

Review Essay

Is Christian America Invented? And Why Does It Matter?*

Hunter Baker
University Fellow and Associate
Professor of Political Science
Union University, Jackson, Tennessee

After many years of earnest disputation, we remain fascinated by the question of what the United States' genetic identity really is, especially in regard to religion. In the previous century, academics memorably battled over Charles Beard's Marxist economic interpretation of the American founding. Today, the religious question preoccupies us. Was America a Christian nation? If it was, then is it still one today? Does the past set a claim on the present or the future? More questions crop up. Were early Americans actually predominantly Christian? Did they go to church? What about the separation of church and state? Did the founders envision a warm relationship between the two entities or a strict division? Even among the separationists, was the impulse more about protecting the church from corruption or preventing religious fanatics from imposing their beliefs on everyone?

Why does this line of inquiry about the relationship between Christianity and the American republic have the feel of a high stakes contest? Both sides act as if knowing the answer will somehow resolve our disputes today.

David Barton, for example, has built a substantial following among some conservative Christians by putting together a collection of documents in support of his case that the founders were thoroughly Christian.¹ The idea seems to be to establish something like ownership rights to the country. We owned it then, so we own it now.

* Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); Timothy E. W. Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

Various entries from individuals who would prefer a more secular interpretation of the nation's roots work in a different direction. Presumably, if it could be proved that the republic was founded as an experiment in secular liberalism, then we could reject synthetic, modern incursions from various Christian religionists who wield myth.²

The battle finds its locus in the First Amendment of the American Constitution. The text itself is not all that helpful. It guarantees that Congress may not enact a religious establishment (which bluntly meant that we would have no national church) and that individuals may engage in the free exercise of their religion (which simply meant they would not pay tithes as taxes and would not be forced to join a national church). Today, the amendment does not actually serve its original purpose. Certainly, it is true that we have no national church and no tithes or membership are required to support it. But the amendment has been dragooned into the larger purpose of bolstering the separation of church and government at state and local levels. The Fourteenth Amendment purportedly achieves that goal—by taking a statement that clearly applies to Congress and applying it to all American governments—and has certainly been interpreted that way by courts. However, I think it is clear that Steven D. Smith is correct in saying that the First Amendment's religion clauses are jurisdictional in nature. "Congress shall make no law" meant that the states were able to continue their own practices on the Virginia model (separation), the Massachusetts model (a slender establishment), or some variation. If Smith is correct about the amendment being jurisdictional rather than truly substantive, then the Fourteenth Amendment would have nothing to extend to the states.³

Regardless of whether Smith is correct, we are where we are. Our jurisprudence has treated the religion clauses as a general prohibition on establishment and a broad guarantee of free exercise, which applies to all American governments. No government in the United States actually attempts to establish a formal church. Neither do any require membership or mandate tithes. No government is likely to attempt such a thing. If these matters were all that is at stake, we would have stopped arguing about establishment and free exercise a long time ago.

The problem, though, has come as we deal with controversies that go beyond these matters. Does "establishment" include prayers and Bible reading in schools? How about subsidies to religious education for nonreligious needs such as bus rides, scholarships, or computers? Is a Ten Commandments' monument at the state capitol a forbidden establishment despite the decalogue's powerful influence on the tradition of law in the West? Does the same free-exercise guarantee that ensures that one may choose a church or no church also extend to protect the individual or groups from incursions on their religious life and conscience

by the state? Frankly, we are in no-man's land on many of these questions, and the courts have had to manufacture the answers. Mostly, they have seemed to rely on Jefferson's "wall of separation" metaphor though that was merely one of a variety of live options at the time. A strict construction of the amendment would leave such things open to local preferences, but the courts have not been satisfied with that answer. Of course, if we speak of *rights*, then it is difficult to argue for anything other than universal laws to protect them.

Because the plain meaning of the words of the amendment in historical context is not directly aimed at the matters to which we now apply them, we seek additional guidance and support. There are arguably three camps involved.

Most conservative Christians (Catholic and Protestant) would prefer to see a vigorous Christian presence in our institutions and politics. They fully respect classical institutional separation of church and state, but still see room for the church to inform the public sphere and perhaps to ground its values. Thus, they are friendly to religious participation in government programs and to the presence of religious symbols, such as the Ten Commandments, on government premises.

The second camp contains the more secular-minded activists. They tend to have a more negative reading on religion and seek to protect themselves and all public communities from religious coercion. For them, the best way to deal with religion is to "neutrally" prevent it from interaction with government institutions or even politics and to root it out where it has found a foothold. Theological liberals tend to fit into this second group because they fear conservative religious activity in the public square and in institutions as much as secularists do. By the late twentieth century, opposition to conservative religionists became a significant part of the identity of theological liberals and their denominations.

