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*National Identity and Political Theology
in Post-Protestant America*

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Eldon Eisenach : The Next Religious Establishment: National Identity and Political Theology in Post-Protestant America (American Intellectual Culture) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my

time, and all praised *The Next Religious Establishment: National Identity and Political Theology in Post-Protestant America* (American Intellectual Culture):

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Establishing the Establishment By Joshua Christofferson In his book, *The Next Religious Establishment*, author Eldon J. Eisenach uses an American historical framework to justify his thesis: "...a new voluntary religious establishment is required as a precondition for reaching agreement on church-state/religion-politics issues..." Eisenach contends that from its founding era until the early 20th century, America functioned under a shared religious theology. This theology (a Christian based theology), says Eisenach, was pervasive in all public institutions including the political arena and university circles. With the use of his historical interpretation of American political life, Eisenach paints a picture of what he believes to be the true and ideal state of America. However, Eisenach fails to heed his own logic. In describing this ideal state, he unintentionally stumbles across flaws that make his argument extremely less potent. First, Eisenach introduces a new terminology that will dominate his book: national political theology. He states that the term national political theology is fundamentally different from terms such as "civil religion", "public religion", and "common or shared faith". These terms, he says, are inadequate because they denote that there is a "left-over" common denominator from "real" church institutions and therefore undermine political authority. Although these terms are similar, the difference is that "national political theology" must be publicly defined and accepted en masse and not be merely a generic common ground between individuals (as public or civil religion is). The problem here is that Eisenach does not realize that public religion is defined by the public. His new terminology is actually more generic than the one he is discarding. By this new terminology, Eisenach is only veiling his true intent: to establish a religiously based regime in America. Throughout his book, Eisenach does not hide this fact. He admits that a national theology must be introduced subversively and not directly. Any attempts at direct integration have failed, he says. Only slow, delicate theological integration can penetrate the "Godless" political arena present in America today, claims Eisenach. Presupposing that politics and religion are inherently bound, Eisenach defeats his own logic concerning the nature of politics, religion and government. He fails to realize that if it is the case that religion and politics are inseparable, then it is also the case that government and politics are inseparable. And if a national political theology is instituted (as Eisenach wishes), then the primary care of religious ideology falls to the hands of the political arena and therefore the government arena. Eisenach's religious ideology will most certainly be twisted and reformed to suit a political agenda, which will largely resemble the Old World order America fought against during its formation. Eisenach realizes this trap and actually refutes it quite logically. He states that a federalized church/institution would be impractical and dangerous. He goes on to say that if such a federal religious establishment were installed, smaller counterfederations would emerge, thus ultimately weakening the power of churches and religions. Eisenach defeats his purpose even further: "The only way out of this trap would be to construct ever larger and more embracive federations with ever more diverse constituent bodies. But this path reaches the same destination: the only faith remaining in common would be a 'constitutional faith' that, in itself, affirms nothing except that all faith is private and that freedom of individual conscience is the highest value." Eisenach realizes that his national political theology would initiate a chain reaction that would inevitably bring America to the stage it currently is in, thus negating any such utopian institution. This ideal state, argues Eisenach thrived once in the universities of America, and will thrive there once again. The American university, says Eisenach, has traditionally been the bastion of national political theology. Eisenach claims that attempts made to establish power by institutionalized churches in national organization have failed. However, attempts to assert power in the universities and public schools have succeeded, says Eisenach. These same universities, though, have turned drastically secular, says Eisenach. Despite this reversal of national political theology, argues Eisenach, American universities can once again rise to initiate Christian theology into mainstream America. But what will this theology consist of? Who will decide what this national public theology shall entail? As Eisenach states, the public must concede with a decision on a national public theology, but the formation of such a theology must come largely from a certain breed of institutionalized religion. Will it be a Methodist perspective? A Baptist one? A Catholic one? A Jewish one? Won't this then be the formation of a new religion in and of itself, constructed of a hodge-podge of theologies which will in turn be the very structure he is trying to pull America away from? How would a unified Christian theology unite WASPs to Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or even Jews (which he naively believes would wholeheartedly accept a national Christian unity)? Would this not alienate these groups further and therefore negate a sense of unity? These questions haunt Eisenach's book to a degree he chooses not to acknowledge. His utopian national political theology is noble, but flawed from its core. Eisenach fails to realize that while this national political theology may have been a strong factor in America's past, its failure to maintain power is its fatal flaw. The fact that America has become more diverse in the last century (multicultural), political action of the past is inherently dysfunctional. Like communism, national political theology has noble principles and ideals, but in practicality leads to disunity and corruption (as seen in the untold side of Eisenach's history). While American unity is of course vital and ideal, one must explore changing ideas in an ever changing world. As Eisenach states, the universities have abandoned their Christian theology for a secular one only within the last 30-40 years. If Eisenach sees this as a decline in American

