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Civic Charity and the Making of America

Matthew S. Holland

September 19, 2014

Address Delivered at the 30th Anniversary of the BYU-Public School Partnership

Thank you President Worthen. That introduction was a wonderful reminder that not all forms of inflation are painful.

It is an honor to be here today, back on this campus I love so much. It is good to see so many BYU friends and former colleagues. It is especially good to see the two of you who had the courtesy not to guffaw when my UVU appointment was announced.

It is also an honor to be part of the 30th anniversary of the BYU-Public School Partnership. In my current role at UVU, I have worked actively with the superintendents of Utah, Wasatch and Summit counties to forge a regional K-16 alliance consciously built on many of the same principles of the BYU-Public School Partnership—recognizing that making the links between public education and higher education as clear and robust as possible is absolutely essential for rearing a generation ready for civic engagement, professional success, and personal flourishing.

Well, we gather here today to discuss civic virtue and civic life. In doing so, I thought it might be appropriate to begin with a favorite story by one of the great icons of American public morality, Huey Long, former Governor of Louisiana.

Campaigning in heavily Catholic Louisiana, Huey tried to foster some moral and religious unity by starting a stump speech with the declaration, “When I was a boy, I would get up at six o’clock in the morning on Sunday, and I would hitch our old horse up to the buggy and I would take my Catholic grandparents to Mass. I would bring them home, and at ten o’clock I would

hitch the old horse up again, and I would take my Baptist grandparents to church.” After that speech, a close aide, impressed with Long’s devout outreach to his Catholic audience said, “Governor, you’ve been holding out on us. I didn’t know you had any Catholic grandparents.” Huey replied, “Don’t be a [darn] fool. We didn’t even have a horse.”

The cynicism here directed at any professed religious inclination or principle giving real shape to political activity or organization is not without some justification in this fair country of ours. That noted, I forge ahead with my thesis this morning. I suggest that ideals of Christian charity, or *agape*—the highest form of love as found in the New Testament—have played a vital and prominent role in shaping the nature and direction of our civil society. More specifically, I argue that distinctly biblical notions of love have been over the years, and ought to continually be, artfully refashioned into a guiding public principle. The kind of *civic* charity I see emerging from several foundational moments in our democratic life together is a principle conceived of in broad enough terms to be comfortably embraced by large and pluralistic swaths of the republic while still having enough theological and normative heft to lift it up above some purely anodyne notion just being nice which seems all the rage today.

To those skeptical that charity has played, or should play, much of a role in the development of American political life, I say, “I get it.” From Machiavelli’s political realism, to Bacon’s scientific materialism, to Locke’s philosophical liberalism, to Freud’s therapeutic justice, to Nietzsche’s post-modern attack of any moral norms traditionally understood, many of the strongest currents of our intellectual and academic influences together form—whatever their other differences—a most imposing barrier for charity to play any meaningful part in our national civic life. But, it is this very fact that makes the story of this country all the more

interesting. Despite these swarming intellectual forces, various notions of *agape* have proven religiously central *and* politically salient in the rise of America.

In the limited time we have here today, the best I can hope to do to advance this thesis is give you three very redacted accounts of foundational moments where some idea of Christian charity has been key, then offer you a kind of summary account of the complex public principle that seems to emerge from these and other related moments.

Winthrop

Charity is planted first and deeply into the soil of America's political heritage by John Winthrop. An attorney and respected man of means of Suffolk County, England, Winthrop was elected governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company (later Colony) in 1629 and by the spring of 1630 was on board the *Arbella*, sailing to America as part of the "great migration" of English puritans to the New World. After arriving in Massachusetts, Winthrop remained governor until 1634 and was later reelected governor or lieutenant governor twelve more times; he was serving as governor when he died in 1649. Over these two decades of illustrious service to one of early America's most important English colonies, Winthrop settled Boston and skillfully held together the sprawling frontier settlements of Massachusetts in the face of harsh winters, economic downturns, sporadic Indian attacks, unpredictable patterns of migration, and divisive political and theological disputes. He also took a leading role in creating the first confederation of American colonies (the United Colonies of New England). And through all of this, he kept a journal that remains one of the single richest sources of early New England history.

