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Introduction by Dustin Walcher, Southern Oregon
University

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Introduction by Dustin Walcher, Southern Oregon University

Virtually all historians who have seriously examined the twenty-eighth president have noted Woodrow Wilson's devout Presbyterianism. However, neither his faith generally, nor his embrace of covenant theology specifically, has received sustained attention as a causal agent driving foreign policy. Mark Benbow seeks to rectify that oversight in what both Linda Hall and David Zietsma identify as an "insightful" book. Zietsma adds that Benbow "neatly unpacks hidden assumptions that were rooted in Wilson's religious beliefs," and Malcolm Magee delights that "the author has delivered a remarkable book that does just what was promised." Indeed, Richard Gamble suggests that the "lines of inquiry [Benbow opens] seem to hold great promise for discerning the inner logic of Wilson's vision of America and his posture toward the world." While all four of the reviewers find much to praise in Benbow's efforts, they are more inclined to suggest that he has opened a new area for sustained examination than they are to declare his study definitive.

Leading Them to the Promised Land is first and foremost a book about Wilson. It uses the president's personal stance toward the Mexican Revolution during its formative years of 1913-1915 as a lens into the causal role that covenant theology played in shaping his administration's foreign policy. As such, it is a tightly focused monograph. Benbow's first of seven substantive chapters provides background on covenant theology, and analyzes its influence on Wilson's thinking generally. The next six chapters provide a more conventional chronological narrative of U.S. policy toward the Mexican Revolution, with particular emphasis on the ways in which Wilson's religious beliefs served as a policy determinant. Covenants were agreements between people, or groups of people, that were overseen by God. For example, Wilson believed that national leaders and their constituents were bound by covenant. Consequently, leaders had particular obligations to the citizenry. When leaders did not live up to their obligations, they lost their legitimacy to govern and the people had the right to rebel. That was what happened in Mexico. Much of what drove Wilson was the search for a new Mexican leader who would be able to honor his covenant with the citizenry.

Benbow joins an expanding group of historians of U.S. foreign relations providing serious scholarly attention to the influence of religion. As cultural history ascended during the 1990s, foreign relations historians increasingly incorporated its insights into their analysis. Citing the work of David Fogelsong, Seth Jacobs, and William Inboden (and I would add Andrew Preston)¹, Zietsma highlights the expanding attention religion has received as a causal factor behind U.S. foreign policy. He concludes that Benbow "begins to resolve the

¹ Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire": The Crusade for a "Free Russia" since 1881* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Andrew Preston, "The Politics of Realism and Religion: Christian Responses to Bush's New World Order," *Diplomatic History* 34:1 (January 2010): 95-118.

problem of understanding religion's influence in a manner that accounts for particular systems of religious belief. By focusing on covenant theology as core to Wilson's religious faith, Benbow offers a fruitful approach."

Although the reviewers commend Benbow's efforts, they advance a variety of distinct critiques. Richard Gamble suggests that "Wilson's religious identity was more complex than Benbow indicates." Benbow did not consider the effect that the liberalization of the American Presbyterian Church might have exerted upon Wilson. "The *differences* between Wilson and his Southern heritage," Gamble writes, "might turn out to be at least as important as the similarities." Second, Gamble, wonders how "historians deal satisfactorily with the 'unspoken' remnants of the past, with ideas that have left few documented traces in the archives." Here he touches on one of the most challenging aspects of applying cultural analysis to questions of causation. It makes intuitive sense that a deeply religious man like Wilson would draw upon the tenets of his faith in nearly all aspects of his life – including in his public role as a policymaker. However, it is difficult to demonstrate with any precision how such factors figured into those decisions. This methodological paradox confronts any historian working at the intersection of culture and foreign relations history, but is left underexplored by Benbow.

Linda Hall takes a different tack in her review. Principally, she questions whether the chronological scope of Benbow's analysis is sufficient to test his thesis. Including analysis of the Pershing expedition, the 1916 election, and Mexico's 1917 constitutional convention, might have caused Benbow to modify his conclusions. In particular, such an expanded chronological focus would have facilitated greater consideration of Wilson's approach toward "just war." Moreover, she suggests that Benbow should have taken greater care to contextualize his account. Hall points out that "it is also important, in considering the larger 1910-1917 framework, to remember that Wilson viewed events in Mexico at the same time that he was trying to keep the United States out of European entanglements." This distinction is particularly important to Hall when examining the events of 1916 and 1917.

David Zietsma would like to have seen a more systematic application of the theory of analytical reasoning that Benbow introduces, in addition to more analysis and explanation of covenant theology. Although outlined in the introduction, the theory of analytic reasoning "is never again brought to bear throughout the text." Moreover, he argues, the book suffers from "a decided lack of clarity around covenant theology's intersection with other religious and ideological frameworks such as the Social Gospel and Progressivism." Furthermore, covenant theology "seems rather murky despite a chapter partially dedicated to explaining it," resulting perhaps "from a paucity of analysis on contemporary covenant theologians and covenant theology writings." Finally, Zietsma suggests that "Wilson too often appears to be acting in a vacuum, isolated from the larger culture and operating almost solely from the paradigm of covenant theology."

By contrast, Malcolm Magee appreciates the book's tight focus on Wilson, noting that the President was often personally isolated. He argues that the book's strength is "the author's familiarity with the theological pattern that the president was immersed in from childhood

until he entered politics.” On the other hand, Magee outlines Wilson’s decision to select a personal representative to Mexico in an effort to circumvent the State Department bureaucracy, which Wilson did not trust on Mexican matters. In this context, Magee contends that Benbow “could have more forcefully highlighted this personalization of the mission by the president.”

Wilson has not gone wanting for attention from historians. Nonetheless, Benbow’s book, which concentrates our collective attention on the significance of covenant theology when analyzing Wilson’s foreign policies, will have a salutary effect on the field. While anybody who has ever taught a class on Wilson’s foreign policy has doubtlessly mentioned the president’s religiosity as part of the broader cultural context in which he made decisions, Benbow provides the original research necessary to substantiate and begin to contextualize the claim more effectively. More students of Wilson will likely follow his lead.

