referred in his more secular argument based upon feeling. Second, it served as the basis for what he called a "national faith" that cemented the otherwise disparate members of the union into an organic unity and stood in juxtaposition with the "new faith" of popular sovereignty. Third, it enabled him to illustrate the principles of the Declaration with Scriptural references, thereby allowing him to remain within the orbit of natural rights while at the same time making use of the resonances of Biblical allusion.

In his Peoria Address of October 16, 1858, Lincoln devoted his speech almost entirely to an analysis and critique of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. It was in that speech that he had brought forward his argument against slavery based upon feeling. Simple human sympathy and a basic sense of justice, he said, taught people that "the negro has some right to himself." Several paragraphs later, he observed that one of the arguments Douglas put forward in defense of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise was that "the sacred right of self-government" required that the people of the territories be allowed to decide the question of slavery for themselves. Lincoln responded by noting that he, too, had faith in the right of self-government. Furthermore, it was precisely this faith that was the foundation of his basic "sense of justice" that told him that slavery was wrong. "I trust I understand and truly estimate the right of self-government. My faith in the proposition that each man should do precisely as he pleases with all which is exclusively his own, lies at the foundation of the sense of justice there is in me."<sup>27</sup> Thus, while his argument based upon feeling was, in one context, a faith-free argument, resting simply

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<sup>27</sup> Lincoln, Peoria Address, October 16, 1854, 327

upon a gut-level revulsion against slavery, in the broader context supplied by this discussion of faith in the right of self-government, this secular argument rested ultimately for Lincoln upon a kind of faith.

While faith in natural rights thus served as the basis for moral sentiment, it also served as the basis for a “national faith” that united the country. In a July 10, 1858 speech delivered in Chicago, Lincoln presented one of the most stirring and often overlooked descriptions of the how faith in the philosophical claims of the Declaration united a multicultural, multinational nation. Describing what he considered to be the uses of “4<sup>th</sup> of July gatherings,” Lincoln observed that those who could claim genetic ancestry with the men who had fought for American independence were understandably ennobled by such ceremonies.

We find a race of men living in that day whom we claim as our fathers and grandfathers; they were iron men, they fought for the principle that they were contending for; and we understood that by what they then did it has followed that the degree of prosperity that we now enjoy has come to us. We hold this annual celebration to remind ourselves of all the good done in this process of time of how it was done and who did it, and how we are historically connected with it; and we go from these meetings in better humor with ourselves – we feel more attached the one to the other, and more firmly bound to the country we inhabit. In every way we are better men in the age, and race, and country in which we live for these celebrations.<sup>28</sup>

The fourth of July celebration, however, has potentially an even greater significance for those who could *not* claim common ancestry with the founding generation.

But after we have done all this we have not yet reached the whole. There is something else connected with it. We have besides these men – descended by blood from our ancestors – among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men, they are men who have come from Europe – German, Irish, French and Scandinavian – men that have come from Europe themselves, or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration

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<sup>28</sup> Lincoln, Speech at Chicago, Illinois, July 10, 1858, 455-56.

of Independence they find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.<sup>29</sup>

Again, Lincoln reiterates the previous point that the Declaration’s statement of universal equality serves as “the father of all moral principle,” the foundation or touchstone for all subsequent moral sentiment. He makes here the further point, however, that belief in the doctrine of natural rights also serves as a foundation for an organic national identity. The nation’s immigrants, lacking a “connection... by blood” with the American founding, become nonetheless connected with it as though they were “blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh” of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams. They become so connected through what is essentially an act of faith. Belief in the claim that “all men are created equal” links those who would otherwise be disparate members of the country together.

Belief on the part of individuals generating a mystical “blood of the blood, flesh of the flesh” union between disparate parts, of course, is reminiscent of the Biblical conception of the Christian church, which is similarly bound mystically together into an organic whole by faith. Formally, then, we see a similarity between Lincoln’s political religion and Biblical faith. Substantively, however, there are also significant differences. The belief in question here is not the divinity of Christ or the redemption of man, but the natural equality of all men. And the union generated by this faith is not the mystical body of Christ in the form of a Church, but the organic union of the nation.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 456.

