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Review by **Mark Benbow**, Marymount University

Milan Babík's article, "George D. Herron and the Eschatological Foundations of Woodrow Wilson's Foreign Policy, 1917-1919" is part of the ongoing effort among Wilson scholars to examine the influence of Wilson's religious beliefs on his policies. John Mulder anticipated the discussion with *Woodrow Wilson: The Years of Preparation*.¹ The topic has recently received more attention with books such as Malcolm Magee's *What the World Should Be*² which looks at how Wilson's childhood in a religious Southern Presbyterian household may have influenced his worldview and his policies. Not every Wilson specialist is convinced that there was such an influence, attributing instead a more general liberal Protestantism to Wilson. Recently the debate continued with an H-Diplo roundtable in May 2011 on my own *Leading Them to the Promised Land: Woodrow Wilson, Covenant Theology and the Mexican Revolution* (Kent State, 2010).³

Babík argues that the debate to date has ignored one particular religious figure, George D. Herron, an American proponent of the Social Gospel movement. Babík is right that Herron has been neglected by historians as there hasn't been a scholarly book written on him in over sixty years. Babík argues that the relationship between Wilson and Herron sheds light on, as Babík notes, "the role of eschatology in Wilson's own understanding of international politics and American foreign policy during 1917-1919." (838) Babík first discusses how historians have viewed Wilson's religion, including recent works that place

¹ John M. Mulder. *Woodrow Wilson: The Years of Preparation*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

² Malcolm Magee. *What the World Should Be: Woodrow Wilson and the Crafting of a Faith-based Foreign Policy*. (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2008).

³ <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XII-21.pdf>.

a heavier emphasis on the influence of Wilson's religion on his policies. He then argues that Herron should be studied by Wilson scholars because Wilson's appreciation of Herron's opinions sheds light on Wilson's thought-processes during the First World War (842) and, Babík argues, because Wilson's views "broadly resembled Herron's." (844). It's an interesting approach and not an easy argument to try to prove.

Babík begins with a short biography of Herron. A Congregationalist minister, he was pastor of a church in Burlington, Iowa, before moving to Iowa (now Grinnell) College. Although married with five children, Herron began an affair with the young daughter of a wealthy supporter. Forced from his teaching position, Herron and his new wife moved to Florence, Italy in 1901. He spent the rest of his life in Europe. Beginning about 1917 Herron's role, self-appointed but then ratified by Wilson, was to help spread the Wilson administration's opinion on the war and on the coming peace agreement in central Europe. The author acknowledges that Herron and Wilson differed on the pace of change, with the former preferring a faster rate. Wilson, in contrast, preferred a more "orderly" process (845). Herron fell out with Wilson over Italian claims for former Austrian territory, especially the city of Fiume. Herron supported Italy's expansionist claims, while Wilson did not, and the latter seems to have quickly grown tired of Herron's lobbying for Italy.

Babík's article is an interesting reminder of the complicated interplay between various groups and individuals over the United States' entry into the First World War and the debate over the peace to be made thereafter. He does overstate the case slightly when he calls Herron one of Wilson's "advisors" (854) which implies influence. Wilson enjoyed getting reports from unofficial and semi-official channels. Anyone going through Wilson's papers at the Library of Congress will find countless examples of reports, letters, memos, pamphlets, etc., that were sent to Wilson. Clearly Wilson valued Herron's opinion because he found a position for the former minister with the American legation in Berne. Moreover, although Babík does not mention it, there are also several of Herron's books in Wilson's personal library.⁴ But did Herron's writings change Wilson's opinions or did they merely reinforce what Wilson already believed? Babík implies the latter when he notes that "Herron's significance lies in his interpretation of the Great War and American war aims in Protestant millennialist terms and even more so in the welcoming attitude with which Wilson acknowledged this interpretation as expressive of his own views and motives." (846) Moreover, Babík notes, "T. G. Masaryk...later recalled that Wilson and Herron 'were brought together by Herron's writings, *_since Wilson regarded [Herron's interpretation] as correct and giving an accurate picture of the situation_.*'" (846, emphasis added) In other words, Herron echoed Wilson's beliefs.

