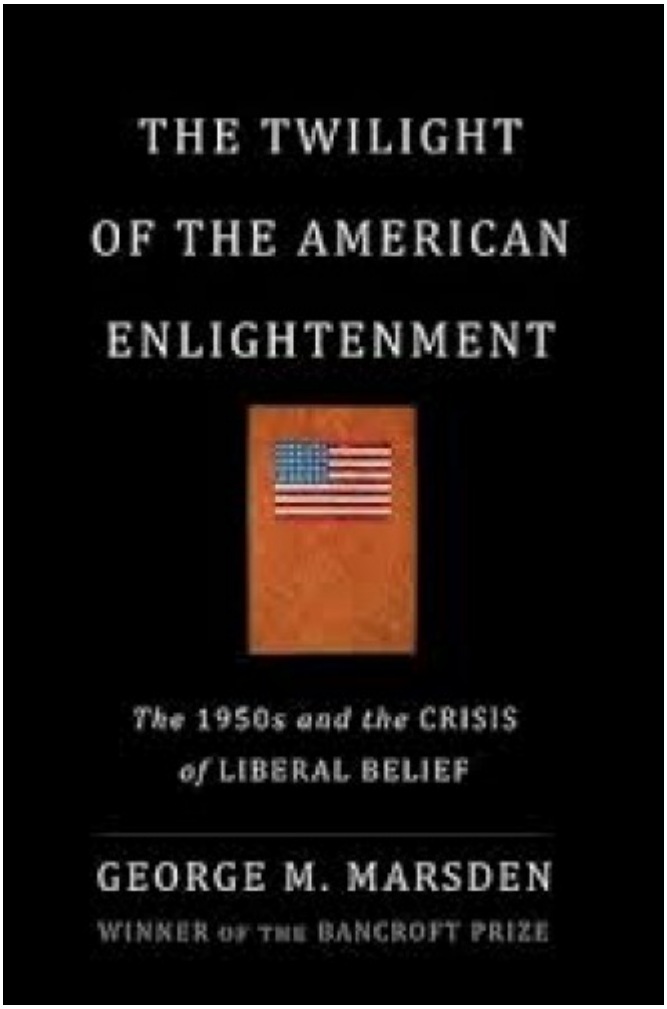
The Twilight of the American Enlightenment, by George M. Marsden

reviewed by Kevin M. Schultz in the April 30, 2014 issue

In Review



The Twilight of the American Enlightenment

By George M. Marsden
Basic Books

Among those historians who openly identify as believing Christians, George Marsden stands alongside perhaps only Mark Noll at the pinnacle of the profession. Every scholar of American history, believer or not, knows who Marsden is.

What has been so remarkable about his professional fame is the way he has blended the demands of the secular academy with his Protestant faith. By using the methods of the secular profession to answer questions provoked by his Christianity, he has written transformative books on American evangelicalism, the place of Christianity in higher education, and Jonathan Edwards, his biography of whom is the definitive one on America's greatest theologian. Marsden has won all the big awards, too, including the prestigious Bancroft Prize and even a Guggenheim, and he served as the crown jewel in the University of Notre Dame's free-spending attempt to gather the most talented Christian scholars in all of academia.

He did all this while continually pushing back against his fellow evangelical scholars, whom he viewed as overly parochial. While they were interpreting the past by falling back on scripture-as-evidence or by explaining things as "God-ordained," Marsden reminded them to leave the supernatural aside and "support the rules necessary for constructive exchange of ideas in a pluralistic setting."

"I am not," he wrote, "challenging pragmatic liberalism as the modus operandi for the contemporary academy." Instead, he was using "pragmatic liberalism" as a way to explore questions that interested him, questions that often derived from his faith.

Knowing this background helps clarify what he's doing in this brief, highly readable treatise: he explains the rise of our gridlocked civic life by arguing that the secular ideals of the Enlightenment (which reached their peak in the United States in the 1950s) and the unbending stance of the religious right are both to blame. Neither makes space for the other, and gridlock is the inevitable result.