Participants:

Mark Benbow earned his Ph.D. in American history from Ohio University. He teaches American history at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia since 2007 and formerly was resident historian at the Woodrow Wilson House in Washington D.C. in 2003-2006.

Dustin Walcher is Assistant Professor of History at Southern Oregon University and a review editor for H-Diplo. He received his Ph.D. in 2007 from the Ohio State University. A specialist in the history of U.S. foreign relations, he is currently examining the failure of U.S.-led development initiatives and the rise of political violence in Argentina in the 1950s and 1960s.

Richard M. Gamble (Ph.D in History, University of South Carolina, 1992) is Anna Margaret Ross Alexander Professor of History and Political Science at Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Michigan. He is the author of *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation* (ISI Books, 2003) and is currently finishing a book tentatively titled *A Spectacle to the World: The Story of How America Became the City on a Hill*.

Linda B. Hall is Distinguished Professor of History and Regents Professor at the University of New Mexico. Her most recent book is *Mary, Mother and Warrior: The Virgin in Spain and the Americas* from the University of Texas Press. Her recently completed manuscript is *Dolores del Río: Beauty, Celebrity and Power in Two Cultures*, on Dolores del Río, film star in Hollywood and Mexico. She is currently revising *Tangled Destinies: Latin America and the United States* with co-authors Don M. Coerver and Blair Woodard.

Malcolm Magee has a Ph.D. in the history of international relations. He is a visiting faculty in the Department of History at Michigan State University, following a career in religious and non profit organizations. He is the Director of The Institute for the Study of Christianity and Culture. His fields include American religious history, progressive era politics and 19th century political and religious thought. He has written, *What the World Should Be*:

Woodrow Wilson and the Crafting of a Faith Based Foreign Policy (Baylor University Press, 2008). Currently he is working on a chapter in the Blackwell companion series on Woodrow Wilson, a work on religion and the Great War and a novel.

David Zietsma is Assistant Professor of History at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario. His research focuses on the intersection of religious culture, identity narratives, and United States foreign relations in the twentieth century. He has published articles on religion and U.S. foreign relations in the journals *Diplomatic History* and *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* and is currently revising a book manuscript entitled *Imagining Good and Evil: Religion, National Identity, and United States Foreign Relations, 1930-1953*.

Religious language in general, and the cadences of evangelical Protestantism in particular, have featured prominently in America's justifications for war in every phase of its national existence, from the Revolutionary War to Manifest Destiny, from the Spanish-American War to the First World War, and from Vietnam to the War on Terror. While historians have acknowledged religion's place among the range of economic, social, racial, ideological, and strategic factors that have shaped U.S. foreign policy since the nation's founding, they have often handled it more as an abstract "force" than as a theology with any particular content. To be sure, rhetoric is rarely "mere" rhetoric and it gets entangled with behavior in all sorts of expected and unexpected ways. But observing the precise correspondence between Christian theology and U.S. foreign policy presents a difficult task for the historian seeking to understand a policymaker's motives and purposes. The scholar has to fight the temptation merely to place a president or cabinet member in a handy religious classification—such as "evangelical"—and leave undone the hard work of demonstrating the connections, significance, and implications of the term. Categories are not causes, and they rarely explain as much as they appear to.

Historian Mark Benbow steps up to the challenge of linking religion and foreign policy in *Leading Them to the Promised Land*, a serious, scholarly attempt to trace Woodrow Wilson's policy toward the Mexican Revolution back to the Presbyterian "covenant theology" he was reared under as "a true child of the manse" (125). Benbow does not offer a broad religious history of the Mexican Revolution or of America's response to it. By design, he includes little about the Catholic Church in America or Mexico, the activism of the social gospel movement, or much on the religious press's coverage of the events south of the border. Instead, he looks narrowly at how the "schema" of Wilson's "assumptions" (2) about God and the world shaped the way he understood and responded to Mexico from 1913 to 1915. He wrestles with the problem of "what personal, unspoken biases affected Wilson's interpretation of Mexico's revolution and the role the United States might play in events" (3). In short, he argues that "Wilson's deep religious faith, grounded in the covenant theology prevalent in his home Southern Presbyterian Church, became the foundation for his policy toward Mexico" (125).

While not excluding other factors, such as business interests and the principles of liberal internationalism, Benbow offers six "operating assumptions," shaped by Wilson's covenant theology, that he believes bring coherence—at least for analytical purposes—to the way the President thought, spoke, and acted toward Mexico in these troubled years. These include Wilson's particular understanding of the meaning and practice of constitutionalism; open deliberation among the people's representatives; popular support for legitimate government; and America's divine call to achieve these ends, including waging just war if necessary but always tempered by a "general noninterventionism" (125-26). Benbow's meticulously researched and thoroughly documented chapters explore these themes within a largely chronological narrative, appropriately reserving the more theoretical material for the introduction and conclusion. With clear prose and firm control

of the narrative arc of his story, he manages to make sense of the near anarchy in Mexican politics from 1913 to 1915.

Benbow is to be commended for looking back to Wilson's theological formation as a Southern Presbyterian to find the interpretive key to at least one phase of his foreign policy. Simply posing the question of whether the framework of covenant theology accounts for Wilson's "unspoken assumptions" may enable historians to notice dimensions of his policies that would otherwise remain invisible, and doing so opens further possibilities for how to tackle the more daunting task of rethinking Wilson's reasons for intervention in the Great War and his conduct during the peace negotiations that followed. These lines of inquiry seem to hold great promise for discerning the inner logic of Wilson's vision of America and his posture toward the world.

The fact that Benbow deals largely with what he acknowledges to have been "unspoken biases" leads me to raise two lingering questions about Wilson's theology and about the larger enterprise of connecting religion to foreign policy. I pose these questions as a sympathetic reader who has wrestled with them (with varying degrees of success) for over twenty years.