Lincoln elaborated upon the concept of a “national faith” in the Declaration especially in his criticism of what he called the “new faith” in Douglas’ “sacred right of self-government.” In this context, Lincoln argued that the “national faith” maintained the equality of all men and the concomitant principle that no one should be governed without their consent, but that this faith and its principles were losing out to Douglas’s “new faith” which maintained the equality of merely all whites descendant from Great Britain and of the right to own and rule slaves.

Where Douglas contended that the “sacred right of self-government” required that settlers in Nebraska be permitted to choose whether to allow slavery or not, Lincoln pointed out that this depended upon whether slaves were men. If slaves were men, then the teaching of the “ancient faith” that all men were created equal “kicked in” and applied, by definition, no less to them than to free whites. “The doctrine of self-government is right – absolutely and eternally right – but it has no just application, as here attempted. Or perhaps I should rather say that whether it has such just application depends upon whether a negro is *not* or *is* a man... If the negro is a *man*, why then my ancient faith teaches me that “all men are created equal;” and that there can be no moral right in connection with one man’s making a slave of another.”<sup>30</sup>

Where Douglas contended that the people of Nebraska were good enough to “govern a few miserable negroes,” Lincoln pointed out that the right to rule another is entirely contingent upon the other’s consent to that rule. This was not merely a dictate of reason but also the core of the country’s “ancient faith.”

... no man is good enough to govern another man, *without that other’s consent*. I say this is the leading principle – the sheet anchor of American republicanism. Our Declaration of Independence says:

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<sup>30</sup> Lincoln, Peoria Address, 328.

[quotes Declaration]...

I have quoted so much at this time merely to show that according to our ancient faith, the just powers of governments are derived from the consent of the governed. Now the relation of masters and slaves is, PRO TANTO, a total violation of this principle. The master not only governs the slave without his consent; but he governs him by a set of rules altogether different from those which he prescribes for himself. Allow ALL the governed an equal voice in the government, and that, and that only is self government.<sup>31</sup>

The central dogmas of the nation's "ancient faith," the equality of *all* men and the necessity of consent in legitimate government, were in Lincoln's judgment slowly being replaced by the "new faith" expounded by Douglas.

Little by little, but steadily as man's march to the grave, we have been giving up the OLD for the NEW faith. Near eighty years ago we began by declaring that all men are created equal; but now from that beginning we have run down to the other declaration, that for SOME men to enslave OTHERS is a "sacred right of self-government." These principles can not stand together. They are as opposite as God and mammon; and whoever holds to the one, must despise the other... Let no one be deceived. The spirit of seventy-six and the spirit of Nebraska, are utter antagonisms; and the former is being rapidly displaced by the latter.<sup>32</sup>

The old faith, the "spirit of seventy-six," was steadily losing ground to the new faith, the "spirit of Nebraska." And as the national faith was being displaced by the new faith, the nation itself was changing. Specifically, Lincoln worried that these changes were ultimately undoing the philosophical and constitutional principles underlying the liberty of all Americans. In his 1858 speech in Chicago, he warned that if Douglas' interpretation of the Declaration prevailed, not only would negroes be written out of the document's inalienable rights, but so also would the European immigrants whose people were not present at the time of its composition. If this were to happen, he said, the government would be placed upon a different basis.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 339.

Now I ask you in all soberness, if all these things, if indulged in, if ratified, if confirmed and endorsed, if taught to our children, and repeated to them, do not tend to rub out the sentiment of liberty in the country, and to transform this Government into a government of some other form.<sup>33</sup>

And in his Peoria Address, he asked and answered his own question: “Is there no danger to liberty itself, in discarding the earliest practice, and first precept of our ancient faith? In our greedy chase to make profit of the negro, let us beware, lest we ‘cancel and tear to pieces’ even the white man’s charter of freedom.”<sup>34</sup> The liberty of all Americans, Lincoln suggested, depended ultimately upon keeping faith in the nation’s founding creed.