As Winthrop left England on board the *Arbella* in 1630, he offered a lay sermon entitled "A Model of Christian Charity" which spelled out his vision of *public* life in the New World. The speech's sophistication and far reaching impact more than justifies the assessment of a

number of political theorists and intellectual historians who see it as a kind of Ur-text for the American political tradition, and see Winthrop himself as a “resolute statesman [and] a philosopher” standing “at the beginning of our consciousness.”

Winthrop’s speech reveals *agape* as the form of all the Christian virtues, best summarized in the two great commandments to love God with all one’s heart, soul and mind, and to love one’s neighbor as one’s self. Though predicated on pre-modern assumptions of providential hierarchy and inequality, Winthrop’s sermon generates for the Bay Colony a social theory that supports a system of nascent democracy and welfare practices well ahead of the most notable, progressive social thought of the day.

Though easily missed, given the caricature of Puritan life that tends to prevail in our contemporary consciousness, the fact of the matter is that on Winthrop’s watch, and stemming directly from ideals and arguments made in his famous shipboard sermon, considerable care was rendered to the poor. Winthrop is also repeatedly on record for making diligent efforts to maintain relations of peace and affection with those who opposed him personally and the colony in general. The kind of virulent anti-Catholic statements so common throughout England at the time are noticeably absent from Winthrop’s writings. Until the day he died, Roger Williams, one of the most famous internal dissenters of Winthrop’s Boston, spoke hardly anything but fondness and praise for the man. And with respect to early Boston’s religious and racial other, Winthrop’s own journal records a number of amicable exchanges with native Americans, including hosting them in his home overnight and inflicting strict punishment against any colonist guilty of mistreating them. Winthrop’s Massachusetts was also more enlightened than almost all the rest of the colonies in its treatment of African Americans. Massachusetts honored slave marriages before the law, afforded slaves rights to trial by jury, forbade masters from inflicting arbitrary

punishment, and openly admitted African Americans to local congregations on the same basis as white applicants.

Maybe most influential of all was the contribution Winthrop and the Puritans made to America's culture of democracy and law. In the "Model" speech and elsewhere, Winthrop is clear; the work of setting up both civil and ecclesiastical power must be done "by a mutual consent." The Puritans made the state and even the church answerable to the people not vice versa. To that end, one of his first major moves as governor in Massachusetts was to expand the franchise. Furthermore, spurred on by certain Calvinist teachings and the kind of persecution the Puritans experienced from England's fusion of civil and ecclesiastical power, Massachusetts, under Winthrop's leadership, laid out a remarkably well-defined separation of church and state. And, over time, primarily on Winthrop's watch, Massachusetts developed a bicameral, legislative body of rudimentary checks and balances between a larger, popular assembly of deputies and smaller, aristocratic assembly of assistants, anchored by a written body of fundamental liberties, making it one of the most democratic entities in the world at the time. And all of this was wrought in a genuine and dangerous state of nature a good fifty years before Locke would publish his *Second Treatise*.

In the "Model of Christian Charity" speech, Winthrop argues that the foundation of community he and his colleagues would build in the New World should be that of true charity, or Christian love. His vision was that through the power of God's grace, those who have been separated by Adam's fall and man's subsequently sinful and selfish nature would draw together, into a perfect whole. Charity bonds together Christ and his saints into what Winthrop calls the "most perfect of all bodies" (Ibid.). In this way, charity as the love of God (binding the saints to

God) and the love of man (binding the saints to each other) makes possible a tight and warmly knit, covenantal union of Christ and his regenerate followers.

For many, the distinctly Christian roots of this unity are too exclusionary to be very attractive—not much here for the unregenerate. But even solid secularists and non-Christians tend to acknowledge that the result is a rather compelling vision of community. As Winthrop describes it:

All the parts of this body being thus united are made so contiguous in a special relation as they must needs partake of each other's strength and infirmity, joy and sorrow, weal and woe. If one member suffers, all suffer with it, if one be in honor, all rejoice with it... This sensibleness and sympathy of each others conditions will necessarily infuse into each part a native desire and endeavor to strengthen, defend, preserve and comfort each other (*WP* 2:289).

