

The Twilight of the American Enlightenment – the 1950s and the crisis of liberal belief  
George Marsden

Marsden is a religious historian. This book documents the conflicts within Christianity in the middle of the century. It addresses the various Christian thinkers of the time, Niebuhr and Tillich among others, and the tensions between their thinking and that of more conservative Christians on one side and a secular society on the other.

His central thesis is that the 1950s was the last decade in which most Americans believed that there could be an American consensus, a common set of American values and beliefs which would be recognized if not embraced by all Americans.

European Protestants had dominated America from the time of the founding. Marsden, a Catholic, finds them to have been somewhat overzealous in excluding Catholics, Jews, and of course other religions from the American consensus. The descendants of American Protestant founders pretty much ran things.

Martin cites the rise of intellectualism as a defining phenomenon of the 1950s. He is certainly right to the extent that European intellectuals were widely discussed in American contexts. The French existentialists, Sartre and Camus, were popular among the beatniks and the high school students I hung with in Berkeley. Although, as Marsden points out, though the 1950s represented a high watermark in church attendance, those attendees were more of our parents' generation than our own is also correct in saying that our Christianity was held alongside of a belief that the founding fathers had more or less set things up right, and that the discoveries of science would somehow prove to be compatible with the two. It did not work out that way.

My view from Berkeley is that the Jewish influence on American intellectual life in this decade was far stronger than Marsden would credit. They were not simply starting to make inroads – they were dominant. Everybody read Mortimer Adler, Walter Lippmann, and a host of other Jewish columnists and pundits. It was the apex of our belief in the science of psychiatry. Woody Allen, Mike Nichols, Elaine May and a host of other Jewish actors both celebrated and spoofed it. The intellectuals loved Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, and in music it was Tom Lehrer. David Gelernter claims in [\[\[ASIN:1594037086 America-Lite: How Imperial Academia Dismantled Our Culture \(and Ushered In the Obamacrats\)\]\]](#) they pretty much took over academia in this decade. I was a math major at Berkeley, and the professors I remember seem to have been Jewish.

Kevin MacDonald writes in [\[\[ASIN:0759672229 The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth-Century Intellectual and Political Movements\]\]](#) that the Jews, not by design but as a matter of an unarticulated evolutionary strategy, supported causes which chipped away at the beliefs of the Protestant governing class. They ridiculed the red scare at the time, primitives like Joe McCarthy. Marsden does as well. It turns out that there was some substance to the fear that communists spies were attempting to infiltrate America and form American thinking. We have this from

not only American historians but former Soviet historians. There is no doubt, however, that McCarthy was a bit of a buffoon and a political opportunist. Is being partially right is not a defense of his behavior.

Marsden just as is the civil rights movement as an idea whose time had come. As MacDonald points out, supporting the civil rights movement allowed American liberals to occupy the high ground and push defenders of traditional values into an indefensible position. White Southerners were charged as irredeemable racists. Marsden repeats the claim. A prominent Swede, Gunnar Myrdal, was invited to America in the 1940s by the Carnegie foundation to study race relations. Myrdal arrived with absolutely no former exposure to people of different races, but no shortage of self-esteem, and cranked out a 1500 page volume entitled "An American Dilemma" prescribing what the liberals thought should be done. He was correct in pointing out that continuing to treat citizens differently based on their color was absolutely unsupportable either legally or practically. He was naïve in assuming that if the legal bars were removed, the two populations would behave more or less identically. This has not been the case. As an interesting aside, modern Sweden is grappling with these issues today. As written in [[ASIN:1484873831 The Swedish Story: From extreme experiment to normal nation]], their liberal convictions led them to invite large numbers of African refugees, who have turned out not to be excellent Swedes.

In retrospect, it could well be that Southerners understood better than Northerners, we did not have the experience living in a racially mixed society, the kinds of problems that might arise from the relaxation of segregation. However, it was morally indefensible, and the Jewish press and activists made sure everybody understood that. Marsden is unwilling to acknowledge that there are differences among the races, as can be readily confirmed by a look at South Africa today, and every country in the Americas and Europe in which there are substantial African minorities. The moral way to reconcile the differences is a legitimate topic of discussion. Not to recognize the differences, as the liberals in the 1950s and liberals today refuse to do, only allows problems to perpetuate themselves.