First, Wilson's religious identity was more complex than Benbow indicates. The President was more than a Southern Presbyterian reared in a pastor's home in the aftermath of the Civil War. He became part of a liberalizing trend within American Presbyterianism—and within Victorian Christianity in general—for which the Westminster Confession of Faith, the catechisms, and the finer points of Calvinist theology meant less and less over the years. Along with much of his generation, Wilson embraced a sentimentalized Christianity that moved away from theological orthodoxy to a religion of the heart. Benbow acknowledges this trend regarding the Northern Presbyterianism's weakening commitment to the doctrine of predestination, but he fails to consider the degree to which Wilson, as part of that trend, became something decidedly other than a Southern Presbyterian. Did he, for instance, retain anything of James H. Thornwell's doctrine of the spirituality of the church that had done so much before the Civil War to limit the institutional church's role in politics? The *differences* between Wilson and his Southern heritage might turn out to be at least as important as the similarities. Likewise, what parts of covenant theology did Wilson leave behind? Did he stretch that theology into something different, into a set of assumptions his Southern ancestors wouldn't have recognized?

Secondly, and more broadly, how do historians deal satisfactorily with the "unspoken" remnants of the past, with ideas that have left few documented traces in the archives? Scholars can observe words and deeds and the consequences of words and deeds, but how do they draw out the connections between these things and the principles and motivations of a historical actor, especially when those implications might require researchers to go all the way back to that person's childhood? What methods ought to guide and restrain historians as they attempt to probe "subconscious factors" (3)? This undertaking seems fraught with dangers. What standards of proof are there for things "unspoken"? Similarly, arriving at a historical actor's "worldview" (2) might indeed help bring analytical coherence and order to his conduct, but as a system it may also lead us to over-ascribe

behavior to that set of factors at the expense of others that are at least as relevant but don't fit the system.

Given the persistent tendency among many U.S. policymakers and the general public to understand America's role in the world within religious categories, the study of U.S. foreign policy can only be enriched and deepened by giving religion its due place. Hopefully Mark Benbow's study of Wilson will turn out in hindsight to be part of a growing body of work among historians dedicated to understanding religion as more than a rhetorical cover for policymakers' allegedly more "real" motives.

Mark Benbow takes on a difficult task in seeking out the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy toward Mexico during the most violent years of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1915. His argument is that Wilson's specifically Presbyterian background, particularly its covenant theology, formed a "template," a set of principles that guided "his political decisions, his tactics, and his long-term diplomatic objectives." (p.xi) While I think it is correct that these notions were important for Wilson and informed his ideas about not only the proper organization for other nations but also for the United States, I think we must also consider the ways in which the Mexican situation provided a particular problem in applying these principles. In my discussion, I will go beyond the time period in Benbow's book to consider both the Pershing Punitive Expedition into Mexico and Mexico's Constitutional Convention in 1916-1917 and the ways in which these do and do not fit with Benbow's thesis. It is also important, in considering the larger 1910-1917 framework, to remember that Wilson viewed events in Mexico at the same time that he was trying to keep the United States out of European entanglements. These concerns became particularly acute in the 1916 presidential election, when his own political situation was precarious. A defeat in the election would have made it impossible for him to fulfill his dream of becoming the peacemaker in Europe.

Benbow makes it clear what he means by covenant, i.e. a compact between particular parties sanctioned by God, and uses as his example Wilson's ideas about governance in his book *The State*. In this work, as Benbow notes, Wilson traced the stages that governments pass through on the road to democracy. Starting with the most negative arrangement in which government was "master" and the people were "veritable subjects," he envisioned moving toward the most desirable state "in which the leaders of the people themselves become the government." (p. 9) While Wilson did not invoke divine sanction in these cases, certainly he saw such agreements as the core of legitimacy and right in the relationship between a government and its people. Still, Wilson further wrote that "In politics nothing radically novel may safely be attempted." (p. 9) It would certainly follow from that assertion that revolutions in general, and the Mexican Revolution in particular, would concern him profoundly given the long border that his own country shared with that troubled nation..

Benbow, however, makes clear that Wilson was not entirely negative about revolution; rather, revolution might be an opportunity for the emergence of the self-government mentioned above. A major step in resolving the chaos would be a covenant, in this case a constitution, that would make possible a government in accordance with the will of the people. Yet as I see it, Wilson's actions toward Mexico were far from consistent and fraught with other considerations, though I agree with Benbow that his stances throughout had a strong and important moral dimension. By extending the period of analysis through 1916 and 1917, the period of the Pershing Punitive Expedition, the promulgation of the new Mexican Constitution, and Wilson's eventual de jure recognition of the government of the

Venustiano Carranza government in Mexico, we can investigate Benbow's assertions about the earlier period in a larger context.

It seems to me likely, as Benbow surmises, that Wilson would have found Mexico's first revolutionary president, Francisco Madero, who was an educated individual from the upper class devoted to constitutional principles and probably as disturbed by violence and chaos as Wilson himself, a worthy leader and even collaborator. However, Madero had been killed and his place taken by the military leader, Victoriano Huerta, with at least the acquiescence and possible connivance of the U.S. ambassador, just two weeks before Wilson took office. There is no question that Wilson was shocked by these events and regarded Huerta as an assassin, a violator of constitutional process, and a dictator -- in essence, someone thoroughly unacceptable to him as the leader of the neighboring country. Strangely, however, his initial reaction to the various Mexican revolutionary leaders as they fought Huerta and then each other was to favor Francisco "Pancho" Villa, whom he regarded as a sort of Mexican Robin Hood. However, he can hardly have believed that a victory by Villa at any stage was likely to lead to constitutional government despite the civilian intellectuals in Villa's camp. Further, Wilson developed a personal antipathy toward the leader of another faction, Venustiano Carranza, who even called his movement "constitutionalist" and whose supporters, some of them leaders in their own right, included a number of educated men who were much more likely to develop an orderly government based on a written compact than were Villa and his followers. Carranza, for his part, deeply opposed the U.S. occupation of Veracruz in 1914, while Villa did not object to this action by what he perceived as potential or even actual allies. Though Wilson eventually granted Carranza de facto recognition in October 1915, an event that was one of the factors leading to Villa's raid into Columbus, New Mexico, in March 1916, it was a step he was reluctant to take because of his personal animosities.