⁴ "The Library of Woodrow Wilson." 4 March 1921. Copy in the author's possession. The books include *Germanism and the American Crusade*, *The Greater War*, *The Menace of Peace*, 2 volumes, and *Woodrow Wilson and the World's Peace*.

As Babík notes, the period of correspondence lasted about two years, although Babík describes this as “a sustained (even if infrequent) stream of correspondence. (849) The index for the Wilson Papers at the Library of Congress, however, lists about two dozen letters from Herron to Wilson and about the same number to others such as Colonel House which are in Wilson’s file. Almost all of them date from 1919 which makes it questionable whether this constitutes a “sustained” correspondence. This can’t be taken as a final total, as it likely does not include every cable sent by Herron through State Department channels. Since Babík argues not that Herron was a major influence on Wilson, but that his views paralleled Wilson’s, this is not a major matter, but it does provide some sense of scale, as well as revealing how Herron seemed most interested in communicating directly with Wilson during the negotiations at Versailles and the subsequent campaign to ratify the treaty in the U.S. Moreover, the President was inundated by letters, memos, and pamphlets by those trying to influence the peace treaty. Herron’s letters are but a small part of this flood and Babík needs to go further in showing why his letters are of particular importance in understanding Wilson besides the fact that Wilson apparently agreed with Herron’s arguments.

Babík also quotes Czechoslovak President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and diplomat Štefan Osuský on Herron’s relationship to Wilson, the former calling him “Wilson’s unofficial confidante.” He notes that Osuský credited Herron with convincing Wilson to disregard early peace feelers from the Austro-Hungarian government. (854) Unfortunately, Herron seemed prone to overstatement and was not adverse to self-promotion. He referred to himself as “Dr. Herron” for the rest of his life after receiving an honorary D.D. from Tabor College in Iowa.⁵ What evidence is there beyond the accounts of these Czech leaders of Herron’s influence on Wilson? Wilson’s agreement with Herron’s views indicates only agreement, not influence. It may well be possible that Herron exaggerated his influence on Wilson to the Czech leaders to impress them.

Finally, even if Wilson’s worldview was influenced by his religious upbringing, that is not necessarily the same as his viewing the world through a religious lens. Babík claims Wilson viewed World War One through an “eschatological foundation” (856 and title) but does not provide evidence beyond Wilson’s apparent agreement with Herron. He never quite gets over the hurdle of proving that Wilson’s approval of religious language also proves that the President saw the war as a religious struggle. Could it not be that an event on the scale of the World War lent itself to apocalyptic language? Not every reference to an “Armageddon” in politics is a religious one.

Despite these criticisms, Babík’s article is useful in shining a light on how Wilson attempted to deal with the chaos of the First World War and at Versailles. Herron was

⁵ Robert T. Handy. “Herron, George Davis”; <http://www.anb.org/articles/15/15-00328.html> ; *American National Biography Online*. Feb. 2000. Access Date: Nov 04 2011.

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not in the same league as Colonel House as one of Wilson's advisors, but he did have at least brief access to the President's ear at a critical time. As such, Babik adds more detail to our understanding of how Wilson grappled with the question of post-war world in 1918-1919. Babik should to continue investigating Herron's relationship with Wilson as a line of inquiry worth pursuing.

Mark Benbow is a member of the history department at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia, where he has taught since 2007. From 2003-2006 he was staff historian at the Woodrow Wilson House museum in Washington, DC. Benbow's first book, *Leading Them to the Promised Land, Woodrow Wilson, Covenant Theology and the Mexican Revolution, 1913-1915* was published by Kent State University Press in 2010 and he is a contributor to *The Woodrow Wilson Companion* which is due to be published in 2013. He is currently working on a biography of Christian Heurich.

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