

The Religious Life Of Robert E. Lee

A. James Fuller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Fuller, A. James (2017) "The Religious Life Of Robert E. Lee," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 19 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.4.25

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss4/20>

Review

Fuller, A. James

Fall 2017

Cox, R. David *The Religious Life of Robert E. Lee*. Eerdmans, \$26.00 ISBN 802874827

At a time when Confederate memorials to him are being removed from public spaces, Robert E. Lee's memory continues to be controversial. In the heated debates over statues of him, much of the myth of Lee created by the Lost Cause still resonates, including his Christianity. Every historian and biographer has made reference to the general's faith and some writers still venerate him as the quintessential Christian gentleman or even the Christ-like part of a Lost Cause "trinity" that also includes Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis. In his 2017 book, *The Religious Life of Robert E. Lee*, R. David Cox rejects the marble man too often portrayed in popular history and memory in favor of introducing his readers to the real Lee, a man of faith whose religion did indeed shape his life and character. But rather than a stone statue of a saint or the hypocrisy of a Christian slaveholder, Cox reveals a Christian soldier who struggled with his faith as he made his spiritual journey as an evangelical Episcopalian in 19th century Virginia. In a deeply-researched book that grounds its subject in the context of the past, Cox reminds us that the measured tones and nuance of historical scholarship remain the necessary antidote to the passions of current politics and the corrective to mythology. Historically examining Lee's religious beliefs helps us understand the man and the contradictions and paradoxes of his life.

Cox, an Episcopal priest who served as rector at the R.E. Lee Memorial Episcopal Church in Lexington, Virginia before becoming a history professor at Southern Virginia University, looks at his subject with both a critical and contextual eye. His unique position allows him to have empathy with Lee's beliefs and struggles in the faith even as he is able to judge him historically. Basing his interpretation on deep archival research, Cox traces the roots of Lee's religion, drawing especially on personal letters. He studies the family's long practice within the Anglican tradition and shows how his subject was raised in a

Christian home formed by parents that emphasized different aspects of the faith. Cox argues that Lee's Christianity shaped his character, serving as the foundation of his personal honor, his understanding of his position as a Virginia patrician, and his duties as a soldier. This leads to a generally sympathetic view of Lee, as it effectively explains the greatest paradoxes of his life. But one wonders, for example, whether or not the ethics of honor played more of a role than Cox shows. The author does not fall into the trap of avoiding Lee's slaveholding and views on race, a problem that plagued previous writers who saw him sympathetically. Instead, Cox directly takes on the issue and casts Lee's views in the context of the time, judging him in ways that allows room for both racism and paternalism, individual respect paid to people of color, and the mistreatment of slaves.

Family and the home are central to Cox's interpretation of Lee's religion. Like many others in the nineteenth century, Lee understood his faith in ways that intertwined religion with family. This informed his own childhood, his marriage, and his views of slavery. The reader learns how the Christian faith, even within the same Episcopal Church, allowed different individuals to emphasize different ideas and have different experiences and understandings of spiritual matters. One example is how Lee and his wife differed in their experience, as she underwent an evangelical conversion and was more emotional while he had no such crisis moment and took a more rational approach to his beliefs. Lee was devout and regularly attended church services. But more important than his outward practice was his inward character, as he was a man shaped by his faith as it informed his understanding of family, class, race, gender, patriotism, and duty. Cox expertly shows how his paternalism mixed with Lee's Christian doctrines, creating a complex character who simultaneously held to paradoxical ideas that often seemed contradictory.

In addition to a full treatment of race and slavery, in which he shows that Lee's views were typical for his time, Cox focuses on two incidents that demonstrated the general's religious life. The first came when Lee, an American patriot who had served with distinction and fulfilled his duty in the U.S. Army for many long years, chose to decline command of the military forces being mustered to put down the rebellion. Instead, he resigned and joined the Confederacy, a choice that reflected both the context of loyalty to the state rather than the nation and his religious beliefs. Even though he opposed secession and loved the United States, he believed it was his duty, his calling, to stand with the state Virginia rather than with the country. The second incident came after the

war, when Lee accepted the presidency of Washington College and promoted reconciliation between the North and the South. For Cox, Lee rose to the level of personal greatness in the post-war period, as he saved the college, the local church, and the South itself. Unable to overcome his personal views and context on matters of race, Lee did not lead the way toward progress in the relationship between blacks and whites. But his work as an educator, parishioner, and Confederate hero all reflected how he accepted the new reality of defeat and faced it with resignation and determination, both of which were born of his Christian faith. Although he self-servingly thought he had always tried to do the right thing, Lee tried to accept God's will in changing circumstances, even when it meant that his efforts proved to be in vain. In 1861, he believed that God called him to fight for the Confederacy. In 1865, he thought that God wanted him to lead the way toward reconciliation. Only when seen in light of Lee's faith and the context of his life do such actions make sense. Cox does a great service in clearly explaining Lee's complex Christianity and his book should be read by both scholars and general readers alike. Such insightful clarity is refreshing in a time when minds are divided by bitter debate over the often-distorted memories of a controversial figure who was later memorialized in statues and enlisted in the ranks of those fighting the culture wars and the political battles of the early twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries.

A. James Fuller, Ph.D., is professor of history at the University of Indianapolis. Among his many publications are six books, including Chaplain to the Confederacy: Basil Manly and Baptist Life in the Old South; The Election of 1860 Reconsidered; and Oliver P. Morton and the Politics of the Civil War and Reconstruction.