There is also a generally wide appreciation for the way that Winthrop memorializes the thrust of his message in a lasting image he borrows from the book of Matthew.

Winthrop concludes his sermon by declaring that a community so ordered would indeed become a “City Upon a Hill,” an example for all “succeeding plantations,” one worthy of great “praise and glory” (*WP* 2:295). Especially when contrasted with the much-lamented anomie of contemporary society, there is much here to admire. In point of fact, Winthrop's view that Puritan New England could truly be so unique—compassionate and good at home and benignly influential throughout the rest of the world—shaped not only the Boston of his day, but larger American ideals ever since, and maybe never more than in the relatively recent past. As the subtitle of a just-published, Oxford Press biography rightly suggests, Winthrop is “America's Forgotten Founding Father”—an assessment that simply follows in the intellectual wake of

Tocqueville, who first (and best) claimed he could “see the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritan” because the Puritans in general, and Winthrop in particular, exerted a more powerful political influence on America than the traditional founding fathers of 1776 and 1787.

That this vision of a “City Upon a Hill” would seem to fundamentally exclude the non-regenerate—of whom there were more than a few even in early Boston—is not Winthrop’s only problem from a political perspective. The all too real and dark side of Puritanism, its harshness, in some ways comes as a result of, rather than in spite of, Winthrop’s concept of Christian love. The problem here has more to do with hermeneutics than hypocrisy. The very demands of love for God and others fosters—in the hands of Winthrop and others—a hyper-judgmentalism that is ultimately inimical not just to individual well-being, but also to community. As Winthrop warns, should the Massachusetts colony fail to demonstrate their love of God through an exacting commitment to their communal covenants with him, “the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us . . . [and] and we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast Sea to possess it” (*WP* 2:295).

From this we can see how Winthrop’s model eventually implodes, buckling under the weight of its own understanding of what *agape* demands from its citizenry. Because the strict keeping of commandments large and small became critical to demonstrating a love for God, and thus for survival, Puritan New England was infected at times with a grim paranoia and grim intolerance towards those potentially jeopardizing the communal covenant, and thus their individual and collective lives. By this formulation, the most loving thing one could do for one’s neighbor is punishing them into keeping their covenants.

But there is another problem here, one less recognized than the former. Concepts of biblical charity cannot be severed from broader epistemic claims of truth. Because Winthrop fails

to adequately develop a framework for facilitating such claims, the full range of “truths” necessary to support and wisely direct the community’s practices of charity are bereft a stable footing and sure guide. Of course, the scriptures were taken to be God’s word of truth, but by its very nature, the Puritan congregationalist approach to religious understanding and order constantly chafed at the very forms of authority essential for cementing agreement concerning covenant obligations of love toward God and man. Speaking of such covenants in the “Model” speech, Winthrop says, “the Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles” (*WP* 2:294). But nowhere else in the speech does Winthrop carefully reason about, or offer authoritative revelation on, who the “us” is or how final decisions will get adjudicated. Thus, in another way, Winthrop’s model eventually explodes, unable to contain and channel all the competing visions of a godly life of love that sprang up in the extraordinary religious ferment of Puritan America.

Despite the great power and continuing legacy of Winthrop’s founding vision, America needed a different kind of footing for public life.

Jefferson

In the spring of 1776, shortly after Thomas Jefferson arrived in Philadelphia to attend the Continental Congress, local papers published a draft of the Virginia Declaration of Rights—a document penned by George Mason, one of Jefferson’s most important mentors in matters of political theory. Historians are now virtually certain that Jefferson had a copy of Mason’s document in hand as he wrote his original rough draft of the Declaration of Independence. One remarkable aspect of Mason’s text—besides a logic and language strikingly similar to Jefferson’s famous second sentence in the Declaration—is its final line which reads, “and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity, towards each other.” This would seem to suggest a continuing political relevance for some concept of Christian charity

even at the onset of the American Revolution, nearly a century and a half after Winthrop delivered his “Model” sermon. However, Jefferson’s Declaration, which at times appears to follow Mason’s document in virtual lockstep fashion, moves aggressively to extinguish any vestige of an American aspiration to be a model of Christian charity.

