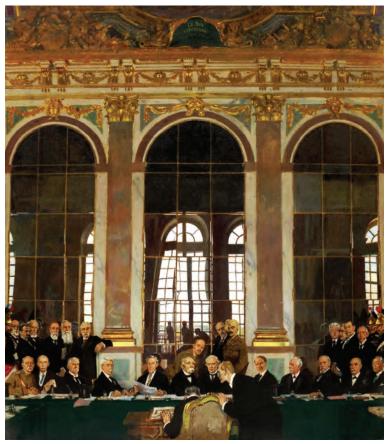# RESURRECTING WILSON: A CHRISTIAN CRITIQUE OF LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM

Matt Gobush

On January 8, 1918—one hundred years ago—President Woodrow Wilson mounted the rostrum of the House of Representatives, America's inner sanctum of democracy, to deliver one of the most consequential speeches in history. The setting was somber; the audience, anxious; the speaker, stern. An ocean away, American soldiers were preparing to fight, kill, and possibly die on Europe's western front. Wilson had led the country into the Great War and mobilized its armed forces nine months before with a stirring speech to Congress pledging to make the world "safe for democracy" and secure "ultimate peace."[1] Now, as American troops finally descended into the trenches and awaited the enemy's imminent onslaught, Wilson returned to this august chamber to renew his pledge and sanctify their certain sacrifice.

Fittingly, he would do so not with the soaring rhetoric of his earlier call to arms, but with a subdued speech detailing his vision of a post-war peace, however distant it might have then appeared. On this occasion, Wilson chose to play the professor, not the preacher. Drawing upon the recommendations of "The Inquiry," a secretive circle of experts convened by the president that would later

The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, 28th June 1919, *by William Orpen, 1919. Imperial War Museum London. Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

form the Council on Foreign Relations, Wilson outlined in his address a fourteen-point program for settling territorial disputes and answering national aspirations from Alsace-Lorraine to Austria-Hungary, Belgium to Bulgaria. He framed it with policies of open diplomacy, free trade, arms control, and national self-determination. And, in his final point, he proposed what one senator later called "the one great new idea of the 20th century in the field of international relations": an international association for collective security, the League of Nations.

Despite its professorial sobriety, Wilson's Fourteen Points address nevertheless held spiritual power. In a sense, it baptized US

foreign policy, infusing it with renewed moral clarity. It recast a European war of realpolitik as a global clash of ideas, with the United States seizing the mantle of liberalism to resist both imperialism and communism. And it reconceived the very practice of international politics as an evangelistic enterprise, aiming to elevate the better angels of mankind's nature. Each of his fourteen points sought to achieve one noble ideal: "the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with another, whether they be strong or weak." As Americans prepared to fight in the world war, their commander in chief reminded them of the world they were fighting for.[2]

The Allies would withstand the Central powers' spring offensive and, with vital American assistance, turn the tide. By November 1918, the war was won and the work of winning the peace had begun. Wilson's Fourteen Points, endorsed by all parties in the war, became the basis for peace negotiations held in Paris. The president journeyed to Europe—the first sitting president to do so—to advocate for his agenda and was greeted by adoring multitudes hailing "Wilson the Just" and "Savior of Humanity." Future president Herbert Hoover, on hand for the triumphant arrival, observed that "no such evangel of peace had appeared since Christ preached the Sermon on the Mount." Less enthused, French premier George Clemenceau grumbled, "The good Lord Himself required only ten points."

Wilson's Fourteen Points served as a platform for peacemaking as well as a springboard for the first and only school of US foreign policy to bear a president's name—*Wilsonianism.* Despite its personal association—or perhaps because of it—the term is difficult to define. It is typically equated with liberal internationalism, although neoconservatives have also claimed its mantle. Embraced by presidents of both parties, from Roosevelt to Reagan, Wilsonianism defies political label. Compounding the confusion is Wilsonianism's evolution over the past century in response to changing realities. Its enduring essence can nonetheless be traced to the Fourteen Points address, in which the president proposed that political and economic liberalism, combined with universal multilateralism, form "the program of the world's peace."