Finally, there is a third camp composed of a particular type of conservative Protestant. This group tends to embrace a fairly strong view of separation because of their concern that the government will corrupt the church or leave it neutered as are the established churches of Europe.

There are significant consequences that follow from how the nation ultimately interprets the interaction of religion, politics, and institutions. If the relationship is construed as friendly and mutually reinforcing, then it is a fairly simple thing to argue against something like gay marriage, to have Christian chaplains in the military, and to provide students with government funding that they may carry to religious schools and colleges. But if the separation is seen to be a strict one and is motivated by a skeptical view of religion and its contribution, then religiously informed views become void in politics and even religious participation on an equal basis in government programs becomes suspect. Scholars writing about

the nation's religious culture are likely to have their own views of the situation and who should prevail as they work.

With this background in mind, we encounter two new works on Christianity and America's religious culture. Kevin Kruse tips his hand early in *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* with a prefatory statement: "Like most scholars, I believe the historical record is fairly clear about the founding generation's preference for what Thomas Jefferson memorably described as a wall of separation between church and state."⁴ Kruse later indicates his belief that the United States' real tradition is one that not only rigorously separates church and state but also clearly divides religion from politics. He also sees the high degree of church membership achieved during the Eisenhower years as something that was new and engineered relative to the real American way.

Before I contest or critique some of Kruse's views, I must say that his study of public Christianity in the twentieth century is deep and tremendously informative. I would recommend it to any serious student of twentieth-century religion, politics, and culture. Although I encountered it with a certain amount of resistance because of the slick subtitle "How Corporate America Invented Christian America," I have concluded that it may reflect the publisher's desire to make the book more marketable. The author's real arguments are more subtle than the title implies.

No, corporate America did not create Christian America. The mistake is not to claim that there has been a Christian America but rather to see it as monolithic and not in competition with other important identities. H. Richard Niebuhr commented in his *The Kingdom of God in America* that the philosophers (such as Jefferson) were often driven by the Enlightenment, but the numbers that sustained the revolution, for example, probably ran ten to one in favor of the Christians.⁵ In other words, even if Christians did not supply the majority of the intellectual firepower, they provided the great majority of the popular support.

Niebuhr's comment drives me back to Kruse's view that the high rates of church attendance of the Eisenhower era ran counter to American tradition. That point cries out for a revisitation of Patricia Bonomi's *Under the Cope of Heaven*. In that book, Bonomi set out her dissatisfaction with claims that Americans were irreligious during the time of the American founding. She found the assertion difficult to believe given the position of the revolution and founding between the first and second Great Awakenings. Based on powerful research of primary sources, she concluded that church attendance and membership during the period have been misunderstood and misrepresented. She estimated that church attendance in those years was probably around 60 percent or so, which puts it quite close to the Eisenhower era highs.⁶

I would also offer some resistance to Kruse's notion that the American founders intended to rigorously separate religion and politics. Philip Hamburger's *The Separation of Church and State* (2002) made exactly the case that the founding generation would have been practically united in the conviction that religion and politics should not be separated.⁷ Bonomi wrote to similar effect in her book. Kruse chooses to engage neither of those authors.

Having suitably lodged my protest in those areas, I would like to move on to the three big themes that Kruse covers so interestingly and informatively. The author's story begins with an examination of what he calls a "Christian libertarian" movement spurred predominantly by the activity of a high profile, theologically liberal pastor, James W. Fifield (from Barack Obama's denomination!), who vigorously fought the New Deal and emphasized God-given liberty against a grasping, freedom-engulfing state. Fifield operated out of southern California and lived like a wealthy man. He built a big church and preached something like a success gospel. Kruse goes into significant detail on Fifield's projects designed to push this Christian libertarianism.⁸

Although Fifield is an interesting, if largely forgotten, figure, Kruse sees him as a catalyzing agent. He is a tiller of the field. From his work springs other efforts by men such as Abraham Vereide (the founder of Goodwill Industries and Doug Coe's founding predecessor at International Christian Leadership, now the Fellowship Foundation) and Billy Graham. Kruse documents small-government language from Graham early in his career that seems to track Fifield's own attacks.⁹ But the interesting thing about the story Kruse tells is that while Christian libertarianism (if that is really a good label) failed to take off or roll back the New Deal, the effort to bring a form of Christian backing (as with gold and currency) to the government seemed to succeed. President Eisenhower, both on his own and with the influence of Graham, developed a conviction that the United States would be incoherent as a polity without a better basis than simply the will of the people (or perhaps a Rousseauian "general will"). Soviet atheism surely helped spur him as well.