Further, Wilson's reaction to the Columbus raid was to send in troops with the mission of capturing Villa, even though there was little chance of him being able to do so without the cooperation of Carranza's forces in northern Mexico. It was an action that severely destabilized Mexico, leading away from the democratic and constitutional order that Wilson seems to have desired. The Pershing Punitive Expedition had the effect of restoring Villa's reputation and of turning him into a charismatic national hero bravely defying the Colossus of the North, just at the time that he had been defeated and discredited within Mexico. Wilson, rather than a concern for stability, democracy, and a return to constitutional government, had opted for intervention, calling into question Benbow's conclusion that he had "A commitment to general nonintervention in another nation's affairs..." (p. 126) It is hard to reconcile the Punitive Expedition with that assertion, even given Benbow's discussion of Wilson's "concept of mission" and "The idea of just war as a legitimate tool of that mission ..." (p. 126)

I believe that Wilson had a number of important goals in this action that had little to do with Mexico or its most desirable political course. First of all, it was a way to push the U.S. Congress into giving him the funds to upgrade the U.S. military so that he had a credible force with which to maintain his negotiating position in Europe without having actually to go to war there. Indeed, in several speeches on "preparedness" in early 1916, he began to

talk about the disgraceful situation on the Mexican border, particularly after the murder of several American engineers at the hands of Villa's troops several weeks before the Columbus incident itself. Second, he was concerned about his 1916 reelection campaign, in which his unwillingness to go war in Europe was used by Republican opponents, including Theodore Roosevelt, to ridicule what they saw as his cowardice. He could use Mexico and Villa as a surrogate for the enemy on the other side of the Atlantic, maintaining U.S. neutrality and his own position as negotiator in the larger conflict. In the event, he was reelected but pushed into the European war nevertheless. The catalyst was the Zimmerman telegram, in which the German Foreign Minister offered to make common cause in that conflict with Carranza, who was now thoroughly angry with Wilson, with the promise of the restoration of Mexican lands lost to the United States in 1848. We do not know what Carranza's reaction was to the German offer. Yet we can surmise that given the strains between the Mexican and the U.S. presidents, it is at least feasible that Carranza was attracted to the notion, however ludicrous it may seem almost 100 years later.

Part of the shock of the telegram when it was revealed to Wilson related, I believe, to his sense that the Mexican situation had already been resolved. He had begun to withdraw Pershing's troops from Mexico a few weeks earlier as Mexicans worked on the writing of a new constitution; the document had been signed though not promulgated by the time U.S. forces were completely withdrawn. It would be extremely interesting to know, particularly in light of Benbow's thesis, more of what Wilson thought of this constitutional process and whether or not it was a factor in his decision to remove Pershing's troops. Negotiations between the two governments to arrange their removal had been going on for several months with little progress. U.S. forces had long since been pulled back to a location relatively close to the border where any likelihood of an encounter with Villa, let alone his capture, was almost nil. Wilson's decision to pull them out may well have been influenced by the ability of Mexico's political leaders to come to an agreement on a number of thorny problems and to produce a new constitution, signed on 31 January 1917 and promulgated in May, providing a path toward peace and even, with luck, democracy. The U.S. withdrawal began in mid-January and completed in February, timing that seems hardly coincidental. Wilson may well have been encouraged by this movement toward order based on a written compact and have acted accordingly. Certainly, he was also motivated by the continuing cost of the Expedition and by the perilous European situation. Still, I think it likely that in his mind the Mexican situation had become much more promising. If Benbow is correct about Wilson's overarching goals, and I believe that he is, he could now leave the nagging Mexican situation aside with a relatively good conscience and focus on Europe.

Benbow also notes that Wilson was steadfast in resisting demands by U.S. businessmen for intervention in Mexico to protect their interests. To Wilson's credit, he continued this stance through the rest of his presidency. Even when pressured toward aggressive action by Senators Albert Fall and Gilbert Hitchcock, who visited him in his sickroom after his stroke to suggest the withdrawal of recognition from Carranza's government, he held firm. Disagreements with his own Secretary of State Robert Lansing on the issue of Mexico helped lead to Lansing's resignation two months after the infamous visit by Fall and Hitchcock.

Benbow's analysis of Wilson's notion on covenants as a basis for good government and thus for attitudes and actions toward foreign governments is insightful. It affords us a deeper basis for understanding his sometimes contradictory actions toward Mexico. However, it is important to remember that Mexico and its internal political fate, constitutionalism and democracy notwithstanding, were secondary to Wilson's own political survival in 1916 and his concerns about Europe throughout the period. It is tragic that his poor relationship with Venustiano Carranza's government helped force him into the European war that he had tried so hard to avoid.

Mark Benbow's recent book *Leading Them to the Promised Land* seems to be a fool's errand. The author says he will get us inside the head of one of the most complicated presidents of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, and tell us how his mind worked when he made decisions on U.S. foreign policy in Mexico from March 1913 until October 1915. The author promises that he will tell us "what goes without saying," the "largely unspoken assumptions" that formed the bedrock of this complex man's ideology and policy decisions (pp. 1-2). The surprise awaiting the reader willing to go on this chase is that the author has delivered a remarkable book that does just what was promised. *Leading Them to the Promised Land* highlights the specific schema that was beneath the surface of Wilson's thinking. The strength of this book is the author's familiarity with the theological pattern that the president was immersed in from childhood until he entered politics. From the time of his birth until he entered the New Jersey Governor's mansion, Wilson was continuously associated with Presbyterian institutions and a specifically Presbyterian theology. Benbow explains simply and clearly Wilson's Southern Presbyterian beliefs about "covenant" and another theological idea, "federal headship" (pp. 3-12). These ideas, with the other ideological schemata the president developed over his life, formed the tapestry of his world view. Awareness of these ideas gives historians insight into one of the theoretical frameworks behind Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy.