This assertion rests on assumptions regarding the moral behavior of nations. It assumes that a nation's internal governance structure shapes its external relations, that so-called "regime types" are relevant to international politics. It assumes that freedom fosters peaceful relations, a concept informing what political scientists later framed as "democratic peace theory." And it assumes international organizations are capable not simply of aggregating interests of sovereign states, but also engendering a sense of community, enabling members to transcend parochial interests. This creed most clearly distinguishes Wilsonianism from realism, which holds that nations behave similarly regardless of regime type, that material rather than moral sources of power govern international relations, and that ordered competition in the form of a balance of power is the best guarantor of peace and stability. Wilsonianism, in contrast to realism, is fundamentally idealistic, optimistic, liberal, and universal.

Wilson ended his seminal speech with a bold assertion: "The moral climax of this, the culminating and final war for human liberty, has come." Tragically, this prophecy proved false; the Great War would be but the first of the century's world wars. History mocked Wilson's prediction of "ultimate peace." The catastrophic collapse of the interwar world order could be ascribed to a host of factors, including the punitive terms of the Versailles Treaty, the eventual rejection by the US Senate of the League of Nations, and even Wilson's own negotiating intransigence. But no small measure of responsibility lay with a crucial weakness in Wilsonianism itself: the moral tension between liberalism and universalism. To make the world safe for democracy, Wilson envisioned a League of Nations that encompassed all sovereign, self-determined nations, regardless of their internal constitutional character. He entrusted democratic and autocratic nations alike with collective security, relying on a process of "common counsel" guided, as he declared in a congressional address a month later, by a "spirit of unselfish and unbiased justice" among member states. Tellingly, the term "democracy" is absent entirely from the president's Fourteen Points. To achieve universal participation, Wilsonianism tolerates moral equivalency.

There is, however, a caveat. At the Paris Peace Conference, Wilson assured an American delegation skeptical of his designs that he was "playing for a hundred years hence." If so, having now reached this centennial horizon, a deeper

assessment of the moral tension inherent in Wilson's worldview is due, in part because our world today bears ominous resemblances to Wilson's on the eve of World War I. Now, as then, autocracies such as Russia and China are increasingly energized and militarized; democracies, including our own, seem embattled and besieged, from within and without. Civil wars, particularly in the Middle East, threaten to become crucibles of great power confrontation, not unlike proxy wars in the Balkans that sparked the first global conflagration. The Trump administration's recently released National Security Strategy echoes the antebellum militancy and materialism of a century ago. President Trump portrays multilateral institutions not as forums for cooperation, but as cockpits for the "competition for influence." Moreover, he sees America's role in promoting democracy and human rights as one of mere "encouragement." Priority appears to be placed squarely on the pursuit of national material interests in a competitive, zero-sum international environment darkened by war and rumors of war.

Given his grasp of the theoretical and theological influences on Wilson's thought, Reinhold Niebuhr and his Christian realist school offer particularly penetrating insight into Wilsonianism's moral tension. Niebuhr sympathized with Wilson, despite his being "the president that most disappointed him." Niebuhr's nuanced criticism is constructive. But it is barbed nonetheless. Niebuhr found the president's idealism self-righteous and his universalism utopian. The contrarian theologian also viewed the alternative of amoral realism self-defeating, and the cause

of promoting democracy and international community necessary. Underpinning Niebuhr's constructive critique was a dual doctrine: the persistence of sin and its corrupting impact on all human relations, and an abiding hope for humanity to achieve proximate justice, if not ultimate peace.

A Christian realist appraisal of Wilsonianism rightly begins with its namesake. As *Providence* contributing editor Walter Russell Mead notes, although the Wilsonian tradition is rooted in the American Christian missionary movement predating the man himself, President Wilson was undoubtedly the nascent tradition's most prominent and powerful advocate. The contours of classic Wilsonianism reflect the character of Wilson himself. Winston Churchill observed that the fate of the world at the height of the Great War rested on "the workings of this man's mind and spirit to the exclusion of almost every other factor." But "in all his strength and in all his weakness, in his nobility and in his foibles, he was…an unknown, an unmeasured." Never have so many owed so much to so singular a statesman—but of him have known so little.

Deconstructing the enigmatic president has proven perilous. The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, made an attempt which was roundly criticized. Two contemporary scholars have fared better: Princeton's Tony Smith, who distills Wilson's academic record and intellectual allegiances in his 2017 book *Why Wilson Matters*; and the Institute for the Study of Christianity and Culture's Malcolm Magee, who discerns the president's religious convictions in his 2008 book *What the World Should*

Be.[3] Braiding their research provides an understanding of Wilson's mind and spirit, and how Wilsonianism incorporates both. As former senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan observes, "Wilson's vision of a world order was a religious vision: of the natural goodness of man prevailing through the Holy Ghost of Reason."