Our third and final point about Lincoln’s transformation of the Declaration into an object of devotion is that the resulting political creed was in at least one important respect consonant with the religious creed of Biblical faith. On several occasions he frames his critique of slavery on the grounds that laborers are entitled to the fruits of their labor. This was, for him, what the Declaration’s statement of universal equality required. It did not necessarily require full social and political equality – indeed he explicitly said that it did not require these things – but it did require that those who earned their bread be allowed to keep it. In at least two instances, he delineated what equality did and did not require with reference to this argument about the right to eat one’s own bread. In his Dred Scott speech he addressed the “negro woman” in these words:

In some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of any one else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others.<sup>35</sup>

And in a speech he delivered in Springfield, he added:

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<sup>33</sup> Lincoln, Speech at Chicago, Illinois, July 10, 1858, 457.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Lincoln, Speech on Dred Scott Decision, June 26, 1857, 398.



Certainly the negro is not our equal in color – perhaps not in many other respects; still, in the right to put into his mouth the bread that his own hands have earned, he is the equal of every other man, white or black.”<sup>36</sup>

While from today’s perspective, these arguments are troubling because he appears to have not fully embraced the equality of blacks, from the perspective of Lincoln’s time they were troubling because he appeared to have too fully embraced such equality. The mores of the time, in which Lincoln himself may have participated, would not have entertained the desirability of full civic equality. Consequently, Lincoln carefully noted the limits of the equality he was defending. Moreover, to make even this limited yet controversial form of equality resonant with his audience, he articulates the natural right to property in the Biblical language of the right of the laborer to the bread he makes. This language is spread throughout the Old and New Testaments. In Genesis 3:19 the punishment for Adam and Eve is that “By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground from which you were taken.” In Deuteronomy 25:4, a precept of justice for the nation of Israel is that “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out grain.” This precept is glossed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:9 and 1 Timothy 5:18 when he insists upon the right of the worker, specifically the apostles, to remuneration. “Is God concerned about oxen, or is he not really speaking for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope, and the thresher in hope of receiving a share.” Thus in this argument against slavery Lincoln weaves together Scriptural reference with the natural rights philosophy to develop an argument that is substantively grounded in reason and the American political tradition, but is supplemented with citations to Biblical authority. The language of rights is thus inflected with the language of faith.

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<sup>36</sup> Lincoln, Speech at Springfield, Illinois, July 17, 1858, 477-78.

Restoring the nation's faith in universal equality and the injustice of slavery was only half of Lincoln's battle. As a practical politician confronting the issue, he needed to propose a specific policy for slavery that took into consideration not only the abstract injustice of slavery but also the historical record of how slavery had been previously handled. With respect to this latter issue, Lincoln formulated another dimension of political religion that infused the policies of the founding "fathers" with quasi-religious significance, describing his call for a return to those policies as a "restoration of the national faith," and once again employing Biblical references to encourage this return.

From his first speech against the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the fall of 1854 to his address at the Cooper Institute in the winter of 1860, Lincoln devoted his skills at research and fact-finding honed through years of legal work to establish what the policy of the American founders had been with respect to slavery. This was not merely out of blind devotion to the work of the founding generation. As he said in his Cooper Union address, "I do not mean to say we are bound to follow implicitly in whatever our fathers did. To do so, would be to discard all the lights of current experience – to reject all progress – all improvement."<sup>37</sup> Rather, he conducted his research largely in response to Douglas who had claimed on several occasions that he (Douglas) was simply following the practice of the fathers who had allowed for the continued existence of slavery, provided for its protection in the constitution, and left the states and territories free to decide the slavery question on their own. As Lincoln said, "Senator Douglas has sought to bring to his aid the opinions and examples of our revolutionary fathers. I am glad he

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<sup>37</sup> Lincoln, Address at Cooper Institute, II. 119.

has done this. I love the sentiments of those old-time men; and shall be most happy to abide by their opinions.”<sup>38</sup>

Lincoln argued that the policy of those old-time men with respect to slavery was threefold: to declare their moral opposition to slavery, to tolerate its continued presence in the states where it existed, and to prevent its spread beyond these states into the nation’s territories. He compared their policy to how one might deal with cancer: “Thus, the thing is hid away, in the constitution, just as an afflicted man hides away a wen or a cancer, which he dares not cut out at once, lest he bleed to death; with the promise, nevertheless, that the cutting may begin at the end of a given time.”<sup>39</sup> Or as he put it in his third debate with Douglas, “the way our fathers originally left the slavery question, the institution was in the course of ultimate extinction, and the public mind rested in the belief that it *was* in the course of ultimate extinction.”<sup>40</sup>

