

BOOK REVIEWS



EVANGELICAL ANXIETY: A MEMOIR BY CHARLES MARSH

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A review by Scott Stossel

The most devoutly religious person I've ever known was also the least anxious person I've ever known. Sargent Shriver, with whom I spent time while writing his biography 25 years ago, had a deep Catholic faith that seemed to lend him an unshakable serenity. Traveling the world to launch the Peace Corps for John F. Kennedy, Shriver would sometimes find himself on little rattletrap planes in Africa, heaving violently through storms. While everyone else was terror-stricken, Shriver would seem placid, even content. I asked him how this could be so. He explained that he believed whatever happened—crash or not, live or die—was God's will, something he accepted that with complete equanimity, even a kind of joy.

For me—neurotic, plagued by sometimes debilitating clinical anxiety (and I *hate* flying)—this seemed evidence of a link between deep religious faith and existential comfort in the world. In Shriver's presence I felt keenly that my reluctant agnosticism, my inability to access the consolations

of faith, excluded me from the kind of deep, almost-metaphysical ease Shriver possessed. If only I could give myself up to God, believe that whatever happened was his will and that whatever was his will was okay, I thought, my anxiety might lift.

Well, Charles Marsh's *Evangelical Anxiety*, published last year, makes clear what I sort of already knew: that the relationship between faith and anxiety is a lot more complicated than that. In this fascinating, provocative, remarkably candid memoir, Marsh, who grew up in the evangelical tradition and is an academic theologian who remains a practicing Christian, tells the story of his own struggles with anxiety, depression, and nervous breakdown. Only, in his case, his religious beliefs were for many years less a balm for his anxiety than a principal cause of it. The book details Marsh's careening between religious and psychotherapeutic approaches to his anxiety, and it vividly details how his lusty body—the place where the welling force of erotic desire and the quelling strictures of Southern Baptist doctrine clash—becomes the site of his anxiety's most awful torments.

Marsh grew up the son of a (white) Baptist pastor in segregated Alabama and Mississippi, where the death of MLK in 1968 was met by the cheers of his grade-school classmates at Mason Primary, and where his grandmother tells him that “no matter what he thinks about all God's children, white people are the superior race.” Marsh transcended his upbringing among conservative Baptists and segregationists to become liberal in his political and policy convictions, without ever yielding his faith in God.

A more difficult struggle to overcome was with his own concupiscence. As a boy, he would sit in church on Sundays, pulsating with desire and fear. “How hard it is to bring erections

under the Lordship of Christ,” Marsh writes, describing the improvised chastity belts he would fashion using jock straps. So terrified was he of transgressing God's will, he fears “if I let my guard down and fornicated with Marcia, Linda, or Sharon—I'd have to kill myself.” He describes spending the first year of his PhD program in Philosophical Theology alternating between looking at purloined porn magazines and reading the fifty-first Psalm and Kant's writings on ethics, praying for God's forgiveness.

Marsh then suffered a series of nervous crises as an adult. His descriptions of panic attacks—the bone-deep dread, the racing thoughts, the revolt of your own body against you—are (this panic-attack sufferer can tell you) spot-on. At first, Marsh tries to combat these bouts of anxiety using the tools of his faith. He tries to embrace his anxious suffering as a Godly gift, to see his pain as the route to purity and transcendence. In the Evangelical tradition, he writes, anxiety and other mental illness “is all demonic activity (principally, possession).” Nearly half of evangelicals believe that “conditions like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia can be treated with prayer alone,” according to a Southern Baptist Convention survey. So-called Bible-based counseling, the closest thing to psychotherapy allowed among Evangelicals, is grounded in a “sin-based explanation of mental illness.” A prescription consists not of medicine or cognitive therapy but of “a cleansing dive into the Psalms.”

For Marsh, this didn't cut it. “Of course I needed Jesus,” he writes. “I also needed professional help.” Beset by panic attacks and depression while pursuing a PhD at the University of Virginia, he finally seeks help from a psychologist. Doing so “was a recognition that the paradigm of Christian self-help, of getting deeper in the Word

as a cure for psychic anguish, was exhausted. And it was a recognition that I didn't want to kill myself."

Far from finding psychotherapy to be alienating to his religious self, Marsh discovers it to be "like prayer reciprocated." The therapy works. But after graduate school, while teaching in Baltimore, he suffers another breakdown. He talks a psychiatrist into giving him a course of psychoanalysis four days a week for a mere five dollars an hour, which is all he can afford on his teaching salary. Dr. Lieber helps Marsh to understand that "desire is the human situation," and he becomes more comfortable talking about "the ferocity of my desire to dive headfirst into the thighs of every interesting woman who caught my attention." His anxiety relents again, and he becomes a better husband and a better father, determined not to use the "Bible as a bludgeon" on his children as it was used on him. ("You will be constantly under assault by Satan," his own father had written to Marsh as a young man. "You must maintain constant vigilance.")

Back at UVA, in a tenure-track job, a deeper depression descends, one that forces him to reckon finally with "the biochemistry of my brain." He goes on antidepressants. "Trusting the Lord with all my heart now meant accepting advice that I should take the pills," which eventually steady him. They also lead him to the conclusion that "trying to chase away madness with the petitions of faith is a recipe for disaster." God does not want you "wasted and bare," he argues, citing Virginia Woolf's famous description of the soul afflicted with mental illness. "Don't believe the grace pimps when they tell you otherwise," Marsh writes. "There is no sermon in the suicide."

None of this causes his Christian faith to waver (though he does drift from Evangelicalism), nor does he think psychiatry alone can relieve the suffering endemic to being human, to having a desiring body with the propensity for sin. Moreover, a psychoanalyst can't give you the freedom to sin, or to "bank recklessly on grace" (as Martin Luther once advised a

young monk who wanted to sleep with a peasant girl). God can.

I did finish the book wondering if Marsh's encomium to "strong sin" as a "propaedeutic to joy" was simply license to misbehave, or a retroactive justification of his wayward sexual adventuring. But then I also wondered if this was another thing my agnosticism robs me of: the ability to sin and be forgiven.

Ultimately, Marsh settles upon the realization that both psychoanalysis and faith use language and narrative to provide healing and hope; they "follow parallel tracks into the mysteries of being human, where all truth is God's truth." Marsh has used his own narrative talents to provide readers—those both anxious and not—with a gritty and profane book full of wisdom and honesty and gratitude and grace. □