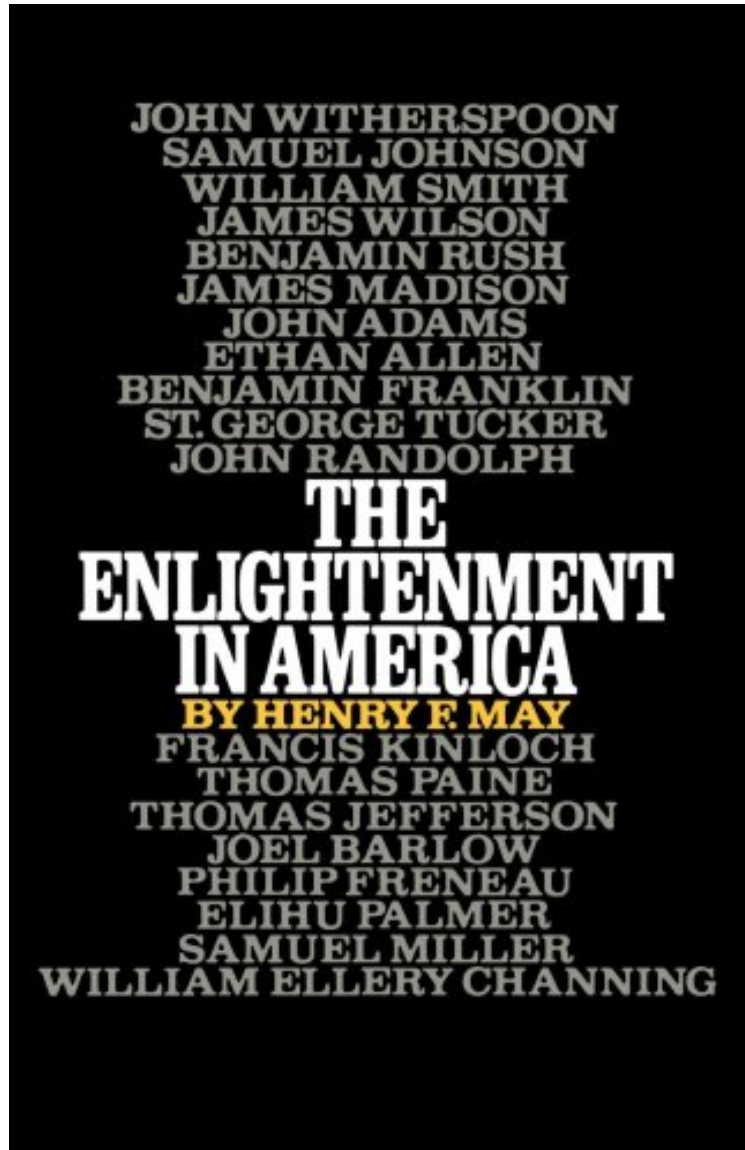


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The Enlightenment in America (Galaxy Books)

Henry F. May

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Henry F. May : The Enlightenment in America (Galaxy Books) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Enlightenment in America (Galaxy Books):

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. The Enlightenment? Try Four Enlightenments in AmericaBy Frank BellizziHenry May says that before he wrote this book he went exploring. He wanted to find in the eighteenth century the roots of nineteenth-century American culture. When he examined the writings of eighteenth century Americans, he saw a mixture of New England Calvinist Protestantism and the European Enlightenment. Moving on to the next

century, he noticed that the unexpressed and implied ideology of nineteenth-century America rested . . . on a series of tacit compromises. Of these the most basic was the compromise between a belief in moral certainties and a belief in the desirability of change and progress (xi-xii). Looking at the relevant secondary literature, he saw that there were hundreds of works that took up some aspect of Calvinist Protestantism in America. Yet hardly anyone had written about the American career of the European Enlightenment, although its principles were everywhere assumed. So, acknowledging that the two parts had to be taken together, he decided to focus on the one that had hardly been treated: My book . . . does not deal equally with the two main clusters of ideas influential in early America: the Enlightenment and Protestantism, but rather about the Enlightenment, with Protestantism always in the background as matrix, rival, ally, and enemy. It is not about the Enlightenment and religion, but rather about the Enlightenment as religion (xiii). Mays working definition of the Enlightenment as religion reads: the Enlightenment consists of all those who believe two propositions: first, that the present age is more enlightened than the past; and second, that we understand nature and man best through the use of our natural faculties (xiv). But things were never as simple as that because, as May observes, many Americans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would fall somewhere along a spectrum between Protestantism and the Enlightenment. The most revealing question might be, To what degree would a person assent to the idea that reason, as opposed to revelation, tradition, or illumination, is the best guide? The biggest challenge for May was related to the fact that, while scholars had seen and studied the varieties of Protestantism, hardly anyone had sorted out the variety and difference within the Enlightenment (xv-xvi). So May created his own four-part division of the European Enlightenment, an arrangement that follows a more or less chronological order: 1. Moderate. This preached balance, order and religious compromise, and was dominant in England from the time of Newton and Locke until about the middle of the eighteenth century (xvi). 2. Skeptical. Developed in Britain but especially France around 1750, this Enlightenment's grand master was Voltaire. Among its most significant results were the skepticism of Hume and the materialism of Holbach. 3. Revolutionary. According to this variety, one could construct a new heaven and a new earth by destroying the old. It began with Rousseau and culminated in Paine and Godwin. 4. Didactic. This Enlightenment opposed both skepticism and revolution. From what it saw as the debacle of those Enlightenments, it attempted to save the intelligible universe, clear and certain moral judgments, and progress. Its main center was Scotland and began around 1750, but really triumphed, in America in 1800-1825 (xvi). The Enlightenment in America is a survey of these four types. May concludes that by the time of early nineteenth century, the Skeptical and Revolutionary Enlightenments had died out. The Skeptical had always been much too radical and dismissive of religion, not to mention unintelligible, for most Americans. The Revolutionary had served its purpose in America and had been discredited by the more recent excesses connected with the revolution in France. Too, both of these Enlightenments were overcome by that triumph of Protestantism known as the Second Great Awakening. At the same time, the effects of the Moderate Enlightenment were still present in American politics and religion. The Didactic Enlightenment was both practical and easy to understand. Above all, it could be mixed with the variety of religion that was popular in America at that time. Thus, the Didactic emerged as the greatest philosophical force in American intellectual culture during the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