Historians of the Wilson administration inevitably have to deal with the complex personality of the president. Explaining Wilson's unique approach to policy decisions is a strength of this book. The president made his foreign policy decisions from a place of isolation that, as Robert W. Tucker recently remarked, was "without parallel among American presidents." In a speech in 1916 the president referred to Abraham Lincoln's "very holy and terrible isolation" in ways that were revealing of himself. Historians often overlook this in their studies on Wilson. Historians try to make sense of the policies by describing a "Wilsonian" consensus in the administration. Assuming a consensus among a group as diverse as Wilson, William Jennings Bryan, Walter Hines Page, Edward M. House and Robert Lansing, men who often had their own agendas, is highly problematic. Benbow avoids that mistake by focusing on Wilson. Whatever other forces may have acted upon the president, whatever social forces added to or shaped American policy, it was only "Wilsonian" if it mattered to the president. This singularity of mind springs directly from the theological ideas laid out in the book.

Wilson's religious upbringing and thought patterns influenced the approach he took to language and action. His sense of divine calling explains his feeling of isolation. (Or perhaps his sense of isolation explained his feeling of divine calling.) Wilson used religious language and followed a Presbyterian pattern of thought. To Wilson, words themselves were expressions of contradiction held together in mystery. He did not ultimately feel he was accountable to his advisors but to a higher authority and could not fully rely upon them as they were not privy to his inner truth. This explains Wilson's approach to language

which embodied ideas that transcended the precise legal meanings his advisers were reading into them.

Wilson's theology was not neatly separated into sacred and secular. He held a view that saw the world as a whole and filtered it through this framework. The complexity of his mind is made more understandable to those who recognize this framework. Recent scholarship has begun to build on John Mulder's 1978 work *Woodrow Wilson, The Years of Preparation* in which Mulder showed in detail how Wilson applied these views to the world at large outside the church. What has been missing until recently is an application of those ideas to the way in which the president conducted foreign policy. For most historians accustomed to taking a materialist and reasoned approach to history, extra rational approaches, particularly those that might be rooted in faith, are problematic. It is easier to either ignore them or assume they were not important enough to the final outcome in the "real" world to wrestle with. Benbow is able to bridge this gulf through the use of the theory of analogical reasoning. Placing this along side Wilson's theology makes the extra-rational world of faith and theology accessible to the rational world of historians of foreign policy (pp. 1-3).

Leading Them to the Promised Land begins with the chaos of the Mexican revolutions leading up to 1913. By the time the President took office in March of 1913 Mexico had been fully engulfed in chaos and the American Ambassador there, a Republican appointee from the William Howard Taft Administration, had taken sides, implicating himself and the United States. Two of the new president's initial foreign policy goals were to repudiate Taft's "Dollar Diplomacy" in favor of a more idealistic approach and to restore order to the United States' southern neighbor. It is here that Benbow's approach sheds new light on an old subject. Rather than imperialism as usual, Wilson, at least in his own mind, was following a divine pattern, trying to impose a providential, covenantal scheme onto the messy politics of the world he was living in. "Covenants were a method of bringing order to chaos, of moving those emerging from the wilderness closer to God and heaven" (pp. 10).

Wilson's repudiation of "Dollar Diplomacy" was clear from the beginning. Business interests were lower on the president's list of priorities than other, more idealistic interests. It would be inaccurate to describe Wilson as "anti-business." It would be equally difficult to describe him as "pro-business" in his international relations policy. The president could best be described as benignly neutral toward large international business interests. Many business leaders in the U.S. pressured the president to act on their behalf in Mexico. He would not do so unless they could convince him of a righteous (read covenantal) reason. He was prompted by the thought of saving the oppressed people of Mexico, but within his own ideological framework.

The covenantal reasoning behind Wilson's involvement in Mexico is made clear in this book. The president's desire for order, and his early fascination with covenants and constitutions, has been well documented. What strengthens Benbow's book in this respect is his application of another schema to the mix. Along side the idea of covenant and divine order, along side of the concept of America as God's agent in the earth was the theological idea of "federal headship" common among the Presbyterians that Wilson was raised

among. According to this theology, Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden had consequences for all of subsequent humanity. The reason for this was that Adam was the federal head of all humanity, the representative of all humanity, and as such his action had consequences for all subsequent humanity leaving all guilty. This idea that a single representative can be responsible for a group had implications beyond theology for Wilson. A country's president could be seen as the "federal head" of his nation, representing and speaking on its behalf before the rest of the world. Wilson believed this. This idea of "representative responsibility" discussed in the idea of federal headship gives a rationality to Wilson's personalization of politics. It is why he would later focus on the personality of the Kaiser when considering war with Germany. It was why he had such a sense of personal responsibility, having represented the United States and having given his word at Versailles. It drove him on the Western speaking tour that ultimately broke his health and doomed the Treaty. Regarding the policy in Mexico, understanding this idea of Federal Headship makes sense of what otherwise seems to be meddling in another nation's affairs. In Mexico the American Ambassador, Henry Lane Wilson, had been a participant in the coup that overthrew Francisco Madero. This made the United States, in the president's mind, guilty of the subsequent murder of President Madero and the rise to power of the non-constitutional (non-covenantal) Victoriano Huerta (pp. 19-24). It was up to the president of the United States to make that right, to redeem the situation. It is this added theological motivation that gives Benbow's history of Wilson's foreign policy a new dimension.

Since the president felt himself and the nation to be personally responsible for events in Mexico, it also made sense that he would choose to use personal representatives rather than the organizational apparatus of the U.S. Government, which he didn't trust in Mexico anyway. In chapter three Benbow discusses the debate within the Administration. If there is one criticism of the book it is that he could have more forcefully highlighted this personalization of the mission by the president at this point. The author demonstrates from the evidence that the decisions were ultimately the president's but leaves the impression that Wilson got more serious outside input into his decisions. The evidence can be read two ways and the author of this review leans more to the side of "terrible isolation" than does Benbow. That said, the book is not weakened by this emphasis at all and the point the author intends to make comes through quite clearly.

