The Next Religious Establishment, by Eldon J. Eisenach

Reviewed by R. Jonathan Moore in the February 7, 2001 issue

Is the United States still "a nation with the soul of a church," as Sidney Mead once insisted? Are we still united by what Robert Bellah identified as a "civil religion"? Or have we become so diverse, so various in our creeds and commitments, so concerned with tolerating others in the name of civil decorum, that there is little left save the accidents of geography and circumstance to bind us together as a people?

These questions are at the heart of Eldon Eisenach's engaging book. A political science professor at the University of Tulsa, the author is deeply concerned about the nature of American identity. Early on, Eisenach makes clear that the current intellectual situation is confused, even dire. "I fear that contemporary moral and political discourse at its most articulate has become so divorced from our experiences as to become incomprehensible and even pathological," he writes. "Universalistic, formal, cosmopolitan, abstract, and rights-obsessed, this discourse not only seems to deny that we are a particular people--a nation--it also constrains or brackets what can legitimately be publicly stated, so that fewer and fewer Americans feel competent to speak at all."

The way out of this mess, Eisenach argues, is to once again develop an informal religious establishment. Throughout the nation's history American identity has been defined by a series of voluntary and noncoercive religious establishments; only when another shared moral orientation, or establishment, comes into focus will the notion of American identity again have substance and purpose.

Calling for a new American establishment may seem more than a little strange, even socially insensitive or downright offensive, in these times of growing religious and ethical diversity. But Eisenach's argument is much more complicated than this, and deserves serious consideration by all who care about the present state of our union.

One way to get a sense of the current cultural contest Eisenach describes is to line up the protagonists. Who are Eisenach's villains? Chief among them are university professors, who have abdicated their task of articulating a coherent political theology for America. In particular, Eisenach rails against the subset of professors he

calls "universalists." This category includes all those--most prominently John Rawls--who believe that national identity can be derived merely from a commonly agreed-upon set of universal rights and principles.

In Eisenach's estimation, universalists are largely responsible for the growing reach of the state. Once this "overclass" of cultural elites has decided that its principles are universal, the state has ample justification for extending its laws into all spheres of life. This means that government becomes more and more intrusive, seeking to expand the law in order to bring everyone and everything under the universal moral umbrella. The state and its law become totalizing, ruling out of bounds all ideas that can't be expressed in "universal" language.

The problem with universalism is philosophical as well as practical. By claiming an all-encompassing set of principles that stand outside of history and politics, universalists mask the very particular and historically located nature of their claims. In the end, says Eisenach, universalism is a sham. In spite of its lofty pretensions, it is really just one more particular philosophy with its own substantive goals and political agenda. No paradigm, not even universalism, can escape the particularities of its own historical location and cultural situation.

Multiculturalists are also villains in Eisenach's narrative. They're guilty of the opposite sin: by rooting identity in particularist subnational groupings, multiculturalists preclude the realization of an overarching American identity. If the U.S. is understood primarily as a set of separate tribes and cultures (however they may be divided), the only thing Americans have in common is a recognition of diversity. That alone, Eisenach says, does not add enough content to the American character.

Eisenach relies upon history to make the case for his own alternative understanding of American identity. American history, he contends, has been marked by the rise and fall of political regimes. During politically coherent eras, these regimes embody an authoritative national identity. The nature of that identity, when widely shared, constitutes a voluntary religious establishment. Over the course of time America has cycled through different forms of establishment--or "shared moral orientations"--as new understandings of national identity have supplanted older ones. American identity is not static, but is continually renegotiated and contested. As one version of the national narrative recedes, new proposals come forward to take its place. As a new consensus about American identity is reached, a new, noncoercive religious

establishment takes hold. Americans once again share a common set of values and agree upon endeavors the nation should collectively undertake.

The current era, Eisenach suggests, is a time of transition. The former, vaguely Protestant establishment has crumbled; we are now clearly living in a post-Protestant era. What is needed, then, is a new voluntary establishment to replace the old one, so that once again Americans share a moral consensus that will enable and justify collective national action.

Anyone advocating a new religious establishment--however voluntary or noncoercive--will soon run into critics. But with refreshing honesty, Eisenach tackles the implications of his proposal head-on. Each voluntary religious establishment, he confesses, "is both an invitation and an exclusion." Each new moral regime invites everyone to participate, and those rejecting that invitation will not be able to fully take part in national cultural and political life. Universalists will complain that this is unfair, but it is an incontrovertible reality.

Eisenach also observes that any individual or group that claims full membership in the national community will be changed by the encounter with other citizens. To really belong to the nation, in other words, means that one's identity must be negotiated with others of different moral and political persuasions. The consequence is that no group that fully participates in American national life can maintain exclusive control over its own identity. In fact, the closer to the center one's own worldview comes, the more it becomes part of the common faith and the less control one has over its contents. Identity politicians and multiculturalists may find this threatening and unfair, but Eisenach insists again that this reality must be accepted.

If America is to develop a new religious establishment, says Eisenach, the university must lead the way, since it has historically served as the source for a national political theology. In fact, if the nation's institutions of higher education do not lead the way in developing a new national narrative, they will forfeit their moral justification for existing.

Given the nature of Eisenach's proposal, the identity of his historical heroes comes as no surprise: John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln, who each articulated American identity and destiny in terms of a sacred covenant; John Dewey, who argued eloquently for a common faith rooted in and nourished by the university; William Rainey Harper, who insisted that the university's moral legitimacy derives

from service as priest, prophet, savior and philosopher of the nation.

Eisenach's argument is not without flaws. Beware of anyone who holds up the university as "the primary national church" and its professors as America's high priests! And his book falters a bit as he shifts from description to prescription. Though he suggests that pragmatism offers the best means to a new, authentic moral consensus, he does not explain this philosophy. Consequently, the reader is left with no means for evaluating the grandiose claims he makes on its behalf.

Alternately history, theology, political science, sociology, philosophy, cultural rant, morality play and plaintive plea, Eisenach's brief but wide-ranging work is not a quick read. But those who, like the author, care deeply about the nature and character of America will find the journey engaging and ultimately rewarding.