

Daniel Larison

## Lost in the Twilight

*The Conservative Soul: How We Lost It, How To Get It Back*  
by Andrew Sullivan. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Conservatism in America is in crisis. As discontent with the current administration has increased, the fissures between different factions within the “movement” have widened, the disagreements have grown more intense, and the accusations each has hurled against the other have become more vehement. Different conservatives account for the mistakes of administration policy and the betrayal of certain core principles in various ways, but common to many of these accounts of conservative self-immolation is the alleged villainy of religious conservatives. Certainly this is the account of conservatism’s current misfortunes most favored by liberals in the mainstream media. It is an account that Andrew Sullivan, himself putatively religious and putatively a conservative, shares.

If there is a central narrative to *The Conservative Soul*, it is that religious conservatives and their “theocon” elites represent a “fundamentalist” mentality that is alien to a properly skeptical conservatism, and that these zealous “fundamentalists” have taken over the Republican Party. Impervious to reasoned dissent, this now “religious party” morally justifies and empowers a strong central government to enforce fundamentalist norms: big-govern-

ment conservatism is begotten of “compassionate conservatism.” In pursuing, through the politicization of Christianity, what Sullivan calls a “politics of meaning” (a mocking reference to a catchphrase from *Tikkun*’s Michael Lerner, to whom Hillary Clinton brought fifteen minutes of fame in the early 1990s), the fundamentalists in the conservative movement allegedly betray the true legacy of a conservatism that holds freedom as its central value.

*The Conservative Soul* is really two books, which Sullivan seems convinced are connected by the overarching narrative of fundamentalist power but which really have little to do with one another. One concerns the definition of what conservatism ought to be and how religion (and here Sullivan is mainly talking about traditional Christianity) ought to intersect with politics, if at all; the other is a string of critiques of the Bush administration’s failures through poor policy and implementation. While Sullivan lands solid blows on the administration’s excessive spending, its very questionable policies on interrogation procedures for terrorist suspects, and its pain-

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fully incompetent handling of the Iraq war, he has not told us much that many other conservative critics haven't already told us in far more convincing ways. When the administration's rigidity and stubbornness might be explained in terms of its adherence to an ideology, Sullivan exonerates the secular ideologues and chooses instead to privilege the role of a religious fundamentalism fueling a "Manichean" world-view. There is of course a deep irony here. For *orthodox* Christians, by definition, cannot have a "Manichean" worldview (Christianity rejects dualism), whereas "Manichean" divisions of humanity are indeed a feature of Eric Voegelin's "modern gnostics"—the secular "religionists" of the age of ideology.

That Sullivan seems unaware of Voegelin's work is unsurprising. Occasional references to Burke and boilerplate assertions about what the American founders are supposed to have believed aside, Sullivan constantly refers to Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher as his models of conservative thought and action; for the most part, his acquaintance with the work of postwar American conservative intellectuals is essentially nonexistent. He appeals instead to a conservatism that would be agnostic on ultimate questions and would be content to live in the "twilight" of our limited knowledge and understanding. Such an orientation of "soul" does not allow for any confidence in the kinds of transcendent truth claims, the eternal verities and "permanent things," that many thinkers in the Anglo-American conservative tradition (to say nothing of the much more extensive Christian intellectual traditions that have informed conservatism) have taken to be the *sine qua non* of a conservative understanding of the world. Sullivan hitches a ride on the legitimate emphasis on humility, experience, and skepticism that one can find in seminal conservative thinkers such as Michael Oakeshott (the subject

of his graduate work at Harvard), but then hijacks these ideas and makes doubt and uncertainty the core of his entire view.

