

*The Conservative Soul:
How We Lost It, How to
Get It Back*

by Andrew Sullivan

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One thing should be stated immediately in any review of Andrew Sullivan's books: he is a famously inconsistent writer.

For instance, he stridently supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq and lionised George W Bush after 9/11. In the 2004 election, however, he dumped Bush for Kerry, mainly because Kerry *wasn't* Bush, and he now laments the Iraq war. He calls his earlier support 'stupid and premature'. What prompted this shift?

Similarly, across a number of key issues, including abortion and gay marriage, Sullivan's refusal to adhere to the conclusions his stated political and religious beliefs would generally entail has made him a compelling, self-consciously Orwellian but increasingly frustrating voice in American ideas. No one seems to know where he will line up, and perhaps more importantly, why.

The thing to ask about Sullivan, then, is whether he is really convinced by certain political or religious claims, but too often disappointed by political parties and leaders, as he now claims. Or is he a completely different, more nuanced creature from the conservative pundit we have—and perhaps he has—come to expect?

For there is a sense in which

Sullivan's public writings constitute an internal monologue externalised, intent not so much with projecting a world view or adhering to a party line, but rather with acting as a psychic check on Sullivan's previously stated positions.

Just what it checks for, however, and the way this curious mechanism impacts his public claims might be the most interesting insight to spring from his latest book.

His wider claim—that conservatives in America have lost their 'soul' because they too often worship at the shrine of a false conservative idol—is premised on an historically interesting, if reasonably untested, assertion. Sullivan argues that natural lawyers in union with Christian

fundamentalists have formed a bastard conservatism ('theoconservatism') that has, under George W Bush, gained ascendancy over more traditional strains. That's right, neo-conservatism isn't the word, it's the 'theocons' who run the Bush

Administration.

Critics—including Sullivan—characterise this ascendancy as leading to everything from the 'failure' in Iraq to betrayals of the previous conservative preference for small government. Sullivan takes greatest issue, however, with the importation of moral/Christian values, via natural law, into the public square.

On natural law Sullivan is generally unconvincing, although better informed than most other non-academic critics. In explaining the theory he seems to be learning as he goes or at the very least he is sloppy with how he expresses

what he knows.

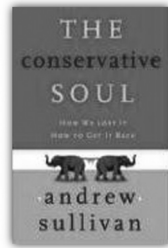
At first instance he seems to argue that so-called 'theoconservatives' are simple determinists, before relenting and presenting the more nuanced idea of vocation or *arête* that Catholic scholars, namely Augustine and Aquinas, perfected from Aristotle. However, Sullivan attaches Darwinian overtones, '... to realise his fullest potential as a member of the species *Homo sapiens*', where no natural lawyer would speak of personhood in such narrow terms.

This particular tone probably fits better with Sullivan's wider argument that all fundamentalists are similar, whether Christian 'theocon' or Nazi eugenicist. He comes close here, and at other times, to adopting the nomenclature and style of messianic secularists.

What is more, he appears to take issue with what might be called an 'infallible second level' of natural law reasoning where things like 'inalienable rights' are posited while ignoring or overlooking the theory's third level that treats of more mundane, political subjects.

What Sullivan misses is that at this third level, characterised by fallen-world uncertainties and conflicting claims to flourishing, the dogmatism and universalism he resents in natural law thinking is often qualified if not jettisoned.

Natural law, when properly articulated, speaks on this third level then only of regimes, policies, laws and paths. The plural here is paramount. These acquire authority and encourage obedience *only* if they tend toward the common good. A law or idea, simply by virtue of being promulgated by the Pope is not, as Sullivan erroneously claims, rationally binding and probably



not exclusively theologically compelling. Otherwise, natural lawyers would be positivists and theologians solely inquisitors. They are typically neither.

Natural law simply does not equate with the 'fundamentalism' Sullivan describes as:

...a total system in which everything is explained and everything is capable of ultimate harmony. Our only choice is whether to live against the grain of this nature—or in accordance with its patterns and direction.

After introducing natural law Sullivan claims that it is, at 'the nitty-gritty', often wrapped up in debates about sex. This claim, he feels it necessary to quickly clarify, is a statement of fact, not the fruit of less rational conclusions: 'I don't raise this issue right away for prurient or personal reasons'. Anyone familiar with Sullivan will pause here.

What he means is that his claims are not based on personal prejudices against natural law ideas on sex, specifically the rejection of gay marriage.

It is, however, an intriguing idea and useful explanation of his positions—one that not even Sullivan can resist entertaining.

It helps to know that Sullivan has championed gay marriage since the 1980s, but that he argues for this innovation from a peculiar position. He wants homosexuals to achieve a tortured notion of bourgeois 'normalcy'. His arguments—articulated in *Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality*—generally chill libertarians, dissatisfy social conservatives, contradict the Vatican and disappoint radicals. But the reasoning is, in many

respects, more conservative than obviously liberal. It should appeal to conservatives, but it doesn't. Therefore, Sullivan's wider public performance and the tone of this book seem to argue, those who disagree with his ideas on gay marriage just aren't conservative.

The rest of the book is spent fleshing out what could only be described as a phantasmagoria, a veritable 'vast Right-wing conspiracy' that Sullivan suggests rests on numbers-heavy but somewhat dim fundamentalist Christians in bed with Jesuitical Catholic intellectuals. These people, he claims, have led his party and his adopted nation astray and away from true conservatism.

Away, indeed, from gay marriage. It is too perfect.

In the absence of any binding document, or a creed for instance, that dogmatically sets out conservative beliefs, conservatism is generally held to be just that which most self-identified conservatives support. Sixty years ago Sullivan's small government solutions were alien to other war-inflected conservatives like Churchill or Eisenhower and they are less compelling for terrorism-oriented George W Bush. There is no 'soul' that conservatism can lose, only votes and voters.

The Republican Party is not currently unpopular because it rejects gay marriage or listens to natural lawyers. Sullivan also fails to deal with the fact that most natural lawyers, including the Pope, and certainly those outside the American conservative power bases he identifies in this book, explicitly rejected the Iraq war as a contravention of just war principles.

What remains of Sullivan's book is a sometimes charming, often contentious, always interesting

attempt by an obviously clever man to explain exactly why the most obvious conclusion—that he is just sore about gay marriage—is not indeed the motivation for this book and the litmus test that informs much of his otherwise puzzling political posturing.

He fails, but readably so. And at least we know now where Andrew Sullivan stands: somewhere between an idiosyncratic reading of Oakeshott on faith and Andrew Sullivan some months back.

Wherever that is, it is not with the Pope and not where most Republicans currently sit. This is something real American conservatives, the men with the numbers and nominations, have been telling Sullivan for some time.

Reviewed by John Heard