The role of reason in Wilson's worldview is most pronounced in his academic career, as Smith reveals. The only president to earn a doctorate, Wilson distinguished himself as one of America's leading political scientists at Princeton University. His research centered, as he put it, on "my chief ambition: the historical explanation of the modern democratic state." Wilson was an intellectual exponent of the Enlightenment and a proponent of the power of reason to shape history. Although a descendent of highlanders, his patterns of thought aligned not as much with skeptical Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume as with Immanuel Kant, the luminary of the German variant of the intellectual movement. Indeed, contemporary philosopher William Galston asserts that Wilson was "the most Kantian of presidents."

Kant professed ethical rationalism, relying on "the moral law within." He defended the equality and dignity of every individual, who, employing reason, assumes the role of a kind of moral lawmaker. Binding moral legislation, Kant argues, rationally conforms to the so-called categorical imperative: "Act as if the maxims of your action were to become…a universal law of nature." Like the Golden Rule, Kant's categorical imperative demands individuals treat others as they would want to be

Photograph of the "Big Four" at the Versailles Peace Conference. Source: Bonhams, via Wikimedia Commons.

treated. He applied it to international politics in his landmark 1795 essay "Perpetual Peace." In this tract, he posits that a republican civil constitution in each **state and an international law founded on a federation of free** states would prevent war. Kant's proposed federation effectively universalizes the supposed pacifist tendency of republics: "For if fortune directs that a powerful and enlightened people can make itself a republic, which **must by its nature be inclined** to perpetual peace, this gives a **fulcrum to the federation.**"

To these two preconditions for perpetual peace Kant added a third: "universal hospitality." By this he meant not simply diplomatic immunity, but "**the right of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy.**" **Kant asserted** that pure reason dictated such a cosmopolitan ethic of universal amity, and would enable "**the human race [to] gradually be brought closer and closer to a constitution establishing** world citizenship." This concept is not dissimilar to the "spirit

of unselfish and unbiased justice" Wilson relied on nations to adopt to assure "permanent peace."

Consistent with his distinctive mode of philosophizing, Kant's vision for perpetual peace is **likely meant as a guide rather than a goal, and therefore not as** utopian as it might appear. Kant **acknowledged the limits of re**shaping the "crooked timber of humanity." Nevertheless, Kant's view reflects an idealized faith **in reason, one that Wilson, the** accomplished academic, shared and later projected on the world stage. As Galston observes, "**Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen** Points were a faithful transcription of the letter and spirit of Kant's *Perpetual Peace.*" Smith **shares this conclusion. "The brilliance [of Wilsonianism] arises", he insists, "from radi**ance of its promise—Immanuel Kant's 'perpetual peace,' a conviction shared by a variety of American presidents from **Woodrow Wilson's time on.**"[4]

Niebuhr criticizes this Kantian core of Wilsonianism for underestimating the human's capacity for moral misdoing. He illuminates this failing in an obscure footnote in his magnum opus, *The Nature and Destiny of Man,* in which he credits Kant for recognizing "man's inclination to corrupt the imperatives of morality so that they become a screen for the expression of self-love." Nevertheless, Niebuhr argues, this "doctrine of radical evil…stands in complete contradiction" to Kant's ethical rationalism and evidences the "influence of pietistic Christian thought upon him, an influence which did not, however, change the general system of ethics and could not have done so without completely shattering it."[5] The Christian doctrine of sin contradicts the requisite cosmopolitan ethic of universal amity. Pitting Kant against Kant, Niebuhr dispels the dream of perpetual peace that Wilsonianism shares.

An understanding of Wilsonianism's theological roots, captured in the president's own religious convictions, further reveals his worldview's moral tension. Wilson was not only one of the most learned presidents, but also one of the most devout. His earliest known essay, written forty years before his Fourteen Points speech, implores readers to join "Christ's army" and wield the "sword of the spirit" to glorify God, foreshadowing the crusading language he would later adopt as commander in chief. The font of Wilson's almost militant belief system was undoubtedly his father, a prominent Presbyterian minister who preached from Southern pulpits during the Civil War. The younger Wilson became a committed disciple of the reformed Protestant denomination and

its charismatic Abraham, John Calvin. Economist John Maynard Keynes, a keen observer of Wilson during the Paris peace negotiations, argued the president's "Presbyterian temperament" profoundly shaped his worldview. Wilson "would do nothing that was contrary to his great profession of faith," reported Keynes.