While many important conservative thinkers would share Sullivan's horror at what Oakeshott called "teleocracy"—a government dedicated to achieving certain propositional ends—they could not share his horror at the idea that human nature has a proper telos, one that must accord with natural law. The constancy of human nature throughout history, which most conservatives take as axiomatic (and which Sullivan also seems to accept), is inextricably tied to an understanding that acting in accordance with that nature brings human flourishing, and acting contrary to it introduces disorder and disintegration into the inner life of man and into society. Strangely missing in Sullivan's account of the "permanence of human nature" is any acknowledgment that conservatives have typically taken their cues about that nature and its limitations here on earth from the Christian doctrine of original sin, and that this source for conservative thought about human nature implies the possibility and indeed the desirability of transformation by grace. This transformation does not remake human nature by destroying it or doing violence to its integrity—since God created human nature, this is not possible—but instead by restoring it to its fullness. If Sullivan is himself a religious man, his religion appears to have no place for grace; if Sullivan is himself a conservative, the only thing he seems to hold as permanently worthy of conserving in human nature is the fog of our unknowing.

Rather than a phenomenon of a revival or return to the fundamentals of the faith, which might normally be called "fundamentalism," Sullivan casts a much wider net and drags under this rubric any Christian who submits to ecclesiastical authority, adheres to the doctrines of his church,

and regards the Bible as true revelation (which, in Sullivan's view, is to take the Bible "literally"). It seems the only non-fundamentalist religion—"true" religion, for Sullivan—would consist in decorative anthropological rituals making no truth claims and imposing no moral demands on anyone. Thus, Pope Benedict XVI, Tim LaHaye, Robert George, and even Bill Kristol all receive mention as promoters of a distorted "fundamentalist" mentality. Indeed, in Sullivan's telling, the secular, neoconservative *Weekly Standard*, unbeknownst to them or to anyone else, was apparently responsible for leading the "fundamentalist" charge in the 1990s.

In Sullivan's narrative, the damage done by "fundamentalism" extends not only into the realm of attitudes and ideas, but also into the realm of public policy, where President Bush serves as the embodiment of the fundamentalist mentality that cannot admit error and refuses to face reality. Incredibly, the foreign policy views of neoconservatives and their theories about the universality of American-style freedom and democracy receive *no* mention in this book—because Sullivan has long since determined that the enemy is religion in politics. This works to relieve everyone else who supported or advocated the Iraq war—including Sullivan himself—of responsibility for what came later. The mental gymnastics required to prove that you are right, even when you are wrong, are remarkable.

Some will be tempted to follow Sullivan into the twilight after a jarring experience with what many others besides Sullivan have seen as a kind of "faith-based" administration impervious to contrary judgments and empirical fact. But if the administration's inflexibility and certainty about

its policies have been shocking, these same traits have also proceeded from a certain ideological mentality committed to abstractions that have no obvious connection with revelation, religion, or holy books. It is in its straightforward conflation of religion and ideology that Sullivan's label "fundamentalist" does so much damage and gives such a misleading account of the phenomenon being described. To follow Sullivan is to agree with him that conserva-



Bill Kristol: Fundamentalist?

tives do not believe that there is an "ultimate truth" to this life "but the one we give to it." Yet it is in deference to meaning that is *given* and wisdom that is *received* that a conservative, even a skeptic or a believer who is often wracked with doubts, relates to the traditions handed down to him. It is *because* of a properly conservative skepticism about intellectual enthusiasms and an

awareness of the flaws of men that we need prescription and authority, including religious authority. It is possible to cast these things off and try to find one's own way, but one will not find much warrant for such a personal or political strategy in the tradition of conservative thought in any age.

Conservatism is indeed the negation of ideology, and there is a central part of conservative thought that affirms the importance of experience (M. E. Bradford's "better guide than reason") and shares Sullivan's (current) hostility to armed doctrines and crusades. But this is because of conservatism's strong, certain affirmation of basic truths about human nature, the transcendent moral order, and the reasonableness of revealed Judeo-Christian tenets that have been tested through the ages and proven their worth. The last several years have seen distortions of and departures from conservative principle aplenty, but if

anything, the cause of these mistakes has not been too much religion but perhaps too little—and a willingness to subordinate to a particular policy agenda the claims of Christian teachings that might have guided us aright. If the soul of conservatism has been imperiled, it will not do to lose our conservative minds in the twilight of doubt,

confusion, and misunderstanding of the basic truths of our civilization's vital religious tradition. Approached with greater disinterest, even Andrew Sullivan should be able to see that it is *because* conservatism is the negation of ideology that it can never be the negation of revealed religion.

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