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Why Isn't "Spirituality" Enough?

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For the last twenty years or more, observers of American religion have noted the proliferation of diverse models of spirituality, ranging from New Age innovations to the re-emergence of ancient paganisms. The mainstream sociological explanation for this phenomenon is rooted in the assumption that the modern age marginalizes the exclusivistic and truth-oriented doctrines of Christianity and leaves the public square open for the emergence of less demanding belief systems and worldviews.

Of course, most of these are tailor-made for the American mindset. The idea of individualism is as old as America itself, and the dominance of autonomous individualism in modern American culture is, at least in part, the inevitable outgrowth of at least one dimension of America's founding experience.

The sociologists are concerned about the rise of spirituality precisely because more communitarian thinkers doubt that these modern forms of individualist religion can sustain social cohesiveness and the American project. Not so fast, argues Leigh E. Schmidt. In "Spirit Wars," Schmidt's article in the latest issue of *The Wilson Quarterly*, he argues that American social critics have prematurely dismissed spirituality as a cultural force.

Schmidt, Professor of Religion at Princeton University, acknowledges that "social critics have achieved a rare unanimity: lambasting American 'spirituality' in all its new age quirkiness and anarchic individualism."

Indeed, a considerable body of literature now exists in order to document the emergence of spirituality and to consider the danger it poses to the republic. An alarm was first sounded by sociologist Robert Bellah and his team of writers in *Habits of the Heart*, published in 1985. Bellah and his team argued that the breakdown of traditional religion was leading to a deterioration in the American social fabric and its essential institutions. They lamented the emergence of "liberalized versions" of morality that were and are almost exclusively individualistic in focus. As Schmidt summarizes, "The social costs of such disjointed spiritual quests were evident not only in the fraying of church life but in eroding commitments to public citizenship, marriage, and family."

But if Bellah and company—joined by observers such as David Brooks and Martin E. Marty—think that the rise of spirituality at the expense of traditional faiths is problematic, Schmidt argues that American liberals should embrace spirituality as a means of gaining political momentum and rebuilding social capital.

Schmidt argues for a longer historical vision. Modern versions of American individualism, he argues, are simply the expansion and continuation of a line of individualistic thinking that runs back to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and a host of others. Martin E. Marty may argue that the conflict between "spirituality" and "religion" is "a defining conflict of our time," but Schmidt suggests a cease-fire.

As Schmidt reviews the history of American spirituality, he sees in Emerson, Whitman, and Henry David Thoreau a combination of "spiritual journeying" and "political progressivism." As he explains, "Emerson's 'endless seeker' was, as

often as not, an abolitionist; Whitman's 'traveling soul,' a champion of women's rights; Henry David Thoreau's 'hermit,' a challenger of unjust war."

Beyond this, Schmidt is convinced that correctives to excessive individualism were already present in nineteenth century America. He points to William R. Alger, a transcendentalist of the second generation and a Unitarian minister. Alger championed Thoreau's concern for the spiritual while rejecting his solitude. Indeed, Alger criticized Thoreau as "constantly feeling himself, reflecting himself, fondling himself, reverberating himself, exalting himself, incapable of escaping or forgetting himself."

Alger apparently recognized that Thoreau's extreme form of individualism led to a "self-nauseated weariness" rather than to social progress.

Schmidt also points to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a radical abolitionist who later served as a colonel in an African-American regiment in the Civil War. Higginson took Thoreau and Alger one step further, arguing that Americans should simply embrace spirituality as a diverse testimony to one fundamental reality. In Higginson's words: "I have worshiped in an Evangelical church when thousands rose to their feet at the motion of one hand. I have worshiped in a Roman Catholic church when the lifting of one finger broke the motionless multitude into twinkling motion, till the magic sign was made, and all was still once more. But I never for an instant have supposed that this concentrated moment of devotion was more holy or more beautiful than when one cry from a minaret hushes a Mohammedan city to prayer, or when, at sunset, the low invocation, 'Oh! The gem in the lotus—oh! The gem in the lotus,' goes murmuring, like the cooing of many doves, across the vast surface of Tibet."