In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson resituates American government on a morality of natural equality and concomitant rights that privileges *individual* pursuits of happiness. By asserting that “all men are created equal” Jefferson meant that no man has a natural claim to rule over another. As his original draft makes especially transparent, it is from this natural equality that certain natural, or “inherent,” individual rights follow: “from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness.”

The implications of the Declaration’s philosophical liberalism for Christianity are significant. People are perfectly free, by right, to seek their individual happiness through following the tenets of Christianity, but it is not government’s job to ensure that this happen. Government is simply to establish an environment that lets Christians be Christians, Hindus be Hindus, and atheists be atheists in a peaceful and ordered environment. As Jefferson put it so memorably in his only published book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*,

The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.

Consequently, Jefferson’s Declaration makes no reference to the providential God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but only a solitary reference to a vague, amorphous, nondemanding “nature’s God.” And the “self-evident” truths of this morality are accessible not by revelation but by the scientific light of reason and a universal moral sense working in tandem. Furthermore, Jefferson

devotes a significant amount of his political career to “building a wall of separation between church and State”; the crowning achievement of this effort was the disestablishment of a state church for Virginia, an effort that began just months after passage of the Declaration. For Jefferson, embracing Christianity as a private matter was perhaps okay, but with respect to the public principles of governance that Jefferson fashioned in the Declaration and elsewhere, religion of any kind was to remain irrelevant.

Among other advantages, this broad but thin and barely theistic public morality obviates many of the sources of harshness and social strife inherent in Winthrop’s model of Christian charity and laid the groundwork for the most successful experiment in human self-rule the world has ever seen. It also comfortably comports with what is now largely accepted as Jefferson’s youthful dismissal of Christianity.

For many, this is the complete story of Jefferson and his decided break with America’s Christian past. But, as is often the case, the story is more complicated than this. What is less known about Jefferson is that during the decade before his presidency, several influences transform his private thoughts about Christianity and its public utility.

Sometime around 1793, Jefferson read *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* by Joseph Priestley. As he later said, “I have read [Priestly’s] Corruptions of Christianity, and Early opinions of Jesus, over and over again; and I rest on them . . . as the basis of my own faith.” Priestly argues that the early apostles and Church leaders corrupted Christ’s original teachings with cryptic doctrines like the Trinity, original sin, and the atonement. In doing so, Priestly eliminated much of what Jefferson had long found unacceptably mysterious and irrational in Christianity.

His readings of Priestly, and other influences, including a series of conversations with his

evangelical friend Dr. Benjamin Rush, considerably altered his attitude concerning the validity and significance of certain Christian ideals. As Jefferson later wrote to Rush, “To the corruptions of Christianity, I am indeed opposed; but not the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others.”

Of course, the concept of Christian charity Jefferson comes to admire is one radically refashioned. It is illustrative of the degree to which Jefferson was taken with a biblical concept of love *and* of his dramatic alteration of this same concept that early into his first term as president, Jefferson spent several evenings cutting out only the verses he approved of from multiple copies of the New Testament, which he then pasted onto blank paper, had bound, and titled the “Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth.” Prominent are excerpts from the Sermon the Mount and the compassionate parables of Luke, which, in the table of contents, Jefferson labels as “true benevolence.” Jefferson also includes the passages from Matthew 22 concerning the “two great commandments” of Christianity—“thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart” and “thou shalt love the neighbor as thyself”—which Jefferson labels Jesus’ “general moral precepts.”

Of course, Jefferson takes nothing from the Old Testament, and his redaction of the New Testament only includes passages from the four gospels, with very little from the esoteric book of John. He entirely excises the synoptic accounts of Christ’s mysterious conception and birth, the miracles of his ministry, and, most notably, the atoning and sacrificial nature of his death and later resurrection—cornerstones of traditional Christian theology.