unity, and thus power, it should be noted that in this timeframe, America has risen to the most powerful nation on the planet (with notable mistakes of course). And what if this reinstitutionalized theology does not fit Eisenach's specific ideals, will he then claim it to be wrong or ineffective? While his utopia will have been reestablished, his personal religious perspective may have not. It is only within the framework of a Godless Constitution that all walks of life can develop their unity, and thus their nationalism as Americans in this great American experiment.

America cannot survive without a common faith. History has taught us that our national identity and our political order require voluntary religious and civic organizations. Following the social, political, and cultural upheavals of the 1960s, Americans are now engaged in a struggle to determine the future of our nation's character and destiny. So argues prominent political theorist Eldon J. Eisenach in this brilliant and controversial new book. Contentious debates over multiculturalism, church-state relations, and immigration illustrate America's current identity crisis. Creating a common vision for America is no easy task but Eisenach describes how the moral and spiritual foundations of a new, coherent, American identity and faith are already emerging. As in the past, the next religious establishment's primary expression will be a political and cultural order that mediates and integrates personal, ethnic, religious, and civic identities. *The Next Religious Establishment* alerts readers to the changing landscape of America's identity and invites us to participate in its redefinition. This book will profoundly alter the way political theorists, intellectual historians, and theologians conceptualize America's past, present, and future.

A keen observer of history. . . . This book is a rebuttal to those writers and politicians who see the U.S.'s demise in multiculturalism, revisionist history, and a lack of respect for the canon in American universities. Highly recommended for upper-division undergraduates and above. (J.D. Rausch, West Texas AM University CHOICE)An engaging book. (R. Jonathan Moore *The Christian Century*)This is a wide-ranging, heady, and provocative book. Its novel interpretations and insights succeed in leading the reader to rethink just about everything she or he knows about American history. (The Common Good)The book is indisputably rich in its use of history and tight in its argument. Its powerful thesis makes it perhaps the most convincing recent interpretation of the history and present condition of what is now being called 'religion and American public life.' I hardly need to add that it should be carefully read by those interested in the religious criticism of U.S. Culture. (William D. Dean, *Illiff School of Theology Journal of the American Academy of Religion*)Offers interesting insights into the dilemmas posed by the relationship between politics and religion in the USA. (Political Studies)A grand jeremiad. America's multicultural moral discourse, argues Eldon Eisenach, has become incomprehensible and dangerous. It threatens our common future. Even readers who disagree will find much to ponder in this learned, powerful, passionate, dazzling call for a shared American identity. (James A. Morone, Brown University)Few political philosophers have analyzed the significance of religion in the nation's self-understanding as well as Eldon Eisenach does in this work. This book initiates a significant discussion among philosophers, theologians, ethicists, historians, and others concerning the necessary place of religion in national political identity. This is a novel book that greatly advances the current discourse about public religion and national identity. (Theology Today)Eisenach's jeremiad is both provocative and useful for our time and may well stir the fruitful controversy he admittedly seeks. (Peter Dennis Bathory *American Political Science*)About the AuthorEldon Eisenach is professor and department chair of political science at the University of Tulsa.