Placing slavery *back* upon this basis became Lincoln’s ultimate ambition with respect to policy throughout the 1850’s. “All I have asked or desired anywhere is that it should be placed back upon the basis that the fathers of our government originally placed it upon.”<sup>41</sup> He made the case for this policy on historical grounds by showing with considerable care that the policy of containment had been the nation’s original policy. But just as the secular appeals to reason and feeling were insufficient to persuade his audience of the injustice of slavery, the appeal to history alone was in Lincoln’s judgment not quite enough. Consequently, while he continued to present the fruits of his historical

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 329.

<sup>39</sup> Peoria Address, 337-338.

<sup>40</sup> Third Debate, 603.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

research, he also infused his argument for a return to the policy of the fathers with both a sense of civic piety and Biblical allusion.

Civic piety came in especially to help make the case that Americans *should* return slavery to the place it had been left by the American “fathers.” The very use of this term, “fathers,” which Lincoln employed whenever he had the opportunity, signaled his desire to create in his audience a *filial* connection to his preferred policy. And by restoring the policy of the fathers with respect to slavery, Americans would do more than simply “turn back the clock.” By restoring the Missouri Compromise, “We thereby restore the national faith, the national confidence, the national feeling of brotherhood. We thereby reinstate the spirit of concession and compromise – that spirit which has never failed us in past perils, and which may be safely trusted for the all the future.”<sup>42</sup> By restoring the policies of the fathers, Americans would restore the “national faith.” The “national faith” includes, as we have already seen, faith in the natural rights of the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln in this statement expands the meaning of the national faith to include not only faith in abstract principles but also faith or confidence in the “spirit of compromise” that inspired not only the Missouri Compromise but also the original settlement of the slavery question at the American founding. By encouraging such civic faith in the pragmatic *policies* as well as the abstract principles of America’s political and legal founding, he thereby lends his argument on behalf of restoration greater religious resonance.

Beyond cultivating a home-grown civic piety with respect to the policies of the fathers, Lincoln also drew parallels between a restoration of these policies and various explicitly Biblical injunctions. In his Peoria Address, Lincoln drew upon the apocalyptic

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<sup>42</sup> Peoria Address, 335-336.

language of the book of Revelation to formulate what must have been a stirring appeal for his evangelical audience:

Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution. Let us turn slavery from its claims of “moral right,” back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of “necessity.” Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace.<sup>43</sup>

This language closely approximates parts of Revelation 7:9-14, which read:

After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands... Then one of the elders spoke up and said to me, “Who are these wearing white robes, and where did they come from?” I said to him, “My lord, you are the one who knows.” He said to me, “These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

In Lincoln’s formulation, the original sin of slavery had “soiled” the nation’s republican robe. By returning slavery “to the position our fathers gave it,” or in his more religious language, washing the nation’s robe in the “spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution,” the secular equivalent of the “blood of the Lamb,” the nation could be saved.

It would be saved, he hoped, in two ways. First, the union would be saved from physical dissolution through a return to the spirit of compromise and concession. Second, it would be saved from what might be called metaphysical or spiritual dissolution, as its founding commitment to the equality of all men would not be sacrificed. Lincoln says,

Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. Let north and south – let all Americans – let all lovers of liberty everywhere – join in the great and good work. If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving. We shall have so saved it, that the

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<sup>43</sup> Lincoln, Peoria Address, 339-340.

succeeding millions of free happy people, the world over, shall rise up, and call us blessed, to the latest generations.<sup>44</sup>

This final comment, that America would be called “blessed, to the latest generations” by millions of free, happy people parallels promises of blessing to the nation of Israel if it followed God’s commandments, “Blessed shalt thou be in the city, and blessed shalt thou be in the field... Blessed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and blessed shalt thou be when thou goest out.”<sup>45</sup> We see this promise again perhaps even more clearly to Mary in Luke 1:48: “For, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.”