Though never adequately accounted for in the secondary literature, Jefferson’s rationalized version of Christ’s teachings of love strongly shaped his most important public speech, his First Inaugural—one of only two speeches he gave as President. Without dramatic

alteration of his commitment to a rights-based government of limited proportions, Jefferson's address bespeaks a new order of importance for affecting a *national* happiness—a concept he refers to six separate times in the address. And, in each of those references we see that this national happiness is grounded in love, and a religious love at that. The best example of this can be found in what is one of the greatly underappreciated metaphors of American political thought. In the heart of his address, Jefferson speaks of America's "circle of felicities." Discussing this at some length, he explains that one essential arc on this circle of national happiness is a widespread embrace of

benign religion, professed, indeed, and practiced in various forms, yet all of them including honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, *and the love of man; acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence*, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the *happiness* of man here and his greater *happiness* hereafter.

Given Jefferson's youthful attitudes about religion, this statement is quite astonishing. Jefferson now openly congratulates America for its widespread religiosity, especially for the way it promotes happiness by fostering the "love of man" and an "adoring" of God—the central elements of Christian charity. Of course, Jefferson retains some unorthodox views concerning these elements. And, keeping consistent with his firm belief that government should not endorse or promote specific faiths, Jefferson is careful to praise "religion" in general, rather than Christianity. He also makes a more pluralistic reference to "Providence" (which then becomes an impersonal "it") rather than a more traditional, anthropological reference to "God" as the stated object of religious devotion.

It does not even take close examination to see that Jefferson's First Inaugural does not do much to alter the classical liberalism of the Declaration; nor can his "circle of felicity" metaphor be taken to supersede that of a "wall of separation" between church and state, a trope Jefferson employed in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association written roughly ten months *after* the

First Inaugural. Jefferson's speech repeatedly and explicitly affirms Jefferson's early liberalism, the foundation of his separationist philosophy. Still, in a way, the speech does temper Jefferson's earlier liberalism, declaring that a polity based entirely on a purely secular individualism will be an unhappy one indeed. His speech also implies such a polity may also be unstable. Most of what drove Jefferson to tout America's religious sense of love in the First Inaugural was his determined effort to heal the ugly rift between Federalists and Republicans stemming from the especially virulent campaign of 1800. To that end, the speech was remarkably successful, at least in the short term. Benjamin Rush, who worked tirelessly to evangelize Jefferson and persuade him of the political virtues of Christian charity, was positively delighted to discover that in response to the publication of the address in Philadelphia, "Old friends too long separated by party names were reunited."

While Jefferson's enterprise brings a certain warmth to historically cool liberalism, even as it avoids the harsh and imprudent judgmentalism of Winthrop, it must be acknowledged that it is based on a concept of charity that does great violence to charity's traditional Christian roots. Jefferson strips biblical *agape* of those things that would allow it to do what, perhaps, it alone can do for democratic politics—a point most forcefully and eloquently made by Lincoln.

Lincoln

In one of the earliest speeches of his career, the Lyceum address, Lincoln reveals a deep worry over the dangers that human hatred and revenge pose for a democratic rule of law. The antidote he offers is "political religion." While Lincoln's suggestion embodies many of the trappings of traditional religion (sermons, worship, hallowed texts), it is hewn entirely from the "solid quarry of sober reason," recognizes no deity, and is comprehensively earthly in its aim—making obedience to democratic law (especially the Constitution) sacred to the masses (*CW*

I:115). In his Temperance Address, given just a few weeks later, Lincoln argues that all political and moral reform, to be effective, ought to be predicated on true “benevolence and charity” (*CW* I:274). He is explicit, though, that this love, like the “political religion” of his Lyceum address, is entirely subject to the “reign of reason, all hail!” (*CW* I:279). These, and texts written at the end of his life, make clear that from start to finish, Lincoln saw charity and civil religion as political emollients critical to overcoming the democratic hazards of human malice. However, the purely rational concept of charity underpinning his early addresses appears quite different than the theistic version that crowns the civil religion of his later presidential rhetoric.

