

1989

***Without Help or Hindrance: Religious Identity in American Culture***  
**by Eldon G. Ernst (Review)**

Jacob Dorn

Wright State University - Main Campus, [jacob.dorn@wright.edu](mailto:jacob.dorn@wright.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

**Repository Citation**

Dorn, J. (1989). *Without Help or Hindrance: Religious Identity in American Culture* by Eldon G. Ernst (Review). *Church History*, 58 (4), 537-538.

<https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/history/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact [library-corescholar@wright.edu](mailto:library-corescholar@wright.edu).

Most disruptive and discouraging was the growing distrust exhibited by the widespread, powerful leadership and pressure groups of classic, unreconstructed fundamentalism grown more stridently vocal and vehemently separatist in the face of mainstream Protestantism's cultivation of allegedly antiliberal neo-orthodoxy, demonstrated willingness to work with Billy Graham (the "star" of Fuller and new evangelicalism), and recognition of some merits of progressive evangelicalism at Fuller for ecumenical cooperation. Such developments in mainstream Protestantism blurred boundary lines in the eyes of separatists, and naturally they focused antagonism upon Fuller.

The faculty became divided. How ecumenical can an evangelical be? Nothing seemed to pacify the scathing protests of outraged classic fundamentalists, who examined every faculty member's public statements for signs of doctrinal laxity or slippage into apostasy. Were they antiliberal enough or too conciliatory to features of neo-orthodoxy? Most of all, was some ranter's view of inerrancy or infallibility compromised by what a faculty member had written or said?

The result was increased personal agony among those progressivist faculty who wanted freedom to think through their thoughts and guide their students constructively toward future ministries. Among those who suffered in pilgrimage, none had a more poignant yet confused period of prestige as professor and president than did Edward Carnell, whose tragic story is presented with care and sympathy.

Marsden brings his narrative, thematic history into the 1980s, presenting Fuller with its expanded outlook (having survived the loss of old guard faculty and some fundamentalist constituencies), improved and enlarged curriculum, and a revised statement of faith to suit thoughtful, progressive faculty. "Old Princeton" is no longer the model. Marsden calls the present-day moderate theology at Fuller "Open Evangelicalism."

*Eastern College*

St. Davids, Pennsylvania

ROBERT W. SHINN

*Without Help or Hindrance: Religious Identity in American Culture.* By ELDON G. ERNST. Second edition. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987. 240 pp. \$12.75.

First published in 1977 by Westminster Press, Eldon G. Ernst's brief but wide-ranging survey of the principal ways in which Americans have identified themselves religiously was not reviewed in *Church History*. Though for this edition he has only added a bibliographical addendum of eleven works published in the interim, the issues he raises remain timely, and the work merits this belated acknowledgment.

The context for this exploration of religious identity is the familiar one of

increasing pluralism under religious freedom. Ernst's analysis illustrates the enormous influence of pioneers such as Sidney Mead, Winthrop Hudson, Robert Handy, and Martin Marty on our understanding of the fruits of the American experiment with freedom. Celebrating pluralism, he also underscores its problematic character for Christians seeking their identity as Americans.

In general, Ernst identifies two patterns. One stresses the distinctiveness of the religious group—whether of experience, doctrine, ethical-moral stance, or communal organization—from other religious groups and from the dominant values of society; it involves a minority consciousness which is expressed through various forms of withdrawal and/or dissent. Though dissent often brings groups into the public arena, the tendency in this pattern is toward defining religion as a private matter. Three chapters present historical examples of the rich variety of this orientation. The second pattern, presented in a fourth chapter, envisions Christianity as integrated into the social order and blended with culture; in this pattern, inherited from the ideal of “Christendom,” Christians define themselves as the mainstream of the nation—a potential if not actual majority—and the nation itself as Christian.

In his fifth and final chapter Ernst traces the forces in this century that have dashed the concept of a Christian America and raised with fresh urgency the problem of religious identity. The traditional patterns, he implies, are made irrelevant by a pluralism so radical as to make even the rubric “Judeo-Christian” too restrictive. In the contemporary situation Christians face especially the problems of how to project their social and ethical values into the public arena and how to articulate their theological truth claims without the advantage of a position of privilege in American culture and yet avoiding withdrawal in reaction to the nation's cosmopolitanism. Addressing primarily his fellow heirs of the second pattern, he concludes that Christians must see their identity “*in but not of the nation*” (p. 202).

The outgrowth of lectures given from 1974 to 1976 to pastors, students, and laypersons, this book is intended for the same kind of audience, not for scholars in the field of American religion. Both the preface and final chapter explicitly state the author's goal of helping contemporary Christians understand their quest for identity in broad historical perspective. That goal may explain the rather limited documentation and a bibliography that emphasizes general works. Though one might fault the title for suggesting more than the book delivers, that goal certainly justifies Ernst's focus on American Christianity.