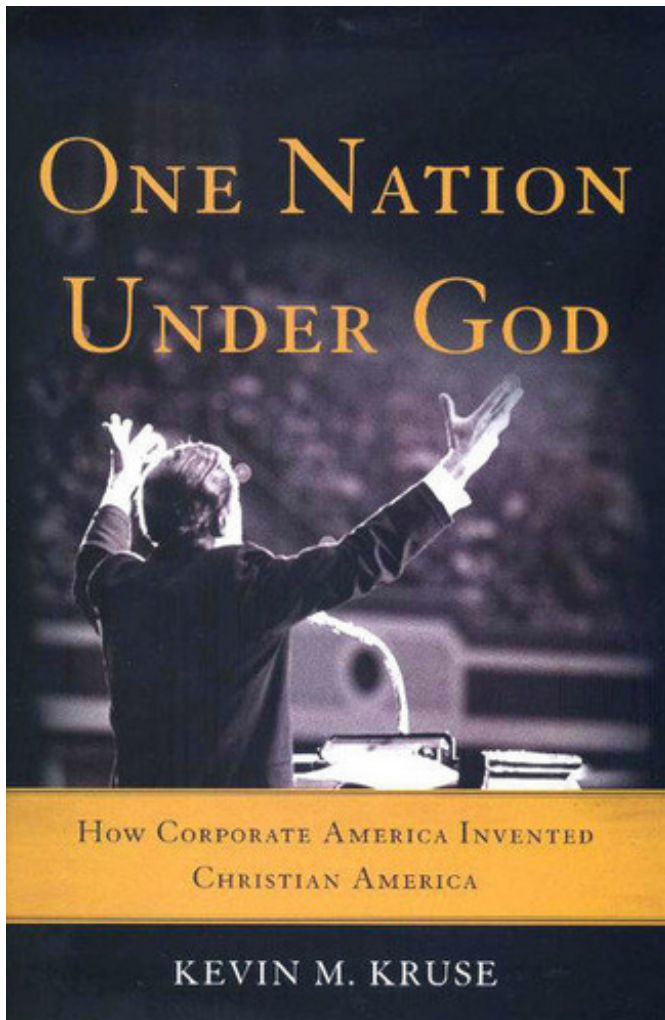


Kruse's work is great

'One Nation Under God' Looks at Faith in America

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"One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America" by Kevin M. Kruse.
New York: Basic Books, 2015, 384 pages, \$29.99 (cloth).



“At heart, this book seeks to challenge Americans’ assumptions about the basic relationship between religion and politics in their nation’s history,” Kevin M. Kruse explains in the introduction to *“One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America,”* his new exploration of the role religion has come to play in the everyday lives of those who call the United States their home. “For decades now, liberals and conservatives have been locked in an intractable struggle over an ostensibly simple question: Is the United States a Christian nation? This debate, largely focused on endless parsing of the intent of the founding fathers, has ultimately generated more heat than light.”

“*One Nation Under God*” is equal parts history lesson and cultural critique. I was impressed by the way Kruse integrates both aspects into a relatively concise yet masterfully thorough analysis of the evolving role religion continues to play in our national affairs. How we ultimately arrived at the present moment is, according to the author, the product of a complex interaction between a unique set of circumstances and the events they precipitated playing out on multiple levels. It was interesting to note how much our fascination with

spirituality has come to dominate political discourse in the seven decades since World War II, a nontrivial revelation traceable directly to a resurgence of religious sentiment that seemed to emerge – both spontaneously and with some outside assistance – during the Eisenhower administration.

“The rites of our public religion originated not in a spiritual crisis, but rather in the political and economic turmoil of the Great Depression,” Kruse notes in the epilogue. “The story of business leaders enlisting clergymen in their war against the New Deal is one that has been largely obscured by the very ideology that resulted from it.”

Kruse paints with both a broad brush as well as with an eye to fine detail. For instance, he devotes an entire chapter to the evolution of the Pledge of Allegiance and the prominent place it has come to

occupy in classrooms across the nation. Certainly who doesn't remember proclaiming this brief assertion of our collective loyalty at the beginning of each school day?

"The original Pledge of Allegiance, much like the Constitution itself, did not acknowledge the existence of God," Kruse notes in "Pledging Allegiance," the fourth chapter. "The idea originated with the Knights of Columbus, a leading Catholic fraternal organization. In April 1951, its Supreme Board of Directors adopted a resolution requiring its Fourth Degree Assemblies – divisions devoted to the promotion of patriotism, of which there were 750 in all – to insert 'under God' after the words 'one nation' when reciting the pledge at their meetings."

Many readers will be surprised by several of the insights Kruse provides, even though much of what he reveals has been public knowledge for years. What I found especially enlightening was the extent to which our leaders – especially our presidents – have infused religious elements into their everyday rituals, creating traditions now largely taken for granted. It is important to remember, however, that perhaps a majority of the activities we have come to see as routine were, at one time, considered inappropriate and even radical by many Americans.

"(Richard) Nixon and (Billy) Graham were so enamored with the National Prayer Breakfast that they resolved to replicate the annual tradition with a more regular one: Sunday services at the White House," Kruse recounts in "Which Side Are You On?" the eighth chapter. "The new White House church services took place in the East Room, a showcase space noted for its sparkling chandeliers and gold silk tapestries. Instead of pews, oak dining room chairs with seats of yellow brocade were arranged in rows of 20. As worshipers entered the East Room, they picked up liturgical programs adorned with the official presidential seal and found their way inside while a Marine master sergeant played soothing hymns on the organ."

Kruse is a professor in the History Department at Princeton University. His previous books include "White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism (Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America)," "Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement," which he co-wrote with Stephen Tuck, and "The New Suburban History (Historical Studies of Urban America)," which was co-authored by Thomas J. Sugrue. His latest offering, like everything he has been associated with, is extensively researched, with 38 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, eight chapters and the epilogue comprising the main narrative.

Structurally, "One Nation Under God" is organized in three major parts, "Creation," "Consecration" and "Conflict." Kruse begins his journey in the 1930s and continues through the present day, although most of the story is focused intently on the 1950s and 1960s; i.e., the genesis of the modern conservative movement.

A point Kruse asserts repeatedly, and with considerable force, is that the undeniable way many Americans have come to see matters of faith and its relationship to our democratic way of life is a fairly recent phenomenon. The founding fathers originated very few, if any, of the customs and practices currently defining our self-serving worldview; i.e., the almost universal notion we are "one nation under God."

Kruse concludes that religion, as used by countless politicians in an effort to advance their own agendas, has become a polarizing force unparalleled in our country's history. His argument is compelling: much of the rhetoric surrounding the ongoing debate about who we are as a people and what our destiny is as a nation is simply a smokescreen for motivations as old, and as unattractive, as humanity itself. I found "One Nation Under God" to be a great read and I believe many readers would share my assessment. I recommend this one highly.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*