When Joshua Speed, Lincoln’s best friend from the Illinois days, came to the White House, he happened upon Lincoln intently reading the Bible. Speed announced himself by saying, “Well, if you have recovered from your skepticism, I am sorry to say that I have not.” Lincoln soberly replied, “You are wrong, Speed, take all of this book upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a happier and better man.” David Donald, Lincoln’s most acclaimed academic biographer, concludes that by the time Lincoln was elected to the presidency he had undergone a substantial religious transformation. Lincoln’s wife Mary may provide the most apt assessment of all. Noting that he never became a “technical Christian” by which she meant that he never was baptized, took communion, or formally joined a Church, her view was that he was fundamentally a “religious man by nature . . . [religion] was a kind of poetry in his nature” and that this was especially drawn out in the last years of his life. To deny a bright and distinctly biblical faith and morality in Lincoln during his presidency—as some continue to do—is to ignore more than just the reports of those closest to him during his life, and his best chroniclers; it is to deny the genuineness of Lincoln’s own words in the speech he

himself thought would be regarded “better than anything [he] produced,” his Second Inaugural (CW VIII:356).

In that speech, the oblique image of a real if distant God that sneaks into the end of the Gettysburg Address (but only in some versions of that world masterpiece) is replaced with an utterly central and striking depiction of a Judeo-Christian God exercising full, unfathomable, and even harsh dominion over American politics. “The Almighty has His own purposes” Lincoln announces to both the North and the South, who were respectively praying for their own speedy victory in war (CW 8:332-33). “He gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence [of human slavery] came” Lincoln surmises, echoing the passage from Matthew 18:7 he had just quoted in full: “Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!”

While the deity appealed to in Lincoln’s Second Inaugural sounds much like the punishing force of Providence that looms throughout “A Model of Christian Charity,” there are some important differences. Compared to Winthrop’s political theology, Lincoln’s embodies an even more profound sense of the unfathomability of God. On this point, Lincoln might be said to be more Puritan than the Puritans, for whom Calvin’s teaching that God was beyond comprehension, let alone emulation, was a central tenet of faith.

The most striking example of this comes with the speech’s opening where Lincoln offers “no prediction” concerning final victory in the war. This is quite shocking in light of the fact that victory was so obviously immanent. With Grant’s long-range guns firing from the North, and Sherman’s juggernaut of devastation moving up from the South, Lee’s forces were fatally pinned in at Richmond, and everyone knew it. Given that this embattled war-time president had every political incentive to promise and claim credit for a quick and triumphant end, Lincoln’s

reticence here is undoubtedly connected to what becomes the speech's most recurring motif: the war is running according to the unknowable "providence of God." As Lincoln explains towards the end of the speech, the war will simply last as long as God wants it to, which just may be until

all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.

Lincoln opens with no prediction because he cannot offer one. Overwhelming empirical evidence logically suggesting a particular outcome still remains subject to a God with total power and divine aims beyond human ken.

This conviction of God's active oversight of the war, coupled with a radical uncertainty concerning God's providential purposes, leaves Lincoln unable to blame the South for the start of the war (despite the obvious fact that unprovoked Southern secession triggered the hostilities) or let the South blame the North for the arrant devastation of the war (regardless of the infamously bulldog tactics of Grant and scorched earth marches of Sherman). Speaking of both sides' intentions and aims, Lincoln intones: "all dreaded it—all sought to avoid it . . . both parties deprecated war . . . each looked for an easier triumph."

This theme of seeing both sides resting on remarkably equitable moral footings ("let us judge not lest we be judged" he says of the South to the North), a move grounded in Lincoln's profound doubt concerning the evidence the visible and rational world provides about the moral and spiritual world, culminates in what are arguably the most benevolent and forgiving lines ever written by a successful military leader in the history of the world.

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives 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."

If Lincoln's wide, epistemic uncertainties produce a kind of suspension of judgment critical to the sublime, even Christ-like, compassion of these lines, this peroration also makes it clear that Lincoln's position cannot be described as relativistic or completely agnostic about moral verities. The liberal "truth" of the Gettysburg Address, plus the fraternal advantages of union ("can aliens make treaties easier than friends makes laws?" Lincoln asked in his First Inaugural), still demand a decided "firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right." With a national community renewed in liberty to protect, Lincoln's Second Inaugural interdicts a spirit of hatred and revenge between the parties and triggers an active care for both sides, even as it rallies the North to resolutely prosecute the final stages of the war.