From chapter three on, the theoretical foundations have been laid and the book progresses through the familiar points in U.S./Mexican relations looking at them with fresh eyes through Wilson's Southern Presbyterian lens. The story follows the slide toward the invasion of Veracruz, Wilson's desire to, "teach the South American Republics to elect good men," the subsequent failure of the president's lesson plan culminating in the ABC conference and finally the unintended consequences of the whole affair and the mystification of many of Wilson's colleagues trying to grasp what it was that was motivating the president (p 53). The theological template makes this book stand apart from other books on United States foreign policy in Mexico during this period.

Leading Them to the Promised Land concludes with a summary of Wilson's ideological template for his conduct of foreign policy. Historians of the foreign relations of the Wilson

administration will note the very “Wilsonian” six points in Benbow’s summary (pp. 125-126). This is a useful template and does fit the pattern of the way the president thought he was working out his mission toward the world. In a final irony, however, one may note that the points held in Wilson’s mind were not always how he acted. Point two, for example is related to the importance of discussion to help rulers determine the popular will. Though this was something Wilson believed, his usual tendency was to avoid discussion when it was inconvenient. Point six, which was a commitment to non-intervention seems ironic as well, particularly in the Mexican situation. The book leaves readers to consider that for themselves. Wilson’s theological views were both the good and the bad in his policy. Faith that can dream of a new and better world can motivate the best in political leaders and help bring about the creation of more just systems. Faith, unchecked by some kind of “covenantal” balance and humility can lead to something other than the promised land. Benbow’s Wilson demonstrates both.

In the Bible's Old Testament, Moses died before seeing the Promised Land, but not before he brought his Israelite followers into a covenant relationship with God and sent them onward to their final destination. Mark Benbow has alerted United States foreign relations historians that U.S. President Woodrow Wilson operated much like a modern-day Moses in his response to the Mexican Revolution; he saw himself as patiently leading Mexico to the Promised Land of covenantal democratic constitutionalism. In his meticulously researched and well argued *Leading Them to the Promised Land: Woodrow Wilson, Covenant Theology, and the Mexican Revolution, 1913-1915*, Benbow has provided scholars with an important step on the path to yet another promised land, namely, that of understanding the influence of religion on American foreign relations. In particular, Benbow uncovers the linkage between religion's *theological* element and specific foreign policy decision-making. Although the tight focus on both covenant theology and Wilson results in some analytical gaps, Benbow should be congratulated for an insightful addition to the burgeoning discussion of religion in U.S. foreign relations history.

Benbow's main argument is that the U.S. response to the Mexican Revolution was shaped by Wilson's Presbyterian covenant theology. Out of this religious "operational code" Wilson refrained from making a quick decision to back the dictatorial and opportunistic General Victoriano Huerta in 1913. Rather, as "covenant principles permeated his political decisions, his tactics and his long-term diplomatic objectives," Wilson patiently assessed events between 1913 and late 1915, before finally deciding to back the Constitutionalist Venustiano Carranza as the best option for bringing covenantal constitutional democracy to Mexico. (xi) In the meantime, Wilson gathered information, communicated with competing Mexican factions, launched what he believed to be a "just war" intervention at Veracruz, and organized a wider hemispheric conference to attempt a negotiated settlement. In all these efforts, including extending U.S. recognition to Carranza, Wilson believed that he functioned as a divine agent carrying out God's will in guiding Mexico toward the Promised Land of democratic progress. This belief resulted from Wilson's understanding that the United States was already in a covenant relationship with God and that the President was the nation's covenantal representative to the world, a representative whose duty included ensuring that that American policy toward Mexico would follow God's will "to spread the gospel of democracy." (12) As Benbow astutely points out, of course Wilson never imagined that the Mexicans should be consulted as to whether or not they wanted to receive this gospel from the United States.

In addressing religion, Benbow engages a vibrant arena of current exploration in U.S. foreign policy history. In recent years, scholarly efforts at understanding religion's role have expanded dramatically. Historians such as David Foglesong and Seth Jacobs provide excellent studies exposing how dichotomies such as Christian/non-Christian and good/evil influenced decision makers' thinking over time.¹ Others such as William Inboden detail the

¹ Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); David S. Foglesong, *The American*

significance of religious individuals and institutions on foreign policy creation.² *Leading Them to the Promised Land's* most important contribution to this discussion is that it begins to resolve the problem of understanding religion's influence in a manner that accounts for particular systems of religious belief. By focusing on covenant theology as core to Wilson's religious faith, Benbow offers a fruitful approach. To be sure, his work builds on Malcolm Magee's recent contribution on Wilson's Calvinism, but by focusing on how covenantalism framed the particular response to the Mexican revolution, Benbow provides a rich and important addition to the scholarship.³

Benbow's book thus underscores culture and ideology, here in the form of religion, as instrumental factors in foreign policy creation. His argument illustrates that Wilson's rhetoric about constitutional democracy was connected to covenant theology and was not simply window dressing for public consumption or a mask for more "real" motivations centered on geopolitical power or economic interest. For example, he relates that Wilson's primary concern lay in guiding Mexico to the most constitutional government rather than in supporting American commercial interests. American businesses in Mexico clearly favored the dictator Huerta, and had from the beginning of the Revolution. In the *Saturday Evening Post* in May 1914, Wilson issued a "rebuke" to the American business community for having backed Huerta against Francisco Madero and for exacerbating tensions by asserting its commercial interests. (74-75) Far from serving merely as public rhetoric disguising economic interests therefore, Wilson's public declarations regarding constitutional democracy in Mexico reflected an ideological commitment rooted in covenantal theology. This religious commitment in turn framed Wilson's refusal to support or recognize a dictatorial regime despite the commercial advantages that might be realized by the United States should that regime come to power.

