Burnidge, Cara Lea*. A Peaceful Conquest: Woodrow Wilson, Religion, and the New World Order.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Reviewed by Devin C. Manzullo-Thomas, (PhD Candidate, Department of History, Temple University).

Over the last decade or so, the field of American diplomatic history has experienced a religious turn. Scholars have come to believe that those ideas, actions, and institutions understood as "religious" played a critical role in shaping the United States' political engagement with other nations. Their work has placed religion alongside economics, national security, race, and gender as a category of analysis. Established scholars such as Andrew Preston and Ray Haberski Jr., as well as younger scholars such as Mark Edwards, Michael Thompson, Emily Conroy-Krutz, Gene Zubovich, Lauren Turek, and others, have led the way in this still-emerging but much-needed turn. Their scholarship has demonstrated how taking religion seriously can re-shape the way we understand familiar figures, events, and themes within diplomatic history.

Cara Burnidge's fascinating *A Peaceful Conquest* contributes meaningfully to this historiographical trajectory. In the book, Burnidge centralizes a well-known historical actor—Woodrow Wilson—and reinterprets his significance through the lens of American religion. Her conclusions are important. Since the time of his presidency and for many decades since, Wilson and his variety of American internationalism have been understood as idealistic and, more importantly, logically inconsistent. In the wake of World War I's then-unprecedented devastation, Wilson's prewar vision to make the world anew seemed overly optimistic, unrealistic, even naïve. Similarly, his wartime declaration to "make the world safe for democracy" *by force* appeared irreconcilable. Burnidge claims that evaluating Wilson in terms of his "idealism" and "inconsistency"—words she understands as pejorative—overlooks the *religious* dimension of his vision, the *consistency* of that vision at the time, and the important historical *changes* that occurred within Wilson's own segment of American Christianity in the years after his presidency that ultimately reformulated that vision. In other words, Burnidge challenges readers to re-examine Wilson, Wilsonians, and Wilsonian internationalism within the particular contexts of early twentieth century American Protestant evangelicalism, social Christianity, and intrareligious conflict. Doing so, she concludes, changes the way we understand Wilson.

Burnidge's narrative begins in the Reconstruction-era U.S. South in which Wilson came of age. She ably locates Wilson's religious identity within a Presbyterianism shaped by Southern evangelical culture, and concludes that he learned from this culture a vision of social order that expected white men to earn an education and apply themselves in service to "the least" within society. This Christian paternalism, Burnidge shows, decisively shaped Wilson's public and political persona, including his presidency.

One of the book's best chapters centers on that two-term presidency and the influence of social Christianity on Wilson's political imagination. Burnidge skillfully reconstructs this version of American Protestantism, which dominated religious life in the early decades of

the twentieth century. Social Christianity was almost exclusively populated by white Protestants; these Christians believed they offered the best cures to what they perceived as the nation's "ills": problems associated with women, blacks, immigrants, and laborers. Buoyed by an optimism about human nature as essentially good and about inevitable progress as the telos of human history, these white Protestant reformers set about to remake the social order, at home and abroad, in their image. Their approach to domestic and global political affairs—applying a particular understanding of (white, male, Protestant) Christianity to both the individual and social spheres—was inherently paternalistic, because they saw themselves and their faith as the only viable solution to the world's problems.

By sketching out this context, Burnidge can then demonstrate how profoundly Wilson's particular definitions of equality, service, and democracy—definitions that defined his particular brand of internationalism—were drawn from this tradition of social Christianity. Wilson insisted that the United States "served" other nations, and that the best form of democracy necessarily intertwined with Christianity to remake the world. Like the social Christians who wanted to remake the world in their image, Wilson wanted to recast the global political order in his own white, male, Protestant image. Thus within this historical and religious context, Wilson's ideas did not seem hopelessly idealistic or internally inconsistent at all. Rather they were, as Burnidge convincingly argues, "the culmination of a specific white middle-class American Protestant movement" (6).

But Wilson, Burnidge further claims, was never narrowly sectarian. Religion functioned as one of many political concerns but received no special status. That fact shone through in Wilson's decision not to invoke any specific religious language in the Treaty of Versailles or at the Paris Peace Conference. Most Americans expressed discontent with Wilson in this regard, including many of his most ardent Christian supporters. Tensions continued to escalate during the debate over the League of Nations. Burnidge shows how this debate became an arena in which other politicians of Wilson's era, Democrat and Republican alike, articulated "their own ideological convictions about God's order, nationalism, and millennial expectation" (6). Prior to these debates, white Protestantism had functioned as a consensus movement despite its internal divisions and disagreements. But in the wake of the League battle, clear cleavages emerged. One cabal of Protestants continued to reflect the ideal of social Christianity, seeking to link the state with their understanding of religion's social mandate. By contrast, a second segment adopted an anti-statist posture and insisted "that Christian identity belonged outside the secular endeavors of the state and inside the religious mission of the church" (130). This "great war" within the Protestant establishment, sparked at least in part by the battle over Wilson's League of Nations, resulted in the movement's fragmentation into "modernist" and "fundamentalist" camps.