That, too, comes through in the narrative. Where Fifield railed against FDR's programs, the second wave aimed its efforts against the architects of the Iron Curtain. Under the influence of Eisenhower's powerful personal credibility, it does appear that a strong movement developed to more strongly express the conviction that the United States stands on a strong Judeo-Christian foundation of the type that could be supported by the three crucial strands of the Protestants, the Catholics, and the Jews. Eisenhower was baptized and joined a church. Cabinet meetings and other official business began with prayer. The government altered

the Pledge of Allegiance to incorporate “under God” and “One Nation under God” became a national motto printed on the money where it joined “E Pluribus Unum” (out of many, one) “Annuit Coeptis” (Providence favors our undertakings), and “Novus Ordo Seclorum” (a new order of the ages).¹⁰

Throughout the book, Kruse is careful to note the involvement of the American corporate establishment. I think that ultimately, he is tilting in the direction of a Marxist analysis of the use of religion. The idea, perhaps, is that the commercial class pushed for a more explicitly religious understanding of America so as to manipulate the public into providing greater support for the United States against the Soviet threat. Kruse does not state that thesis directly, but the inference is not a difficult one to make. This argument is different from the claim that “corporate America invented Christian America.” Rather, it says something more on the order that corporate America appealed to the religious sentiments of Americans to bolster their patriotism when it was needed to help defend the interests of the corporate class. Of course, to look at the situation that way is to reduce figures such as J. Howard Pew, J. W. Marriott, and others to capitalist puppeteers of the people, when in reality motives were surely diverse. In the cases of men such as Pew and Marriott, for example, there is ample evidence of their devout faith.

However, if Kruse does make a soft case for manipulation of the masses by way of religion, the third major part of his book undercuts that case. In the final section, the dissenters against America’s soft religious establishment (prayers and Bible reading in school, as in landmark court cases of the period) begin to push back against civil religion in the Judeo-Christian mode. Kruse does not shy away from demonstrating quite thoroughly that there was a substantial divide between Americans generally and elites in both the religious and legal fields. Prior to reading Kruse’s book, I had not realized just how strong the public reaction had been to Supreme Court cases forbidding prayer and Bible reading.¹¹ Without a major effort by religious liberals to make a case that clergy supported strict separation it seems likely that that the First Amendment may have been joined by a clarifying amendment permitting a much more permeable boundary. It is here where one can easily see why denominations such as the Southern Baptists experienced such a radical shake-up in the decades that followed. There was a sharp divide between denominational leaders and the laity. Nevertheless, the fog and delaying action put up by theological liberals and secularists was enough to slow down the freight train for a constitutional amendment. One cannot help but think about gay marriage decades later. When there might have been enough momentum for a traditional marriage amendment, many mainstream figures adopted a less ambitious (and constitutionally suspect) approach with the Defense of Marriage Act. It satisfied the hunger for action and allowed the minority time

to strategize, organize, and wait for times to change. Observing the resolution of such controversies as those over school prayer, Bible reading, and perhaps gay marriage much later, the dynamic seems less like some corporate elite using religion to manipulate the masses for economic reasons, and instead appears more like a cultural elite frustrating the will of the masses.

If Kruse's analysis tilts lightly in the direction of a Marxist diagnosis of religion's role in American society, then Timothy Gloege's *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* has a bit more conviction on the topic. It is interesting to read the two books together because they seem to argue with each other chronologically about the corporate America/Christian America question. While Kruse focuses on the middle of the twentieth century, Gloege sees corporate titans attempting to use religion for purposes of social control in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Therefore, if Kruse's book argues that corporate America invented Christian America in the 1950s, then Gloege's book might counter, "No, corporate America invented Christian America a half-century earlier."

My rejoinder to both is to argue that Christian America has always been there and that what some see as manipulation might actually be another person's sincere and devout mission. Where J. Howard Pew and J. W. Marriott come in for some attention in Kruse's book, Quaker Oats founder Henry Crowell and Lyman Stewart of Standard Oil take center stage in *Guaranteed Pure*. Although there are others who no doubt had wrong motives or simply swam with the currents, these named figures all appear to have worked to promote religion out of their own sense of spiritual calling. In any case, both books present religion as something wealthy elites hoped to use to calm labor unrest and to keep government reformers at bay.