This influence is readily seen in Wilson's repeated use of the word "covenant" in his agenda-setting speech a century ago, a term saturated with religious significance. Unlike "democracy's" zero appearances, "covenant" is utilized six times in the Fourteen Points to hallow the League of Nations, among other uses. As Magee contends, "to Wilson, the word 'covenant' was the starting place for the integration of the sacred and secular." His reformed Presbyterian faith preached this synthesis, upholding Calvin's vision of Christian statesmen leading communities of the faithful patterned after the biblical covenants that codified God's will.

Wilson placed supreme faith in the power of moral suasion embedded in multinational associations constituted by sacred covenant. He envisioned his beloved League forming such a holy pact and establishing a "presbytery of nations," headquartered, perhaps not coincidentally, in Geneva, Calvin's base of operations. It would instill moral accountability, compelling member nations to prevent war. This imperative was most apparent in Article 10, the crux of the League of Nations Covenant that Wilson claimed "strikes at the taproot of war." This provision called for all nations to "respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political

Official Presidential Portrait of *Woodrow Wilson, by Frank Graham Cootes, 1936. Source: White House Historical Association.*

independence of all Members of the League." Implicit in this provision is Wilson's belief that this forum of "common counsel" would foster enlightened and disinterested peacekeeping by appealing to shared national interests in upholding international order. He predicted that the federation would "operate as the organized moral force of men throughout the world, and that whenever wrong and aggression are planned or contemplated, this searching light of conscience will be turned upon them."

Wilson's faith in moral force was also captured by the contemporaneous Social Gospel movement, of which the president was a kindred spirit. Launched in the late nineteenth century by progressive Protestant clergy, the Social Gospel sought

to apply Christian ethics to the domestic economic, social, cultural, and racial challenges of the day. The Lord's Prayer served as the movement's red letter: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Wilson's Presbyterians were at the forefront of the Social Gospel, proclaiming in 1910 that its goals were "the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind...the promotion of social righteousness, and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."

The Great War steered the movement toward foreign affairs and Wilson's post-war vision for world peace. Writing just two months before the president's Fourteen Points address, Social Gospel evangelist Walter Rauschenbusch urged

polices mystically foreshadowing Wilson's. "Before the War the social gospel dealt with social classes; to-day [sic] it is being translated into international terms," Rauschenbush sermonizes. "All whose Christianity has not been ditched by the catastrophe", he continues, "are demanding a christianizing of international relations…for disarmament and permanent peace, for the rights of small nations against imperialistic and colonizing powers, for freedom of the seas and of trade routes, for orderly settlement of grievances."[6]

Niebuhr's Christian realist critique of Wilsonianism's Presbyterian and Social Gospel foundations hinges on their misguided belief in the potential of humanity to overcome self-interest and sin through a universal collective replicating the Kingdom of God. Based on their "view [of] history from the standpoint of the moral and social imperatives which a rational analysis of a situation generates," Niebuhr asserts that Christian idealists "require a 'federation of the world'" that "disregards the problem of power." In his groundbreaking work *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr grapples with the paradox dooming schemes for universal collective security. "The moral obtuseness of human collectives makes a morality of pure disinterestedness impossible," he writes.[7] This obtuseness reflects the dilemma characterizing any relationship in which a representative is bound to faithfully serve the interests of his constituents. "Everything which falls under the heading of unselfishness is inappropriate to the action of a state," Niebuhr continues. "No one has a right to be unselfish with other people's interests." No human collective, however

sanctified in covenantal terms, can sustain a "spirit of unselfish and unbiased justice," in Wilson's words, and thus uphold a "permanent peace."

However, Niebuhr the Christian realist was also critical of alternative realist views that "do not fully appreciate that a proper regard for moral aspirations is a source of political prestige… [which] is itself an indispensable source of power." He asserts that the Christian "ought to know that the creation of some form of world community…is the most compelling command of our day."[8] Niebuhr was a friend and frequent correspondent of the reigning realist of his time, American diplomat George Kennan, who reciprocated their friendship by famously calling Niebuhr "the father of us all." They both opposed Wilson's idealism, but Kennan's alternative—a "return to the policy of making the national interest the touchstone of our diplomacy"—was, in Niebuhr's view, "the wrong solution." "The cure for a pretentious idealism," the theologian writes, "is not egotism. It is a concern for both self and…a 'decent respect for the opinions of mankind.'"[9]