Benbow thus neatly unpacks hidden assumptions that were rooted in Wilson's religious beliefs. For instance, in accordance with his covenantal theology, the U.S. President imagined that he would only grant American support and recognition to a leader who clearly operated in concert with the Mexican people's wishes. To decide otherwise, whether for expediency or commercial gain, would merely exacerbate the violence and chaos. The Constitutionalist's "stated aims of restoring a government of laws and returning land to the people of Mexico" appealed to Wilson and indicated that the Constitutionalist "Carranza might be that chosen agent for Mexico." (60) When Carranza's control was threatened, Wilson intervened militarily at Veracruz believing that as God's chosen agent, the United States needed to guide Mexico into the most democratic outcome. Moreover, Wilson held that "all covenants traditionally have a higher power acting as an enforcer" and

Mission and the "Evil Empire": The Crusade for a "Free Russia" since 1881 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

² William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³ Malcolm D. Magee, *What the World Should Be: Woodrow Wilson and the Crafting of a Faith-Based Foreign Policy* (Baylor, 2008).

at Veracruz the United States had simply “stepped into that role.” (64) Although he still distrusted Carranza, in 1915 Wilson finally chose to recognize Carranza over General Francisco “Pancho” Villa because he deemed Carranza the best option for the United States to help Mexico “develop its own governing covenant” with only “occasional friendly support and advice” from the United States. (124)

To be sure, there are several drawbacks to focusing singularly on Wilson and his covenant theology. In general, Wilson too often appears to be acting in a vacuum, isolated from the larger culture and operating almost solely from the paradigm of covenant theology. To be sure, Benbow makes clear that particular religious interest groups such as American Catholics attempted to direct U.S. policy in a way that meshed with their own interests. (107) At points Benbow further indicates that Wilson operated out of assumptions that were certainly widely shared, such as “a concept of mission” that envisioned “an ordained role for the United States in promoting constitutional democracy.” (126) As I and others have argued, many Americans shared in that sense of ordained mission and it often provided the framework for American foreign policy.⁴ Teasing out the relative influence of particular theologies in animating that mission would certainly have been helpful to the book’s overall argument.

More specifically, the book contains a decided lack of clarity around covenant theology’s intersection with other religious and ideological frameworks such as the Social Gospel and Progressivism. These latter two were powerful cultural forces in Wilson’s era and surely influenced Wilson’s thinking. For example, the argument that Wilson’s desire to “make things right” in Mexico emerged from covenant theology alone during an era of immense focus on social regeneration and progress is not entirely convincing. (24) In a similar vein, Wilson’s assumption that “the struggle in Mexico and the political battles in the United States were manifestations of the same fight against privileged classes” seems more likely to have emanated from Progressive concerns than from covenantal ones. (100) Many Social Gospel adherents would also have been surprised to find that a “commitment to nonintervention in another nation’s affairs” fit with the covenant responsibility to wage just wars. (126) More nuance and complexity at these points in the discussion of Wilson’s decision-making framework would have been beneficial. This is not to say that making things right, struggling against privilege, and nonintervention did not somehow fit into Wilson’s covenant theology thinking. Rather it suggests that other cultural forces such as Progressivism were also framing Wilson’s decision-making. As the author notes without explanation, Wilson felt “confident that he was on the right side of history, supporting progress.” (100)

The difficulty in locating the limits of covenant theology’s influence partly emerges from the problem that the theology itself is never fully defined. While Benbow effectively

⁴ David Zietsma, “‘Sin Has No History’: Religion, National Identity, and U.S. Intervention, 1937-1941,” *Diplomatic History* 31 (June 2007): 531-565; Walter L. Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

identifies the policy concerns that emerge from covenant theology, the actual theology seems rather murky despite a chapter partially dedicated to explaining it. Without brief explanation of basic doctrines and biblical interpretations, covenant theology's behavioral manifestations ultimately replace the theology itself. Such murkiness leads to analytical conclusions that sometimes appear stretched. For instance, Benbow suggests that "covenant theology emphasized balance and discussion that allowed different interests to be measured against each other." (32) Wilson's patient study of competing factions and his discussions with various Mexican revolutionary leaders thus seems to fit the covenant theology mold. But the connection to the actual theology behind the manifest behavior is not clear. This results, perhaps, from a paucity of analysis on contemporary covenant theologians and covenant theology writings. While the book is extremely rich in foreign policy primary sources, contemporary theologians and religious thinkers espousing covenant theology are noticeably absent, particularly in the chapter on covenant theology. To be sure, Benbow offers an excellent discussion of Wilson's writings and publications, but these are hardly theological tracts and are rarely connected to contemporary covenant theology writing and thought. Thus, Wilson's emphasis on "balance and discussion" might equally have been the result of an emerging Social Gospel influence from theologians such as Walter Rauschenbusch and others who stressed tolerance, dialogue, and refraining from final judgments.⁵

Finally, like numerous other scholars working on cultural influences in U.S. foreign relations history, Benbow's generally insightful work is confronted by the challenge of theoretical clarity and transparency. In the first chapter, Benbow briefly outlines a theory of "analogical reasoning" and decision-making through "cognitive schemas." (1-2) But this theory is never again brought to bear throughout the text. More importantly, the connection between analogical reasoning and religious beliefs and theologies, even if hinted at in the first chapter, is far from apparent. On the other hand, whereas Benbow is obviously concerned with public language and its relationship to deeply held core beliefs, he does not provide the reader with insight into the theories that underlie his unpacking of Wilson's various speeches, statements, letters, and comments. While this reviewer is sympathetic to the focus on language and beliefs, without more solid theoretical grounding skeptics might very well dismiss an otherwise persuasive argument on the grounds that the connections Benbow supposes are largely speculative. After all, there are no direct quotes from Wilson suggesting that Mexican policy must be determined based on a thorough review of covenant theology principles.

The limits of *Leading Them to the Promised Land* in no way negate the overall contribution of the book. Benbow convincingly demonstrates that unpacking cultural and specifically religious frameworks is a useful method for explaining sometimes inexplicable policy

⁵ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907); Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912). My own work addresses social gospel theology in the good neighbor policy. See David Zietsma, "Building the Kingdom of God: Religious Discourse, National Identity, and the Good Neighbor Policy, 1930-1938," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11 (Summer 2008): 179-214.

decisions, in this case Wilson's seemingly endless delay in extending recognition to a Mexican leader as well as his final choice of Carranza. Although there is no promised land of final answers for the historian, by highlighting covenant theology Benbow provides a richer picture of Wilson's decision making. At the same time, his work reminds us that the study of religion in U.S. foreign relations history has many complex layers yet to unravel.