Despite the similarity between the two books in terms of the theme of corporate interaction with Christianity in the United States, Gloege is less concerned with questions related to politics and institutions of government than he is with the church itself. For years, I have struggled to classify the occasional Protestant who, while conservative, can find no good in anything evangelicals ever do. In other words, I have been trying to understand D. G. Hart, as he is perennially dyspeptic when it comes to evangelicals and their attempts to reform/save the culture.¹² *Guaranteed Pure* has given me a lexicon for doing so. Gloege seems to have significant sympathy for a group of persons he refers to as "churchly conservatives."¹³ The churchly conservatives place a high priority on the activity of the churches as churches and look with suspicion on the work of parachurch organizations. Parachurch efforts—the evangelization campaigns of D. L. Moody, for example—suffer from a lack of theological depth that stronger church connections

would provide and make the mistake of adopting worldly methods to carry out their work. As a result, they are run like businesses instead of like churches. Parishioners, in turn, become something less like members of the body and more like consumers. And that, by Gloege's lights, is a major mistake. While *Guaranteed Pure* discusses many matters, this is the book's primary burden. Having worked for a number of parachurch organizations myself, I can understand the complaint, especially when it comes to something such as determining fundraising methods. One might appeal for a plain and sincere approach only to face experts armed with studies who insist on methods that can only be described as "worldly."

While Gloege's critique of parachurch work such as that conducted by the Moody Bible Institute has some strength, the reader may well wonder whether his view is so jaundiced as to color the history. His portrayal of Moody's ministry is so blasé and uninspiring as to leave one puzzled as to why the man has been so well-remembered as an evangelist. Either the reputation was unearned or the narrative fails to do justice to the life and work of the man. I suspect the latter is the case. Moody only really looks good in the book when he is half a country away from the Bible institute that bears his name and having doubts about it.

While much of Gloege's book focuses on the problem of using business methods to do the spiritual work of the church, he also sets forth a complaint with regard to how orthodoxy is determined. Lyman Stewart of Standard Oil provided the financial backing to publish *The Fundamentals*, a series of small books in quasi-periodical form that were sent to pastors across the United States. Gloege takes issue with the form of orthodoxy the books embraced and with Crowell's promotion of Moody Bible Institute as "pure religion" because he sees both efforts as essentially an exercise in brand management and winning market share. Leaders of conservative parachurch efforts offered the public what they purported to be genuine and pure Christianity and thus displaced or marginalized other voices and other claims.

The answer to Gloege may emerge to some degree from Kruse. As mentioned above, Kruse spends the final portion of his book detailing the struggle over the presence of Judeo-Christian religion in American public life. One of the most impressive parts of that narrative has to do with the divide between religious elites and the people in the pews and in the neighborhoods. While it is possible to argue, as Gloege does, that corporate men such as Henry Crowell and Lyman Stewart jumped into the "business" of Christianity and used parachurch organizations to accomplish something of a takeover, there is another way to look at the situation. Perhaps it is the case that the churches (especially in the mainline denominations) faltered by not giving the people the gospel truth for which they

hungered and thirsted, thus leaving the door open for determined laymen to enter and serve as they thought best.

Returning again to the themes present in these books and generally in the running controversy over politics and religion in America, one question emerges repeatedly. Why do many Christians have such a deep desire to see God worshipped and honored not only in their churches but also across the land? Why do they take it personally when the Supreme Court rules against prayer in school and for gay marriage? The social scientific answer would be something like this: They see strong evidence that others do not share their beliefs and find such disconfirmation painful. However there is another answer available. Christians struggle with the sense that the nation owes something to God. It owes him love and respect. It owes him obedience. They still fear as men of old did that God is a jealous god and that he will hold us accountable for refusing to acknowledge his blessings and for flouting his law. They want to save souls, yes, but they also want to bring the nation back to him as they suppose it once hewed more tightly to the Father. Furthermore they feel they should use every tool at hand to accomplish that purpose. It is important to determine the ways in which they may be right or wrong. Books such as these will help us sift the evidence and consider the possibilities.

While I have found much in these books to argue with and criticize, I must emphasize that I found both of them to be informative, well-written, and completely worth the time spent in reading. Both authors deserve a large readership.

Notes

1. David Barton, *Original Intent: The Courts, the Constitution, & Religion* (Aledo, TX: Wallbuilders Press, 1996). There have been at least five editions of the book.
2. For a nice example of this, see Isaac Kramnick and Laurence Moore, *The Godless Constitution: The Case Against Religious Correctness* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).
3. Smith makes that case in *Foreordained Failure: The Quest for a Constitutional Principle of Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
4. Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).
5. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 124. The book was originally published by Harper & Row in 1937.
6. Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 220.
7. Philip Hamburger, *The Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
8. Kruse, *One Nation Under God*, 3–34.
9. Kruse, *One Nation Under God*, 37–39.
10. Kruse, *One Nation Under God*, 67–125.
11. Kruse, *One Nation Under God*, 205–6, 218.
12. See, for example, D. G. Hart, *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).
13. Timothy W. Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 112–13.