The resultant change in America's religious landscape paralleled changes in its political and social landscape: the isolationism of Wilson's Republican presidential successor, Warren G. Harding; the nativism of a resurgent Ku Klux Klan; the economic and moral uncertainty of the Great Depression; and more. As a result, Wilson's heirs were forced to

reformulate the public presentation of their internationalism. It transitioned from an explicit effort to "Christianize" the globe into a more secularized attempt to forge a "brotherhood of mankind" (133). Similarly, it moved from a project rooted in white Protestant identity into an expression of American pluralism, welcoming Catholics and Jews into its vision of world order. By World War II, it discarded its explicitly Christian motivation and adopted the more generic term "idealism." Over time this notion of Wilsonian "idealism" would become tainted with derogatory connotation, especially as modernist Christianity embraced the "Christian realism" of Reinhold Niebuhr. Yet at the time, the secular "idealism" was more appealing than the paternalistic religiosity that originally motivated Wilson. As Burnidge concludes, Wilson's heirs articulated a political vision "based upon Wilsonianism but not a message espoused by Wilson himself" (150).

Burnidge's book, as previously indicated, meaningfully contributes to the recent religious turn within diplomatic history. It also fits into at least two other historiographical traditions. The first is, quite obviously, the body of scholarship on Woodrow Wilson. *A Peaceful Conquest* is not the first effort to understand Wilson's faith and its influence on his politics. But in carefully historicizing its central actor, Burnidge's book offers fresh insights. She fully understands the internal complexities of social Christianity: its progressive vision of human history alongside its rigid assumptions about the natural order, its optimism about human nature alongside its support for segregation and scientific racism. These careful reconstructions of the past enable her to situate Wilson and Wilsonian internationalism in new and interesting ways. She conclusively shows that we cannot fully understand this moment in American presidential and diplomatic history without attending to its religious dimensions.

The second historiographical tradition to which Burnidge contributes is the study of that community of religious reformers to which Wilson belonged—a group that Burnidge calls "social" and later "modernist" Christians. Over the last decade or so, scholars of American religious history have sought to show how profoundly these religious actors shaped American politics, business, and culture in the early twentieth century. They have done so because this historical reality is sometimes obscured by the movement's numerical decline and loss of influence by the late twentieth century. The work of historians such as David Hollinger, Margaret Bendroth, Susan Curtis, Matthew Hedestrom, and Matthew Bowman, among others, has demonstrated the profound influence of these social/modernist Christians. Burnidge also ably contributes to this historiographical tradition. She showcases how social Christianity profoundly shaped Wilson's political imagination if not always his particular policies. Moreover, she makes clear that battles over the League of Nations at least partly contributed to the fragmenting of American Protestantism into demarcated "conservative" and "liberal" camps.

But *A Peaceful Conquest* also suggests the limits of this historiographical tradition. Scholars became interested in social/modernist Christians after a boom in historical scholarship on their religious counterparts, conservative fundamentalist and evangelical Christians, in the 1980s and 1990s. The historians who recovered the history of social/liberal Christians felt that too much attention had been paid to conservatives; the

time had come, they said, to retrieve the importance of the left flank of Protestant Christianity. Now, about a decade into that revisionist turn, it makes sense to ask if we have started to lose sight of the importance of fundamentalists and evangelicals. Burnidge's book provides a perhaps unintentional but nevertheless potent indication that we have, given how she traces the evolving trajectory of Wilson's liberal Protestant heirs but not his conservative evangelical detractors. To what extent did Christian fundamentalist ideas such as premillennial dispensationalism (the idea that Christ would descend from Heaven to earth and culminate world history) shape new, postwar American visions of world order, such as isolationism? Burnidge hints at but does not fully explore such questions, and rightly so; they are outside the scope of her study. Nevertheless her work reminds us that, even as we continue to learn more about how social/modernist Christians influenced American domestic politics and foreign relations in the 1910s and 1920s, we also need to know about how evangelical and fundamentalist beliefs and actions shaped those same spheres during those same decades. Indeed, given the sudden rise of the Religious Right in the 1980s and 1990s and the eighty-one percent of white evangelicals that lifted Donald Trump to office in 2016, we desperately need to understand the long history of conservative religion's influence on American politics, diplomacy, and foreign relations.

Nevertheless this concern about the direction of diplomatic history's religious turn should not distract from the value of *A Peaceful Conquest*. This important book demonstrates "how American religion and foreign relations were constituted between the Civil War and World War II" (5). Moreover, by applying this Venn diagram of religion and diplomacy to the presidency and post-presidency of Woodrow Wilson, this book provides a new and compelling way to read and understand the nation's twenty-eighth president and his brand of internationalism. In offering this fresh perspective, Burnidge has accomplished a significant feat.