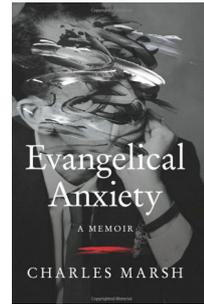


## Book Review

Charles Marsh, *Evangelical Anxiety*  
New York, NY: HarperOne, 2022  
ISBN: 978-0062862730.

Reviewed by Noah R. Karger  
MDiv student at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary  
and Research Assistant at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity



Charles Marsh, Commonwealth Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia and Director at the Project on Lived Theology, has written a fascinating spiritual memoir. *Evangelical Anxiety* is like the author's description of home movies, "not a compendium of facts, but a deluge of impressions" (222). Journeying inward, Marsh reconciles views on faith and mental illness. Raised in the Deep South, what he came to believe about sexual desire, selfhood, and sin became the basis for a lifelong struggle with acute anxiety. Analyzing these deep-seated notions and their effects, Marsh gives us a fresh look at what it means to be human.

The memoir is structured without strict linearity and yet maintains total coherence. Marsh's story unfolds like a memory – or a session of psychoanalysis – back and forth in time, up and down the latter of abstraction. Still, it always moves forward. The narrative's structure is a testament to its author's self-understanding, evincing a profound grasp of life's interconnectedness – each person, event, and place deriving context from the other. Marsh discusses his childhood as the son of a Baptist minister in Mississippi and Alabama, his theological studies at Gordon College, Harvard Divinity, and the University of Virginia, and his work as a professor up to the present.

The book contains 6 parts. The first part

contains chapters on "Martin Luther on Prozac", "Harvard Divinity School: Fall 1981", and "Dry Leaves Tumble Down University Circle". The second part contains the chapters titled "On Fire" and "The Pursuit of a Literary Life". The third section contains the chapters "HDS, Redux" and "Christian Anxiety: A Short Theology". The fourth section contains "Charlottesville: The First Sojourn", "Cathedral Light", "Outtakes from an Evangelical Analysis", "Summer in Laurel", and "Years of Wondering and Longing". The fifth section deals with "Depression", "The Grace of the Strong Sin", and "On Christian Counseling". The sixth and final section concludes with "Oh, Merton" and "Quiet Days in Charlottesville."

The narrative begins in media res with Marsh's time at Harvard, a time defined by his assumption that finding God required "sailor-diving into guilt and shame" (22). A preacher's kid raised in the Deep South, Marsh's experiences of sex, God, the Bible, and race induced more than culture shock. Despite appearing "an evangelical virgin hoping to redeem the secular world," (21) his inner life was nothing short of macabre. As Marsh walks us through memories of immense detail and depth, no topic is off limits, and this is part of *Evangelical Anxiety's* restorative power. Telling the whole story, he acknowledges his need for healing and lives to receive it, and thankfully for us, lives to share it, too.

In Marsh's case, healing first came in the

form of psychoanalysis. One night, circled around a campfire with fellow congregants, his Evangelical minister asserted that “there’s nothing more intense than following Jesus” (117). After a lifetime of harrowing anxiety, this was the last thing Marsh wanted to hear; he wanted peace, not intensity. Around the same time came the opportunity for psychotherapy, which he took, albeit hesitantly. In *Evangelical Anxiety*, Marsh delineates his struggles – psychological and spiritual – in a dialogue with his past and present self: the apocalyptic Evangelical and the compassionate analyst (and everything in-between). For Marsh, psychoanalysis and faith “follow parallel tracks into the mysteries of being human, where all truth is God’s truth” (131).

One of the topics most frequently explored in this dialogue between his past and present self, is sexual desire. Marsh does not euphemistically tiptoe around it like a nervous pastor in the pulpit. Rather, he speaks of it untrammelled by niceties, arriving at neither crassness nor flippancy but fidelity to actual lived experience. Neither does he harangue nor bemoan. Instead, he is kind to himself, a kindness which does not make undue allowances, but which is determined to understand and thereby be made whole. Marsh depicts the road to healing as requiring the realization of one’s imperfections and subsequent acceptance of God’s grace. This, according to Marsh, is freedom. It is an act of integration, requiring that you “put yourself into the place you’ve always associated with terror and alienation and there feel God” (197). For Marsh and many Evangelicals alike, this place of terror and alienation involves sexual desire and its distortion. Discussions on sex are too often a sprint to the finish line, shoving difficult topics into theological Tupperware, saving the leftovers for another day. Marsh, however, is

slow and nuanced in his approach; his theology is better for it. While his mother admonished that “premarital sex leads to psychic ruin,” (55) Marsh teaches that psychic ruin is more likely a product of placing sexual desire and the imago Dei at odds.

While Marsh is always authentic and deep, if he means to directly engage the dialogue concerning theology and psychology’s intersection, the book sometimes falls short on a conceptual level. At one point, Marsh says of psychoanalysis and faith that, “it’s more than fine that they neither merge nor collide” (131). He argues here that the two can live and let live, but later reflections seem to imply a kind of interdependence. Describing the importance of feeling “the bodily effects and reassurances of forgiveness,” he says that in this “psychoanalysis needs theology” (197). He illustrates how he had reached a “dead end” with psychoanalysis and needed to experience profound grace. It seems the two do in fact merge and collide, as he argues that the road to healing requires analysis and grace. This intersection could be acknowledged more explicitly.

That said, perhaps Marsh is all the wiser to refuse getting too caught up in a theoretical debate, seeing his work as essentially existential, focused on real events and their highly personal interpretations. After all, the strained polemics between psychologists and biblical counselors appear peripheral in the fresh light of Marsh’s very human discovery: “I received the gift of moral life: the freedom to be imperfect, to have fears and face them, to accept brokenness, to let go of the will to control all outcomes” (133). Marsh trades the psychological intensity which colored his experience in the Evangelical Church for the buoyancy of grace. One is reminded of Steinbeck: “*And now that you don’t have to be perfect, you can be good.*” What Marsh finds is

freedom *from* perfection and *to* goodness.

Neither Marsh's anxieties nor that which spawns them are uncommon. What is uncommon is his capacity to see, analyze, and relay it lucidly, and furthermore, his resolve to experience wholeness when all is said and done. Evangelical and non-Evangelical Christians alike who struggle with anxiety – or any form of mental illness – will find encouragement in Marsh's wisdom. Exploring mental illness and spirituality in the form of memoir, Marsh offers a *lived* response. Rather than choosing a side in the longstanding Evangelical psychology vs. faith debate, he argues it is a false dilemma. If the reader takes nothing else from *Evangelical Anxiety*, they will be certain of this: Marsh is a hopeful person, a virtue surprising and precious in the wake of acute psychological pain of, literally, religious proportions. Regardless of one's leanings in the debate over the intersection (or lack thereof) of psychology and theology, learning the tender hope of Marsh is surely a move nearer to Christ, nearer to wholeness.