As Schmidt explains, Higginson's vision called for "a cosmopolitan piety in which religious identities were open, fluxional, and sympathetic rather than closed, fixed, and proselytizing."

Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote his essay, "The Sympathy of Religions," in 1871. Clearly, he was ahead of his time. Higginson's poetic description of his universalistic and relativistic spirituality has been realized in the development of American cafeteria-style pseudo-religion.

Schmidt sees a political possibility behind his analysis of America's religious landscape. A proponent of "progressive" causes, Schmidt believes that American political liberals should embrace spirituality as a means of countering the influence of conservatives and traditional Christians.

"The roots of today's seeker spirituality are tangled, but they go deep in American culture and often prove, on closer inspection, to be surprisingly robust," Schmidt argues. "It is hard, once one has traveled any length on the roads forward from Emerson and Whitman, not to be impressed by the tenacity of this joined tradition of spiritual seeking and political progressivism in American religious life."

Interestingly, Schmidt points to Sen. Barack Obama, the recently elected senator from Illinois who has emerged as one of the leading lights in the Democratic Party. Obama, Schmidt advises, wants to "reconnect progressive politics with religious vision."

Senator Obama's statement on this point deserves careful analysis: "My mother saw religion as an impediment to broader values, like tolerance and racial inclusivity. She remembered church-going folks who also called people nigger. But she was a deeply spiritual person, and when I moved to Chicago and worked with church-based community organizations, I kept hearing her values expressed."

We should note that Obama made no reference to where his mother discovered those "broader values" nor did he identify any specific content concerning these values or the spiritual vision that was claimed to undergird them. Nevertheless, Obama's statement serves to indicate how the concept of spirituality functions as a substitute for any specific truth claim or religious identification.

More surprisingly, Schmidt appears to be impressed with Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun* magazine, and his ideal of an "Emancipatory Spirituality." In Lerner's analysis, "The liberal world has developed such a knee-jerk hostility to religion" that those "who actually do have spiritual yearnings" have been marginalized.

In truth, the vagueness of these statements undermines any claim to make a serious intellectual argument. Lerner's idea of "spiritual yearnings" gets him nowhere—what exactly is *spiritual* about these yearnings? Without reference to some specific truth claim or structured thought, this becomes little more than nonsensical wordplay.

This, too, is nothing new. When pressed to define spirituality, pragmatist William James replied: "Susceptibility to ideals, but with a certain freedom to indulge in imagination about them. A certain amount of 'otherworldly' fancy."

Call me hardheaded, but I just don't see reaching out to Americans who identify themselves as being "susceptible to ideals" and interested in "otherworldly fancy" to be a winning political strategy in today's America.

Liberals will have to make their own decisions, and they are certainly not going to look to me for political advice. Nevertheless, I have more respect for a clear-headed secularist than for someone who espouses this kind of mind-numbing relativism. If spirituality simply means a "susceptibility to ideals," does it even matter what those ideals are?

Responding to a similar call for an embrace of spirituality, Paul Powers of Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon argued: "Softheaded spiritualism is its own form of fundamentalism. The suggestion that the 'true essence' of all religions is spirituality implies that if only people were not so stupid as to believe what their tradition teaches them, they would see that behind all this mere cultural baggage is the supreme 'spiritual' truth. Religions and religious people are mind-bogglingly different. Why American liberals who seem so happy to embrace difference in various contexts want, when it comes to religion, to sweep [different truth claims] under the rug of some invented, undefined, supposedly universal 'spirituality' remains one of the true religious mysteries of our times."

In reality, it isn't really such a mystery after all. Spirituality is all that is left when truth claims are removed. Spirituality represents little more than an effort to claim higher "values" without the demands of truth, revelation, and obedience.

Of all people, Christians should be the first to see this for what it is—an effort to replace the Christian faith with an empty "spiritual" shell. Biblical Christianity is profoundly spiritual—but Christian spirituality is an expression of Christian truth, not its substitute.