Response by Mark E. Benbow, Marymount University

Thank you to all four reviewers for taking the time to read and respond to my book, *Leading Them to the Promised Land*. I appreciate all the responses and each reviewer raises some interesting questions for debate. I have a few comments on each of the reviews.

Malcolm Magee was very kind in his review, thank you. The only comment I have about Magee's observations is that I do tend to give Wilson a bit more credit than he does towards taking the viewpoints of others into account, most notably when Wilson was still in the process of forming an opinion. His most important advisor was, of course, his first wife Ellen, but Wilson also listened to Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels and Colonel Edward House on many issues, and Treasury Secretary William McAdoo on financial ones. His secretary, Joseph Tumulty, advised the president on political issues including handling the press. Wilson listened to other cabinet members on matters involving their departments and little else, and even then some were more influential than others. Wilson tended to take bits and pieces from the advice he was given and formed his own opinion from those bits. Once his mind was made up though, only Ellen could make him change it without a great deal of effort. The influence of his second wife, Edith, is an entirely different matter and one that largely falls outside of the timeframe of my book. Kristie Miller's new work on Wilson's wives, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* has an excellent discussion comparing the influence each of Wilson's spouses had on his decision-making.¹

David Zietsma and Richard Gamble both raise similar points about the influence of the Social Gospel on Wilson. I tend to agree with John Milton Cooper's opinion that Wilson "had little truck with the major liberal religious reform movement, the Social Gospel."² For example, in a 1910 speech on clergymen Wilson noted that "I have known ministers to frequent places where they ought not to go, and where no self-respecting man ought to go, under the impression, apparently, that what Christ allied Himself with was places, not human souls. What He sought out was the individual spirit, not its environment."³ As I argue in my book, Wilson's religious views were formed as he grew up, and while they did not remain static, they did not evolve in the same way as his political and social views. Wilson's religious views softened somewhat as he got older, but I disagree with what I think is the implication of Gamble's comment that "Wilson embraced a sentimentalized Christianity that moved away from theological orthodoxy to a religion of the heart." Wilson's religion, I maintain, remained closer to his father's traditional views than to the

¹ Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2010).

² John Milton Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2009) 5.

³ "An Address on the Clergy and the State at the General Theological Seminary in New York." April 6, 1910, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Arthur Link et al, Eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 330.

popular Social Gospel. Wilson's vision of God was a step-removed from the world. He saw God as a somewhat distant God that was not as concerned with individual salvation as the furtherance of His divine plan. John Mulder, like Gamble, contended that Wilson's religious views changed as he got older, "explicitly rejecting the moralistic and legalistic themes of his youth." But that does not mean that he adopted the full Social Gospel. Mulder noted that in 1899 Wilson also stated that Christianity was not "a system of ethics, not...a philosophy of altruism."⁴

That said, it would be interesting to study the sermons and career of two of Wilson's favorite ministers: the Reverend Azel Washburn Hazen, pastor of the First Congregational Church at Wesleyan University, and Sylvester Beach from Princeton, to see how their lessons may have been influenced by the Social Gospel movement. Even if we assume they showed a strong Social Gospel flavor, that would still leave open the question of influence. Did their sermons influence Wilson and if so, to what degree? Did he choose those churches because he already agreed with their position on social issues? There are more questions here for Wilson scholars to explore.

Zietsma notes that I do not connect Wilson's thoughts to contemporary studies on covenant theology. Fair enough. I concentrated on theologians who predated or were contemporary to Wilson's youth in order to focus on those authors that influenced the Southern Presbyterian Church of the nineteenth century that, in turn, shaped Wilson's worldview. In understanding how Wilson viewed the world, I think Robert Lewis Dabney, James Henley Thornwell and James Woodrow are more important than Daniel Elazar. That said, future students would benefit from reading recent studies in covenant theology as a way to cast new light onto the subject. Malcolm Magee's work shows how a more modern understanding of covenant theology is useful in understanding Wilson.

Linda Hall wonders how my thesis would apply to Wilson's actions after 1915. I deliberately chose Wilson's recognition of Venustiano Carranza's government in late 1915 as my cut off point because I thought Wilson's actions after that were the result of so many outside influences, especially the World War, and as a result, it was no longer possible to measure Wilson's initial assumptions about how legitimate governments were formed. National security issues had become so pressing by the end of 1915 that the question of legitimacy quickly took a subservient position. As I note on page 121 of my book, events outside Mexico forced Wilson to reach some form of closure on Mexico so that he might concentrate on other issues, and that recognizing Carranza seemed to be the best, if less than ideal, choice. The natural implication, of course, is that sometimes Wilson's idealism had to give way to what might somewhat over-simply be referred to as more realistic concerns. This does not mean Wilson abandoned his idealistic goals, only that other factors, which also had a legitimate claim on his decision-making process, increased in importance.

⁴ John M. Mulder, *Woodrow Wilson: The Years of Preparation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 149.

To tentatively answer Hall's question, how might my thesis apply after 1915? Absent the pressures of the World War, I suspect Wilson would have pestered Carranza with messages and representatives, trying to influence the shape of the new government. The April 1920 rebellion by some of Carranza's generals--in which Carranza was assassinated--would have challenged Wilson's assumptions about the legitimacy of the Mexican government. I don't want to dwell too deeply in counter-factualism, but I suspect Wilson would have withheld recognition of Governor de la Huerta's and General Obregon's governments, at least initially.

Finally, I feel the need to include one small correction to Gamble's review. I appreciate his noting that my book "builds on Malcolm Magee's recent contribution on Wilson's Calvinism." I certainly have great respect for Magee's work, but I feel a need, forgive me, please, to note that my work predates Dr. Magee's, but that he was much quicker in finding a publisher. Let us rather say that the two works complement one another.

My thanks to all the participants and I look forward to a continued discussion.

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