Does a President’s Faith Shape Policy?

Woodrow Wilson as a Case Study for Today

Lecture by Cara Burnidge
Friday, October 17
4:00 PM in Seerley 115
Religion often plays an important role in presidential elections. Candidates emphasize their values, beliefs, and affiliations with religious institutions. When candidates try to make their religious identity a reason for voters to elect them, many wonder, “do politicians really believe what they say they believe, or are they doing what they can to get elected?” Others may wonder, “if politicians really believe, will their beliefs matter once they are in office?” Can religion shape a presidency?

Using Woodrow Wilson as a case study, this lecture will examine how faith has (and has not) shaped a president’s time in office. Raised in a devout southern Presbyterian home, Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) attended a Presbyterian-affiliated college, Yale University, and remained a member of Presbyterian churches his entire life. When Wilson campaigned for the presidency in 1912, his platform, “The New Freedom,” earned the support of American Protestants for its ambitious reform agenda. And when the United States entered World War I and Wilson proclaimed Americans would help “make the world safe for democracy,” American churches supported the war effort by hosting war bond drives and encouraging male members to enlist in the war.

How did Wilson’s faith lead him to seek domestic and international reform? Why would American Christians be so supportive of war? And what did Christianity have to do with Wilson’s vision of the League of Nations? This lecture will examine how Wilson earned the support of American Christians and how his worldview shaped his policies while in office. By taking a look at Wilson’s presidency, this lecture will also offer insights on how to think about religion in policy making today.
Cara Burnidge is an Assistant Professor of Religion in the Department of Philosophy and World Religions. She received her PhD in American Religious History from the Department of Religion at Florida State University in 2013. Professor Burnidge’s research focuses on Christian reform movements and American foreign relations during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Her manuscript, “A Peaceful Conquest: Woodrow Wilson, the League of Nations, and the Great War of the Protestant Establishment” is under contract with the University of Chicago Press. In this work, Professor Burnidge argues that Woodrow Wilson’s so-called idealism and its legacy in American foreign relations was the result of American Protestants’ debates over how best to reform the world. Professor Burnidge began teaching at UNI in August 2014. Currently she is teaching “Religions of the World,” which she will continue to teach in Spring 2015 in addition to “Religion in America.”