One of the obstacles Lincoln faced in securing a restoration of the founders’ slave policy was the belief among some that the founders could not have intended that all men should be free since they did not themselves free their slaves. As Chief Justice Taney had put it,

[i]t is too clear for dispute, that the enslaved African race were not intended to be included [in the Declaration], and formed no part of the people who framed and adopted this declaration; for if the language, as understood in that day, would embrace them, the conduct of the distinguished men who framed the Declaration of Independence would have been utterly and flagrantly inconsistent with the principles they asserted... Yet the men who framed this declaration were great men.<sup>46</sup>

Lincoln made one argument against this reasoning that appealed to the likely motives of the drafters of the Declaration:

They meant simply to declare the *right*, so that the *enforcement* of it might follow. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Lincoln, Peoria Address, 339-340.

<sup>45</sup> Deuteronomy, 28:3-6

<sup>46</sup> Dred Scott case, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Speech on Dred Scott decision, 398.

One year later in Chicago, he made a similar argument, this time drawing a parallel between striving to realize the standard maxim of the Declaration and striving to obey the admonitions of God.

My friend [Stephen Douglas] has said to me that I am a poor hand to quote Scripture. I will try it again, however. It is said in one of the admonitions of the Lord, “As your Father in Heaven is perfect, be ye also perfect.” The Savior, I suppose, did not expect that any human creature could be perfect as the Father in Heaven; but He said, “As your Father in Heaven is perfect, be ye also perfect.” He set that up as a standard, and he who did most towards reaching that standard, attained the highest degree of moral perfection. So I say in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can. If we cannot give freedom to every creature, let us do nothing that will impose slavery upon any other creature. Let us then turn this government back into the channel in which the framers of the Constitution originally placed it.<sup>48</sup>

Just as complete spiritual perfection could not be realized by any man, yet should be nonetheless aspired towards, the complete political equality of all men, though unlikely to be achieved, should nonetheless remain the nation’s “standard maxim.” For Lincoln, then, the work of restoring the nation’s faith could be illustrated with the lessons of Biblical faith.

From 1854 to 1860, Lincoln put forward in various speeches, notes, and letters three categories of arguments against the “don’t care policy” of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Secular arguments based upon reason and feeling proved to be persuasive in the abstract but unpersuasive “on the ground,” while religious arguments proved to have been, at best, inconclusive given the diverse readings of Scripture at the time and, indeed, the multiplicity of views on slavery available within Scripture. Consequently, Lincoln made regular use of a third category of argument that blended the secular and religious into a new form of political religion. In response to Douglas’ argument that the promise

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<sup>48</sup> Lincoln, Speech at Chicago, Illinois, July 10, 1858, 458.

of equality in the Declaration of Independence did not apply to slaves, Lincoln countered by arguing for the existence of a “national faith” in the substantially secular doctrine of natural rights. This faith, he argued, was the basis for our gut-feeling that slavery was wrong, was the “electric cord” that united a nation of immigrants into an organic whole, and resonated with the Biblical injunction to provide the laborer with the fruits of his labor. In response to Douglas’ argument that his policy of popular sovereignty was in continuity with that of the American founders, Lincoln countered by arguing for a quasi-religious reverence for the true policy of the fathers, which was, in point of fact, hostility towards slavery in principle and toleration only by necessity. This reverence, he argued, was to be expressed in terms of filial piety for the work of America’s fathers, prizing chiefly the spirit of compromise and concession that animated that work, and illuminated by various Biblical injunctions regarding salvation and spiritual aspiration.

Lincoln’s ultimate purpose in formulating this political religion was to counter the forces of antinomianism unleashed by the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott decision. For him, the “don’t care policy” towards slavery encouraged by these statutes and decisions was the most dangerous thing about them, since they conducted the “public mind” towards a disregard for the very naturalness of natural rights, which, in turn, threatened the long-term freedoms of all Americans. To prevent Douglas and Taney from “blowing out the moral lights around us,” Lincoln provided a reinvigorated defense of the naturalness of natural rights that attempted to put religious passion in the service of secular truths.