Here it might finally and more precisely be explained how Lincoln's ingenious position rests on a moral fabric Jefferson could not provide. To argue that Lincoln puts the North and the South on morally equitable footings is not to say both sides are beyond blame. Rather, it is to say that Lincoln forestalls one side from blaming the other by blaming them both. By Lincoln's formulation, it is not the war that is evil, slavery is the evil, an unmistakable violation of the Gettysburg and Philadelphia *truth* that "all men are created equal." And while northerners had earlier abolished the practice of slavery, they significantly helped initiate and continue the slave trade. Thus, both sides stand guilty of contributing to the war's cause. Yet, paradoxically, because both sides are to blame for the war, there is a sense in which both sides are blameless before each other.

By teaching that "the war came," not from one side or the other, but as a "true and righteous" judgment from God—part of a line Lincoln borrows from Psalm 19:9—against slavery practiced by one side and abetted by the other, and proceeds under his control, according to his impenetrable ways and unknowable purposes, both sides stand innocent of the war's actual

start and ugly duration. Accordingly, both sides must come to forgive and care for the other. Furthermore, neither side can curse God for a brutal, lengthy war they brought upon themselves by sustaining, for two and half centuries, a form of human bondage “one hour of which was worse,” claimed Fredrick Douglass, “than the ages of the oppression [the founding fathers] rose up in rebellion to oppose.” Lincoln’s core teaching thus amounts to this: both sides must love each other and God, even as the North must relentlessly fight to end the war in order to exterminate the evil of slavery.

The whole ingenious argument here hinges upon a doctrine of “natural rights,” coupled with a mystical and punishing God of love who intervenes in the affairs of men. But it is just this kind of mysterious, personal God of good and evil that, say, Jefferson refuses to insert into the Declaration of Independence, and aggressively excises from his version of the New Testament. Neither of the scriptural linchpins of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural discussed here (Psalm 19:9, Matt. 18:7) is found in the bible Jefferson made as President. This is because Jefferson entirely rejected the Old Testament, and carefully stripped from the New Testament anything that suggested the God of the Bible defied manifestations of modern scientific reason or embodied the violent judgmentalism of Calvinist-Puritanism.

Thankfully, Jefferson’s liberalism helped move America away from the harshness of 1630, and his diluted Christianity helped heal the destabilizing incivilities of 1800. However, absent an openness to the mystery of a living god of justice and mercy—a mystery that unquestionably runs throughout both Old and New Testaments—Jefferson’s particular form of Christian liberalism would likely have been impotent in the face of the overpowering spirit of mutual revenge lurking in 1865. Mollifying the animosities between indignant Federalists and insensitive Republicans in 1800 is hardly to be compared with neutralizing the acids boiling

between grieving families and raging regional leaders in 1865. Jefferson's model of charity was able to inspire the social and political congeniality needed in his day, but there is little reason to suspect it could have dissolved the bloody hatred of civil war. Such forgiveness and charitable reconciliation seems, rather of necessity, to depend upon a power beyond human nature and a morality beyond modern reason—a power Jefferson assiduously refused to admit.

Lincoln's mature political thought firmly rested on two solid truth claims about humanity. The first is that all humans are free to determine the direction of their individual lives because they are natural equals with one another. Lincoln attested to the truth of this throughout his career and fought tooth and nail to ensure that the country became ever more dedicated to such a truth. The second truth—something Lincoln embraced later—is that all humans are “under God,” specifically the God of the Bible who directs the affairs of men, and who commands love for Himself and other human beings. In the concrete realities of civic life, these two truths may often seem to stand in conflict with one another. Where classical liberal thought moves to separate religion and political power and in general keep the role of government minimal in the lives of naturally free beings, *agape* would seem to inflame every aspect of one's life—including one's political life—with a drive to acknowledge and lovingly obey God and to show forth active and heartfelt concern for all. And yet, on closer examination there may be a deeper harmony and positively reinforcing relationship between these truths, especially when they are blended together by Lincoln's deft touch into something like civic charity—where the harder, sectarian and solely Christian edges of *agape* are softened in substance and rhetoric and meshed with a natural rights doctrine of inherent human liberty.

