

Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky, 1830-1880

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Review

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Harlow, Luke *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky, 1830-1880*. Cambridge University Press, \$90.00 ISBN 9781107000896

The Failure of Antislavery and the Creation of a Confederate Identity in Kentucky

As a border state during the antebellum and Civil War period, Kentucky provides a unique look at issues related to slavery and freedom in the nineteenth century. Luke E. Harlow, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, examines the influence of conservative evangelical religion on the issues of slavery, emancipation and abolition, as well as the post-war change in Kentuckians' minds related to the Confederacy. By delving into the religious roots of both proslavery and antislavery adherents, Harlow reveals how the two opposite sides were united in racist theology by the post-war period.

Harlow identifies Kentucky as "the center of the nineteenth-century American debate over race, slavery and abolition." (p. 2) With abolitionists, black and white, across the Ohio River border, Kentuckians constantly faced challenges to refine and improve their defense of slavery. Using both private and public discourse by clergy and politicians, Harlow succinctly outlines evangelical religions' attacks on immediate abolition, defense of colonization and gradual emancipation, through the growing fear of abolitionist threat to the safety and security of the state's white citizens. The work focuses on the three largest evangelical denominations in Kentucky, and explores the evolving theology of Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians in regards to the question of the legitimacy of slavery in a Christian context.

One of the strengths of the work is the in-depth research and presentation of the writings of religious clergy, lay leaders, and politicians throughout the period. Several key figures in the slavery debate are regarded at length including well-known men such as Robert J. Breckinridge and John G. Fee, but also

important religious voices from the era like Stuart Robinson and James M. Pendleton. The back and forth debate that took place in open forums, pamphlets, and on the pages of various religious newspapers illuminates the character of the discussion as well as the changing meaning of the issues over time. Early in the antebellum period, proslavery clergy argued the biblical mandate for slavery despite the flawed system that developed in the United States. Antislavery men like Fee, approached the scripture from a less literalist interpretation and claimed that the spirit of scripture denounced the practice even without a specific condemnation.

Within Kentucky antislavery forces were divided between gradual emancipationists and abolitionists. It was the emancipationists who faced the least suspicion early in the antebellum period as their emphasis on ending slavery as a means to improve the white race, economically and socially, most closely aligned with the racial attitudes of proslavery Kentuckians. With the widespread failure of antislavery candidates in the 1849 state elections, Kentucky reached a turning point as white citizens shifted from antislavery schemes of any sort. Harlow writes that this is when Kentuckians with evangelical, white-supremacy, and anti-abolitionism views turned from gradual emancipation toward a proslavery stance. The unification of race and religion empowered conservatives in the state toward a proslavery agenda that fueled Kentuckians to preserve slavery within the state and to fight the northern abolitionist threat.

With the coming of the Civil War, Kentuckians fought to hold a position of neutrality. According to Harlow, the issues stirred by the war created conflict within the evangelical denominations as some ministers viewed the church as a nonsecular entity, while others believed that the political issues of the day could not be ignored from the pulpit. After the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, whites in Kentucky saw the war move from a fight for the Union to a war against slavery, and the result was a further move away from a political theology that supported the Union at all costs and a loss of neutrality. White Kentuckians who had formerly believed in a gradual emancipation and ending of slavery, joined their proslavery brethren in support of white racial supremacy. Believing that African Americans were incapable of freedom and fearing the involvement of northern missionaries as an attack on their southern beliefs, white Kentuckians turned their support away from the Union cause as it meant support for immediate emancipation. The primacy of race, combined with a religious belief in the biblical sanction in favor of slavery no matter what the state alleged, drew

Kentuckians toward the Confederate cause even as the war drew to a close. The result was that after the war Kentuckians embraced the Confederate religion of states' rights and white supremacy, and a post-war Kentucky that looked to ex-Confederate leadership. The war accomplished what could not be done before 1861 - it created a Confederate political hegemony that lasted to the end of the nineteenth century.

Harlow's work provides a needed look at the religious motivations and the evolution of theology and religious life of white Kentuckians in the nineteenth century regarding slavery and the Civil War. The final chapter of the book includes a brief look at the creation of African-American churches in the state and the challenge they posed to white Kentuckians' belief in the spiritual inferiority of their black brethren. While a comprehensive look at the publications, private writings, and speeches of Kentucky's evangelical religious leaders, one does question what the lay person in the pew thought of such matters. Harlow does indicate that church attendance remained strong, and in some cases grew, in the various southern denominations in the state, and that is a possible indication of acceptance of their leaders' opinions. A further study of Kentucky's religious history in this period is needed to better understand the issues at the lay level, but Harlow's work is a welcome addition to Kentucky history, religious history, and the literature on the issues of race and slavery in the nineteenth century.

Andrea S. Watkins is an Associate Professor of History at Northern Kentucky University. She is the co-author of Kentucky Rising: Democracy, Slavery, and Culture from the Early Republic to the Civil War with James A. Ramage, and is currently researching slavery in antebellum Kentucky.