
This is the first study in a series published by Oxford University Press that includes volumes on Christina Rossetti (1830-94), John Stuart Mill (1806-73), Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928), Queen Victoria (1819-1901), Benjamin Franklin (1706-90), and Margaret Mead (1901-78). According to the editor of the series, Timothy Larsen (who is also author of the volume on John Stuart Mill), the aim of the series is to provide a general account of the lives and thought of prominent men and women whose cultural significance is not primarily attributed to the religious dimension of their life and work. The volumes focus on their convictions, doubts, ideas, and actions, but also on the religious contexts in which they lived.

The subtitle of this volume is well chosen. It refers to a statement allegedly made by Woodrow Wilson’s (1856-1924) father, Joseph Ruggles Wilson (1822-1903), upon Wilson’s appointment to the office of a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church in 1897 (fifteen years prior to his election to the presidency): “I would rather that he held that position than be president of the United States” (vii). Hankins sees Wilson as “easily one of the most religious presidents in American history” to the extent that every policy and many of his most important speeches were infused with his family’s Calvinist Presbyterianism (vii). He views the promotion of Christian morality and Christian principles throughout the United States and the world as the main driving force of Wilson’s life and work (vii). In ten chapters—“Calling,” “Preparation,” “Christian Scholar,” “Professor,” “Secularizer,” “Stepping Stone to the Presidency,” “Wilson in the Nation’s Service,” “Pacifist Warrior,” “Fidelity,” and “Defeated Prophet”—Hankins lays out the spiritual map of Wilson’s life from his conversion at the age of sixteen up to his death.

Politics and religion were already explicitly linked for Wilson’s father, who was the permanent clerk of the southern Presbyterian Church (U.S.), the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, which remained separate from the northern Presbyterian Church for more than a century after the end of the Civil War; Wilson also had Presbyterian preachers on his mother’s side of the family (1). In the first chapter, Hankins offers an overview of the Reformed orthodoxy that marked the Wilson family. Under the growing influence of Arminianism, calling and covenant became more important than more orthodox conceptions of election, predestination, and depravity and came to shape Wilson’s later political vision. He believed a covenant existed between the nation-state and God, and transferred the ministerial self-understanding of his ancestors to the political sphere (3).

Between 1872 and 1874, at a relatively young age, Wilson decided to go into politics rather than follow in the footsteps of his forefathers (3-4). At Princeton, he came into contact with New Light Calvinist Presbyterianism (4). Hankins makes clear with many examples that Wilson’s focus was on educating himself politically by studying accounts from Roman, French, and British history, focusing especially on the two most recent centuries (Wilson based was especially fascinated with the work of William Ewart Gladstone [1809-1898], cf. 21-22; 37; 54-57). He viewed European history from the vantage point of his religious self-understanding. Hankins traces Wilson’s struggle with the study of law, research, personal life and health (Wilson apparently had several strokes already at an early age, cf. 93; 97), the (religious) significance of debate for his understanding of politics, his dissertation and publications, university career at
Princeton, political career as Governor of New Jersey and as President (124-34; cf. 209). A paradoxical evaluation of himself sums up Wilson's spiritual self-perception: "I am capable, it would seem, of being satisfied spiritually without being satisfied intellectually." Hankins interprets this statement as Wilson's personal rendering of the classic two-spheres view (separating faith from intellect) that developed in the late nineteenth century, a rendering that would pervade Wilson's life (52; 71; 73). Hankins describes the transition from academic career to political office aptly as follows: "In his scholastic career, Wilson distinguished between religion and intellectual life, even while as university president he tried unsuccessfully to keep these two distinct things together. As a politician, he did almost the opposite. He blended Christianity and the advance of liberal democracy until they were virtually the same thing" (106). In conclusion, Hankins sees the Great War as a final turning point: "Wilson had said many times since the 1890s that a new day had arrived. Then, when war came, and it looked very much like the old days remained, he spiritualized even that event. It became 'the war to end all wars,' the 'final act of humanity,' a war 'fought for the salvation of all,' where men shed 'sacred blood.' Having spiritualized the bloodiest war in history to that time, there was simply no way to account for the fact that it changed nothing that was basic to human nature" (213).

One of the weaknesses of Hankins's insightful survey is that he uses numerous religious terms without defining them. Examples include (Wilson's) "Protestant work ethic," his role as "Secularizer" (the title of Hankins's fifth chapter on Wilson's presidency of Princeton University) and "nineteenth-century evangelicals." These terms are particularly important because Hankins emphasizes Wilson's divergence from Old School views of the Bible (11; 13-16). Following his overview of Reformed orthodoxy (which is merely one paragraph), Hankins speaks of the "Second Great Awakening, which took place sporadically from roughly 1800 to the 1840s" (2). It would have served the purpose of this "spiritual life" to have painted the picture of Wilson's spiritual roots in greater detail, especially since Hankins believes, for example, that the 1876 revival at Princeton was formative for Wilson's experience (3; cf. 11). Given that Wilson looked to apply religious models to the political sphere, Hankins should have taken into account recent scholarship on the Second Great Awakening and revisionist scholarship on early Evangelicalism. He could have considered the recent scholarly debate concerning the standard narrative of two great awakenings (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries); nor does he address the question, raised by James D. Bratt, concerning the relation between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century religious revivals. This question is yet to be thoroughly explored, despite the ongoing debate about the historical significance and interpretation of the "Great Awakening" in the early eighteenth century (cf. Butler, Awaish 165, "Enthusiasm" 1; Conforti 99).

Hankins's investigation is nonetheless based on a substantial reading of primary sources (cf. 219-20) and has the merit of offering a comprehensive survey of the religious context of Wilson's life and presidency, thereby pioneering a new field of scholarship into American modernity. Also deserving praise is the book's perceptive rendering of Wilson's attitudes towards Catholicism, which demonstrate Wilson's role in the further Catholicization of American Protestantism, and in the gradual denominational relaxation of higher education in the transition from the old-fashioned Christian college to the modern research university (55-57; cf. 78-79; 85; 98). Noteworthy is the author's decision to avoid facile comparisons with other presidents in favor of discovering new aspects in Wilson's religious life. As a whole, the volume is oriented more towards narra-
tive biography and political rather than religious history. The book includes a helpful index (225-35), a selected bibliography (219-23), and recommends itself not only to scholars interested in the U.S. presidency, but also in the manifold interrelations of religion and politics in modernity, which are in such dire need of more substantial research.

Works Cited

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