It is only some form of charity throughout the community that makes the very existence of a free people possible, starting with the deep care required to raise young and vulnerable life

to a life capable of responsible democratic citizenship. Affectionate ties between citizens—ties which sometimes require the combined effect of a commanding transcendent power and a clear sense of the neediness of all humans in order to break through callousness hatred—stand as important bulwarks against the tyrannical and anarchic enemies of natural right. While surely regretful, in some sense, of needing to rely on market economies and constitutional mechanisms of government which presume a spirit of faction and self-interest, any truly biblically inspired sense of charity would have a keen consciousness of the severe and universal human fallibility that demands such institutions of liberty even as it beckons us to live more generously than those institutions alone require. Finally, charity tempers, rather than expands, a kind of arrogant world imperialism to which, say, a model of natural liberty may ironically be tempted.

An unimpeachable recommendation of Lincoln’s unique synthesis of faith-based love and natural liberty culminating in what we might call “a model of civic charity” would require a thorough, convincing proof of the truths of the Declaration and the Bible. No such proofs can be offered here, nor will they be offered anywhere anytime soon, in a way fully convincing to everyone. Of course, the same could be said of proofs that would wholly convince all of the falseness of these claims. So, what if, as Lincoln came to believe, they are both true? What if it is true that man is by nature entitled to be free *and* there is a God in heaven who rules the earth and demands that humans love him and love each other? If these things are both true, what should our politics look like?

Since Machiavelli, ascendant voices in political philosophy have simply assumed that *agape* is either ethically non-biding, or should play little to no role in politics except to quietly support a liberal order that now understands itself in purely secular terms. But we might consider the loss to this country had Lincoln felt beholden to offer his Second Inaugural by the strictures

of so much modern political theory. Lincoln and his thought still matter today because virtually all Americans act and speak in their daily lives as if his first truth claim concerning natural liberty is true, and vast numbers of Americans still accept some version of the second truth claim concerning Christian charity on faith. These two truths supply different instincts that have become permanent elements in our politics. When blended together, they defy strict party label, which does much to explain Lincoln's continuing cross-ideological appeal and broad cultural influence. Singularly committed to robust versions of both truth claims, Lincoln developed a political vision and rhetoric well suited to steer America toward a model of civic charity. Such a model combines Winthropian and Jeffersonian ideals into a dynamic equilibrium supported by an intellectual framework that recognizes the inherent partiality of any political-historic commitment of inescapably biased human beings, even as it cautiously relies on history, reason and revelation to guide effective political action in the present. Its *modern*-like embrace of natural liberty and *ancient*-like faith in a God of love who commands love are made prudent by the lessons of human experience and peacefully lubricated by a *postmodern*-like suspension of judgment of about who is fully moral and what is fully right.

Where some will insist that Lincoln's philosophy is an illogical mix of contradictory notions, others will recognize in it the manifestation of a gifted intellectual and moral iridescence, a Tocquevillian knack for uniting the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty in a way where neither spirit destroys but instead supports the other.

Unlike Jefferson's attempt at an instauration of Christianity by striking out the divine and original core of that tradition's theology, Lincoln's instauration of America itself sought a careful preservation of this country's liberal core but could do so only by explicitly ensconcing it in the Christian charity of its earliest Puritan traditions, a charity which I have tried to show gave

significant birth and sustaining influence to that liberal core. Lincoln remade America entirely out of old cloth but produced a garment with the luster and strength of something brand new. With its compassion and wisdom, Lincoln's sacred effort got us through the Union's most desperate hour. Where it was rejected after that hour, America incurred its longest and bitterest scars. Even today, there is strong evidence that it continues to draw America together in a vigorous and needed more than ever devotion to liberty and a reverential spirit of mutual concern. With sagacious and moving art, it refuses to let us forget that temporal and eternal bonds of affection may just be the bonds that make us free.