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### December 30, 2010: What Does “one Nation under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance Mean?

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Title: What Does “one Nation under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance Mean?

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12/30/2010—Happy New Year to you all. During exam grading time, professors catch up on their reading, which in my case includes back issues of the New York Review of Books. Back in November, Geoffrey Wheatcroft reviewed two books criticizing the American war on terror: *The Irony of Manifest Destiny*, by William Pfaff and *The Icarus Syndrome*, by Peter Beinart. (review here). Both books criticize the arrogance of American foreign policy, but Wheatcroft is clearly of the view that Pfaff has been mostly right about everything for a very long time. For example, Pfaff opposed the war in Vietnam, saw early on the weakness in the Soviet system, criticized the “ideology of national triumphalism” especially after the fall of the Soviet Union (he called for reduction in American military forces) and does not believe in the enormity of the Islamic radical threat. Pfaff has been right time after time. What is the role of religion in our misguided foreign policy? Pfaff calls our current path “the secular utopian ideology of promoting universal democracy” and Pfaff traces its roots back to the religious exceptionalism of the American founding that has always assumed there is a unique American virtue. So, you could blame our hubris on our biblical heritage. But here we return to the phrase “one Nation under God”. Clearly the phrase can mean precisely that America is uniquely God’s instrument. That is what George Bush, for example, believes. However, “under God” can also mean, and always also did mean, subject to God, subject to divine judgment if we contravene God’s will. And in our arrogance and violence, we can be seen to be doing exactly that. We have in that understanding a powerful resource of critique, one that would speak to religious believers otherwise tempted to worship the State (at least in its wars). I have not figured out why global warming does not strike religious believers as God’s punishment for the misuse of His creation out of greed. That is exactly how a Reinhold Niebuhr would have seen it. Maybe we need more religion in the public square, rather than less.