Letter: Ida M. Tarbell to Bishop John H. Vincent, February 9, 1899

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Feb. 9, 1899.

My dear Bishop Vincent:

Of course I will help you all I can; and I shall be very proud to do so. I have selected hastily, for I know you must have this material at once, a few expressions of Mr. Lincoln which seem to me to show his religious feelings most perfectly.

In the first place, it is worth while noting, I think that Lincoln was, in his boyhood, thoroughly grounded in the Bible. It is one of the very few books which he knew almost by heart. I have made many notes on the phrases and sentences in his public speeches and letters which are framed on a biblical model. He constantly is giving his sentences the turn of some familiar expression of the Scriptures. It shows how thoroughly imbued he must have become with them in his youth. His parents were thoroughly religious. After he left home at about 21 years of age, he had no religious associations so far as I can make out, for a number of years. In this time, he fell in with a company of men who were pronounced, even scoffing, skeptics. They were men of some education, who had been influenced by Paine's "Age of Reason, Volney's "Ruins" and translations from Voltaire. Mr. Herndon claims that Lincoln became an atheist in this period. I think that there is no proof of this. But there is no doubt that he lost his faith in the Christian dogma. Early in the 40's, after his marriage, he became a church-goer. There is nothing, however, in his letters or speeches until 1851 that shows how he felt on religious matters. In that year he wrote a letter to his step-
brother concerning his father, a quotation from which I enclose (No. 1). During the period of the anti-slavery agitation in Illinois, from 1850 up to 1860, there is nothing in his letters and speeches to show his feeling on the subject, although there are evidences of his reverence for the Christian church. It was after his election, when he began to feel his fearful responsibility, that we have the first expression of his dependence upon a Divine Being. I enclose a paragraph (No. 2) cut from an article which I published in McClure's Magazine for December, which shows that he was seeking help in his difficulty by prayer. The speech that he made before leaving Springfield for Washington in February 1861 is worth attention. It is used in the December article (No. 3). The addresses to Congress and all his state papers for the first year after his inauguration contain evidences of his belief that the nation was under the guidance of God. It is not, however, until the Spring of 1862, after the death of his boy Willie, that there is any evidence that he was making a personal test of religion. I am enclosing the advance sheets of an article in McClure's Magazine for March in which I touch slightly upon this point. All through 1862 and the first part of 1863, when the Union cause was in such sore straits, there are many evidences of Lincoln's reliance upon God or upon a Divine Power, and of his seeking direction in prayer. I enclose (No. 4) a bit of testimony from ex-Senator J. F. Wilson. It shows how Lincoln felt in the very darkest part of McClellan's Peninsula campaign. No. 5 is a copy of a memo-
Notice that this was written just after the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was issued and at a time when everybody was disheartened and discouraged. No. 6 is an interview given me by the Rev. Byron Sunderland of Washington. No doubt you know him. The interview occurred two or three days before the end of 1862, when people were fearing that Mr. Lincoln would not keep his promise and issue the Emancipation Proclamation. No. 7 is another proof that in every critical event the President prayed. There is a more generally known case, very similar to this, which occurred at the time that he announced to his Cabinet that he should issue an Emancipation Proclamation. He then said, "I promised my Maker to do this if we should have a victory, and I mean to keep my promise."

I do not know that these will be of any particular value to you. They are, however, as I said, the expressions which to my mind best illustrate Mr. Lincoln's religious feeling. No doubt you have heard stories of his conversion. Several have recently gone the rounds of the newspapers. I think that no reliance can be placed upon them. I have taken great care to investigate each that has come to my attention, and I would not be willing to give them a place in any of my work. So far as I know there is no expression in Mr. Lincoln's letters or speeches proving that he accepted the Christian dogma. As near as I can make it out, he felt that in some way a Divine Being holds the balance of power in the universe, and that, in the long run, good results from all things. Convinced of this he worked patiently and trust-
fully through the Civil War. I think he felt that his business was to do the best he could, and that God's business was to take care of the result. I do not believe that he had any creed, simply a profound faith.

I hope, my dear Bishop Vincent, that you can make something out of this. You are good enough to say that you will give me credit. That is quite unnecessary. I shall be only too well satisfied if you can make any use of what I send.

I am faithfully yours,

The Reverend
Bishop John H. Vincent.