Returning to Marsden's theme, the decade of the 1950s witnessed the beginning of a soon-to-be large rift between white liberals and conservatives. That rift was defined along religious grounds – secular humanists versus religious fundamentalists – and also by geography, increasingly the coasts versus the flyover states. Marsden's history does a good job of documenting the growth, and the politicization of conservative Christianity. There was a growing conflict of fundamental values. Conservatives claimed that they were the legitimate heirs of the founding fathers, sustaining their beliefs in individual self-reliance and freedom. Liberals might claim the same, pointing to the founders' non-dogmatic theism and belief in science.

Marsden exaggerates the unifying power of a common enemy, the Soviet Union. Already in the 1950s, in fact, dating from the 1920s, there was fairly widespread sympathy for the Soviets among liberals. A great many on college campuses believed that the communist threat was overblown. This became expressed in popular culture through the folk singers who came on the scene in the end of the 50s. Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Woody Guthrie, Peter Paul and Mary, and a host of others were quite dedicated liberals, and they contributed a great deal to the split between conservatives and liberals.

Science turned out not to be the liberating force it had been hoped to be since the days of the European enlightenment. Physics and chemistry did not inform political arguments, although nuclear physicist certainly came down on both sides of the political questions surrounding the atomic bomb. In the social sciences, liberals rallied to the side of the anthropologists such as France Boaz and Margaret Mead, and the science of psychiatry. Liberals place a great deal of faith in the propositions that the talking cure could remedy our psychic ills, that medicines like lithium could cure whatever was physiologically based, and that education, which some would have liked to call a science, could bridge the gap between the races in terms of educational achievement, income, and criminality. Conservatives were more inclined to line up with the intelligence researchers, and later the sociobiology movement, which believes in more fundamental differences among men.

Marsden's conclusion is unsatisfying. He dwells at length on a Dutch politician named Kuyper who managed to reconcile all of these conflicting interests and beliefs in the Holland of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His apparent hope is that we can somehow turn back the clock, forget our differences, and once again find some sort of an American consensus. I am more pessimistic.

As Marsden points out, religious belief and science cannot easily coexist. Even in the 1950s it was possible only by rigorously delimiting the spheres in which each could operate. As the consensus on religious issues dissolved, the only common ground could be sought in the area of science. Even at that, liberals and conservatives managed to find their own scientists and disagree in that sphere as well. Even more to the point, fewer and fewer educated people anymore accept the major religious dogmas such as virgin birth and so on. They are following the path of the groundbreaking Protestant theologians of the 50s in rejecting that which is hard to believe, but rather than rationalize some set of spiritual foundation for their lives, they are not retaining much of any religious belief at all.

The tenets that are held with religious fervor today have nothing to do with religion itself. These include the belief in global warming, the belief in the inevitability and propriety of homosexuality, the belief in the absolute equality of the sexes, the belief that genetically modified organisms are deadly, and the belief that tap water is bad for your health. There is also widespread belief in propositions about what we owe our fellow man. Following the UN charter on human rights, we believe that everybody is entitled to health care, a decent job, and an adequate retirement income. These beliefs are more easily held when somebody else is paying... as is increasingly the case and Western Europe and the United States. As mainstream Protestant theology has shifted its focus from the spiritual well-being of mankind to physical well-being, that is, come to side with the liberals, it has become more and more the province of coastal elites and the beneficiaries of their belief system, immigrants and minorities. Meanwhile, middle-class white Christians turn more and more to fundamentalism, and as they attempt to define what they would like to prevail in their own lives – no drugs or abortion – they also attempt to force their views on others. There is less and less compromise between the sides. And they have less and less to do with anything that has traditionally been held as religious belief.

This is a long review – an essay in response to a very thought-provoking book. I would recommend that anyone reading this review ask themselves whether or not the topics discussed are of interest. If they are, read the book. It is extremely well written, with an absolutely fantastic bibliography. If, as I rather suspect, most of the issues raised here have nothing to do with your religious or philosophical beliefs, then this book is probably not relevant. The issues will be sorted out by brute force in the realm of politics, not by polite discussion.