

agent to the Barbary regencies, hit on a new strategy: regime change. Eaton met Hamet, Yusuf's deposed brother, in Egypt, and, with a few Marines and several hundred mercenaries, marched across the desert toward Tripoli. Faced with threats of mutiny and desertion (some from Hamet himself) and shortages of food and water, the force captured the coastal city of Derne in April 1805 and asked for help in negotiating the last stretch to Tripoli. Eaton intended to install Hamet on the throne and inflict a "death blow to the Barbary system." Any claim of mission accomplished, however, was premature.

The American consul general in Algiers, Tobias Lear, perhaps anticipating the "you break it, you own it" doctrine of Colin Powell, put his foot down. If the Marines installed Hamet as pasha in Tripoli, Lear argued, they would be saddled with propping up an unpopular and incapable ruler.

Instead, to secure peace, Lear agreed to pay a ransom of \$60,000 for the *Philadelphia's* crew and make a "gift" of about \$6,000 to Yusuf.

In the end, despite their extraordinary march (which is celebrated in the Marine Hymn), Hamet, along with Eaton and his Marines, were evacuated from Derne, leaving Hamet's allies in the lurch. Despite four years of war, 10 years of diplomatic negotiations, and millions of dollars in protection money, the Barbary pirates lived to rob again. A second war would be fought before Commander Stephen Decatur shelled Algiers into submission and quelled the Barbary threat—in 1816.

HISTORY

A Lincoln for Every Altar

THE SOURCE: "Lincoln and the Will of God" by Andrew Ferguson, in *First Things*, March 2008.

A FAMED 19TH-CENTURY mystic reported that President Abraham Lincoln levitated at a séance in Georgetown. Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy believed that the martyred president became a proponent of Divine Healing even before she discovered it. A California guru announced that the 16th president had once been a yogi in the Himalayas. Cardinal George Mundelein of Chicago identified the Great Emancipator as a closet Catholic. Episcopalians, Baptists, and Presbyterians (whose pews he occasionally warmed) have also claimed him as one of their own, as have atheists and Ethical Culturalists.

There has been an especially great hunger to believe that the martyred president was a devout and orthodox Christian, writes Andrew Ferguson, senior editor of *The Weekly Standard* and author of *Land of Lincoln: Adventures in Abe's America* (2007). Lincoln's secretary wrote that he "talked always of Christ, his cross, his atonement." A clergyman confirmed the secretary's account and added an enticing detail: Lincoln's last words to his wife had been, "We will visit the Holy Land and see those places hallowed by the footsteps of the Savior." But Honest Abe never

joined a church, and his purported "last words" about Jerusalem were delivered as he watched a trashy play at a slightly disreputable theater on Good Friday.

Simultaneously approachable yet remote, Lincoln had a personal magnetism that drew people to him, but his interior remained hidden, Ferguson writes. He made statements that seemed to reveal him as both a believer and a skeptic.

His law partner, William Herndon, said that Lincoln's response to the majesty of Niagara Falls was a deflating "Where in the world did all that water come from?" But in a note found after his death, Lincoln mused that he saw in the falls some immensity that human reason can't explain. According to the freethinker Herndon, Mary Lincoln, the president's widow, said he had "no hope and no faith," and was a "religious man" but not a "technical Christian."

Lincoln developed his own civil religion, Ferguson believes. In another note found after his death, the agonized president grappled to understand why the carnage of the Civil War continued when God "could give the final victory to either side any day." Lincoln's eventual answer, delivered at Gettysburg in 1863 and in his second inaugural address, was that the Union embodied the ideals of human liberty and equality, and the war was a test of whether these principles, as Ferguson puts it, "could be safely entrusted to human institutions."

We will never know for sure whether Lincoln believed in Jesus, his resurrection, the forgiveness of sins, or biblical truth, Ferguson concludes. But

the uncertainty has made Lincoln “our common property,” appealing to believers and skeptics alike. Yet it also means something “definable and concrete.” Lincoln

believed that America was the “carrier of a precious cargo.” We assent to Lincoln’s creed, Ferguson says, “when we think of ourselves as Americans.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Joke Morality

THE SOURCE: “What Is Offensive About Offensive Jokes?” by Jeanette Bicknell, in *Philosophy Today*, Winter 2007.

IT’S PERFECTLY OK TO TELL lawyer jokes, musician jokes, or almost any joke about a rich guy. But jokes about race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or physical or cognitive ability are considered morally offensive. Why?

Philosophers have advanced two theories. “Cognitivists” say that jokes made at the expense of minority groups carry the suggestion that the jokester, deep down, believes them. “Consequentialists” argue that certain jests are morally suspect because they cause harm, or are likely to. But neither theory adequately explains what’s offensive, argues Jeanette Bicknell, a philosopher at Carleton University, in Ottawa. It is quite possible, she suggests, to tell a joke without embracing it as a truth—nobody believes that an elephant actually walked into a bar—but we suspend disbelief for the sake of a laugh. And almost *any* joke might cause harm to someone, sometime.

The main determinant of

whether a gibe is morally offensive is the “vulnerability of the group or individual joked about,” Bicknell argues. The moral fault lies in exploiting vulnerability for the sake of humor.

But vulnerability depends on context and time. Members of marginalized groups can make sport of themselves without condemnation, Bicknell says. Such humor can even have a salutary effect, such as encouraging group solidarity or exploring identity. After Bicknell’s article was published, for example, presidential hopeful Barack Obama was asked during a debate whether he agreed with author Toni Morrison’s characterization of former president Bill Clinton as “our first black president.” Obama said he would have to investigate “Bill’s dancing abilities” before he could

Humor ages poorly. The Museum of Humour in Montreal houses many “cringe-making” examples.

judge whether he was “a brother.” The audience cracked up, but it would have been shocked had Clinton made a similar jest about Obama.

Humor ages poorly, Bicknell observes. The Museum of Humour in Montreal preserves comedy routines from the earliest days of movies to the present. Some jokes are still funny, Bicknell writes, but “much of the remainder is cringe-making.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The War Against Luck

THE SOURCE: “Life, Chance, and Life Chances” by Lorraine Daston, in *Daedalus*, Winter 2008.

HUMAN BEINGS HAVE ALWAYS been uneasily aware of the wheel of fortune that sends both good luck and bad breaks their way, but they haven’t always seen it in the same light. Only recently has anybody even dreamed of stopping it.

Through most of human history, luck was not seen as purely arbitrary, notes Lorraine Daston, a director of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. The wheel-spinning goddess Fortuna, for example, stood lower in Rome’s heavenly moral order than Justitia, the goddess of justice. Lives were ordered by the gods and gov-