3 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Our Tangled Religious History By D. P. Lentini I bought this book after reading some news items describing an effort by conservative Christians on Texas's school textbook review board to recast the Founding Fathers as deeply Christian, rather than the more neutral, if not even hostile in Jefferson's case, descriptions that have been the norm. More generally, I've often wondered how a country that started as a colony of very dour Calvinists came to embrace a form of government that is so ambiguous towards religion. Professor May delivers an excellent picture of how the American Revolution occurred during a very particular period in our social history, when much of the religious activity among the powerful in the colonies was dominated by Anglicans and other "latitudinarians" who were comfortable with the intellectual skepticism of the Enlightenment, especially as espoused by Hume and the other Scottish Enlightenment thinkers. This period followed a much different one, known as The Great Awakening, that was dominated by strong Calvinist tendencies and the sort of "enthusiastic" revivalism that we see today. Ironically, the forces that supported the rise of the Anglican and other "softer" religions died with the end of British rule; so, as the 18th Century ended, professor May explains, the sort of "enthusiastic" religions---especially the Baptists---started to overtake the more "intellectual" religions and the period known as the The Second Great Awakening began. Reading this book in conjunction with Richard Hofstadter's excellent history "Anti-Intellectualism if American Life" brings much clarity to the political and cultural battles we have experienced over time and especially today.

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Excellent By R. Albin The Enlightenment in America is a detailed survey of the impact and life of Enlightenment ideas in 18th century America. Characterized by excellent writing and thoughtful scholarship, this is an insightful book. May begins with a division of the Enlightenment into 4 useful categories; the Moderate Enlightenment, the Skeptical Enlightenment, the Revolutionary Enlightenment, and the Didactic Enlightenment. The Moderate Enlightenment is very much the Enlightenment of Locke, Montesquieu, Samuel Clarke, Francis Hutcheson, and similar figures. Pervaded by a strong sense of rational design of the universe, a commitment to deism or very moderate forms of Protestantism, and of a need for order and balance, the Moderate Enlightenment exerted a strong influence on the American colonies. May is particularly good on the strong interaction

between the Moderate Enlightenment and different strains of Protestantism. Melded with aspects of colonial Protestantism and the Republican Whig/Commonwealth tradition, the Moderate Enlightenment would contribute considerably to the ideology of the Founders. May sees the Skeptical Enlightenment, associated with several of the more skeptical French philosophes and with Hume, as being less influential, though he points out the importance of some of Hume's political ideas. The Revolutionary Enlightenment, whose greatest apostle would be Rousseau and whose most important American contributor is Thomas Paine, had a considerable vogue following the outbreak of the French Revolution but was later discredited, along with the Skeptical Enlightenment, by the reaction against the French Revolution and Bonaparte. The final phase of the Enlightenment in America was the very strong influence of the Didactic Enlightenment, May's term for the influence of the Scottish 'Commonsense' school of James Beattie, Dugald Stewart, and Thomas Reid. Partly a reaction to Hume and partly a reaction to more radical Enlightenment figures, these largely second and third rate thinkers put forward a version of epistemology and psychology that was easily incorporated into the burgeoning evangelical movement in America. Their influence in American education was great and largely defused the radicalism associated with prior aspects of the Enlightenment. Accompanying the success of the Didactic Enlightenment was a definite decline in the intellectual vigor of the former colonies. May does an excellent job of discussing a wide variety of major and minor figures in American life. He is good on a number of now largely unknown writers and clergymen as he is on Jefferson and other major figures. The integration of his intellectual history with political and social history is very good. I'm surprised this book isn't better known.

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