The generation following Wilson answered in a conflicted way Niebuhr's Christian command to create a world community. The post-war world order emerged as a hybrid one, featuring the United Nations organized for collective security, similar to the League of Nations, as well as regional alliances based on collective defense. The subtle difference in terminology captures a profound practical and moral distinction. Collective security is ideally inclusive of all nations, regardless of regime type, motivated by enlightened self-interest to actively prevent war wherever

it threatens. It is essentially universal, inclusive, and internalizing, focusing on countering aggression originating among its members. In contrast, collective defense is typically limited, exclusive, and externalizing, restricting membership to similarly situated or constituted nations and united against foreign threats. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) epitomizes this latter multilateral security association. The transatlantic alliance is explicitly founded to "safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples" and "on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law," and is "resolved to unite their efforts for collective defence." Collective defense, unlike collective security, aligns the interests and values of its member states, and is therefore more effective practically and sustainable morally.

History supports this judgment. Although it has succeeded in other respects, the UN has fallen short in meeting its universal mandate to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war." In contrast, NATO has proven largely effective not only in protecting its members from external threats, but also in consolidating and even expanding its member democracies. Critically, NATO is a genuinely multilateral collective defense arrangement, treating member states equitably and their mutual security indivisibly. This structure was "an interesting choice" by the United States, the dominant ally, as scholar Stewart Patrick observes.[10] Rather than negotiating bilateral security agreements, or simply extending the Monroe Doctrine's prohibition on external interference eastward, the United States elected not to "maximize its sovereign

The Four Military Representatives of the Supreme War Council, Versailles, their Co's, Secretaries, and Interpreters in Session, *by Herbert A. Olivier, 1919. Imperial War Museum London. Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

autonomy" so as to encourage the consolidation and integration of Western Europe's fragile democracies. This magnanimity strengthened America's moral authority. "By exercising restraint, treating partners as moral equals, and guaranteeing the security as well as economic stability of the free world, the United States [through NATO] helped legitimate its own power and leadership," Patrick argues. Tellingly, the term "collective defence" is rendered in its British rather than its American spelling in the official text of the alliance's charter, a show of respect from the would-be hegemon.

For Niebuhr's part, present at NATO's creation, the alliance was a "capstone" of US foreign policy, cementing the axiom that "the frontiers of our interests and responsibilities lie far beyond our geographic boundaries." Although he lamented its "undue emphasis upon military cooperation," missing the essential political and moral challenge communism represented, he commended NATO as "necessary" to allay European fears of a future American reversion to isolationism. Better

still would be a "complete political federation of the West" that met free Europe's greater recovery needs. His was a vision of collective defense of even greater moral depth.[11]

In a speech delivered before his famed Fourteen Points address a century ago, Wilson insisted that "a steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations." Furthermore, he asserted that "no autocratic government can be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants." Here was the moral clarity later lost in his Fourteen Points, in the collective security of his League of Nations, and in his eponymous school of US foreign policy. Liberal internationalism's signal contribution to the understanding of human nature and relations—that a nation's character and behavior are linked inextricably—failed to fully manifest in Wilson's program for peace. His Fourteen Points were predicated on the moral equivalency of democratic and autocratic nations reconciled through common counsel and an ethic of universal amity. A Christian realist, ever mindful

of mankind's sinful nature but ever hopeful of its redemptive potential, is compelled to conclude such a pursuit of perpetual peace quixotic. The world can be made safe for democracy only if democracies unite in collective defense. Thus transfigured could Wilson's transcendent vision of a liberal peace be resurrected. [P]

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Endnotes

1   Woodrow Wilson, "Address to Joint Session of Congress" (Washington, DC, April 2, 1917).

2   Woodrow Wilson, "Address to Joint Session of Congress" (Washington, DC, January 8, 1917).

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

4   Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017).

5   Reinhold Niebuhr,   *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941),   120. See footnote 12.

6   Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1917), 4.

7   Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932). See chapter 10.

8   Reinhold Niebuhr, "Plans for World Reorganization," *Christianity and Crisis*, October 19, 1942, 3-6.

9   Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 148.

10   Stewart Patrick, *The Sovereignty Wars: Reconciling America with the World* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2018). pp. 80-81.

11   Reinhold Niebuhr, "The North Atlantic Pact," *Christianity and Crisis*, May 30, 1949, 65-66.