Marsden's biggest complaint is with the secular intellectuals of the 1950s, who championed Enlightenment ideals like equality and reason without being able to locate a deep premise on which to base those beliefs. Having forsaken Christianity and given up dogmatic, deeply rooted ideologies, the secular intellectuals of the 1950s championed values like individualism and autonomy. When the baby boomers came of age in the 1960s, they took these 1950s ideals and ran with them, sacrificing the commonweal in quests for personal fulfillment. The country lost its moorings, calls for renewal emerged, and—presto!—the religious right came to life in order to restore good Christian living. The failures of the secular Enlightenment led to the rise of the religious right, and each side hated the other.

This is, of course, the standard story of the rise of the religious right. Marsden adds a new twist by placing the blame on the failure of the Enlightenment ideals of the 1950s rather than on the sense of entitlement felt by the baby boomers. And this leads him to investigate the ideas of some leading midcentury intellectuals and to find them all coming up short. We learn a good deal about Arthur Schlesinger Jr., David Riesman, Erich Fromm, and Reinhold Niebuhr, and their passionate commitment to "individual freedom, free speech, human decency, justice, civil rights, community responsibility, equality before the law, due process, balance of powers, economic opportunity, and so forth."

Marsden's ultimate effort is to pan these thinkers for valuing "individual autonomy" over the bonds of community and for refusing to premise public ideals on a single intellectual tradition. Because this is his goal, it seems a tad unfair to leave out intellectuals like Jane Jacobs, Michael Harrington, and even William F. Buckley Jr., each of whom sought to develop a sensibility for traditional communities.

But Marsden is not eager to defend the religious right's anti-Enlightenment, pro-Christian stance, either. He spares no ink in showing the limitations of its adherents. They neglect "issues regarding equity and pluralism," are "ambivalent toward the American heritage," and fail to realize that once "matters are framed in terms of warfare and simple either-or choices it becomes virtually impossible to negotiate those issues in a pluralistic society."

He's no defender of the firebrands on either side. Which is to say that Marsden understands the key problem in American life today: the problem of pluralism and the need to do away with "either-or choices."

In his final chapter, "Toward a More Inclusive Pluralism," Marsden attempts to address this key problem by arguing that the country's recent secular approach to pluralism has been to hear only voices that originate from the same rational basis, a basis that excludes people of faith. Marsden then relies on the work of Dutch thinker Abraham Kuyper to advocate a more parliamentarian form of public life, one "built around the recognition that varieties of viewpoints, including both religious and secular viewpoints, exist and ought to be included in a genuine pluralism." In today's America, Marsden argues, this doesn't happen. The secular intellectuals of the Enlightenment have won the day (though the book's title announces their "twilight"), and they are using their premises to keep quiet those with religious perspectives.

On the one hand, it’s hard to argue with the idea that we should entertain a variety of voices in our public life. On the other hand, it’s difficult to understand how this isn’t being done already. In his recent State of the Union address, President Barack Obama asked those of different backgrounds, including “faith leaders,” to come together to reform the country’s immigration laws. When it came to health care, people of faith were brought to the table to discuss how the Affordable Care Act might be developed. They didn’t get everything they wanted, but neither did anyone else. That’s politics. But did anyone castigate, say, a Catholic priest for wearing his collar and approaching the table with an identifiably religious perspective? Not at all. Concessions were made to accommodate nearly everyone.

Most ironic of all is the case of Marsden himself. Marsden has particular ire for his professional home, the university, which he sees as having acquiesced to the values of the secular Enlightenment. Yes, it may be true that the way in which people develop a common language that advances collective knowledge is by giving up certain foundational principles. But scholars are hardly punished anymore for identifying their religious beliefs. Book after award-winning book has acknowledgments thanking a pastor or a church community—or even God. Marsden is the best example of *not* suffering from what he sees as “prejudice against religious-based views.” He was never shy about having gone to Westminster Theological Seminary before heading to Yale for his doctorate. Nor did he ever disavow the fact that he taught at Calvin College and Duke Divinity School before heading to Notre Dame. And yet, even though he was so open about his religious commitments, nothing stopped him from winning nearly every award the profession has to offer. To have someone like George Marsden claiming to be a member of a subjugated minority is a bit of a mystery.

The United States was unique in blending Enlightenment ideals with religious goals, and it continues to do so to this day. But the key problem of the United States—how to function as a single nation when its citizens possess such diverse foundational beliefs—seems as present as ever. Resolving it requires humility and a willingness to make concessions, both of which are foundational ideals in America’s particular version of the Enlightenment. One wonders, then, if the religious right will read this book with a similar humility.