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Why “Spirituality” Isn’t Enough — Take Two

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My commentary published yesterday, “[Why Isn’t ‘Spirituality’ Enough](#),” included a look at what professor Leigh E. Schmidt of Princeton University now proposes — an affirmation of “spirituality” as an antidote of sorts to what he sees as overly-dogmatic forms of Christian faith.

Now, Jay Tolson, author of an insightful biography of [Walker Percy](#) (among other things), considers Schmidt’s proposal in “[Churchless Seekers](#),” published in the current issue of *U.S. News and World Report*. Tolson covers much of the same ground, looking at the now-familiar American pattern of turning virtually everything into a form of therapy.

But, before we more theological types pat ourselves on the back, Tolson turns the focus back on evangelical Christianity: *Without saying so directly, Schmidt puts his finger on an aspect of American spirituality that increasingly made it seem like one of the feckless pursuits of those overeducated and spoiled “elites” who cultural conservatives say corrupted the moral fabric of the nation during the past 40 years. After all, it is hard to deny that many forms of spirituality blended all too easily with the hyperindividualism and hedonism of the ‘60s, reducing the good to what feels good. Facile uses of Asian religions and esoteric brands of mysticism also went hand in hand with Americans’ growing preoccupation with the therapeutic quest for physical, mental, and, yes, spiritual wellness.*

But while it is easy to point out the connections between spirituality and the me-oriented therapeutic culture, conservative critics—and even Schmidt himself—fail to note the extent to which America’s more religiously conservative evangelical tradition also became imbued with some of those same therapeutic values. Today’s evangelical megachurches can often seem like nothing more than vast well-being clinics, serving their clients’ every needs, from the financial to the romantic. Some of the more popular evangelical preachers dilute the stricter side of the Gospel (except for those somewhat difficult-to-locate injunctions against same-sex marriage) to emphasize a happy, feel-good message. At the very least, American evangelical culture might share more with American spirituality than participants in the former would like to admit.

Tolson’s critique of superficial evangelicalism is not unique. This has been a major concern of more seriously-minded evangelicals for a long time, perhaps best demonstrated in the devastating analysis offered by [David F. Wells](#) in his book, *No Place for Truth*. [If you haven’t read it, consider yourself shamed.] But, it is still interesting to see Jay Tolson offer his take on the issue in the pages of a major American newsmagazine. The truth hurts.

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