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## Interview with Andrew Sullivan

*On Thursday's edition of "The Albert Mohler Program," Dr. Mohler was joined by Andrew Sullivan, a prolific columnist and political commentator as well as the author of a new book entitled *The Conservative Soul*. Among a host of other issues, Dr. Mohler asked Sullivan to define what it means to be both a "conservative" and a "Christian."*

Friday, November 3, 2006

R. ALBERT MOHLER (RAM): Welcome back. Our guest today is [Andrew Sullivan](#). He is a blogger at [The Daily Dish](#), also found at [TIME.com](#), author of *The Conservative Soul: How We Lost It, How to Get It Back*. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from Harvard University, former editor of *The New Republic*, author of several books, and a man that I've faced across the table a couple of times in the media, most commonly I think on Larry King's show. Andrew, welcome to the program.

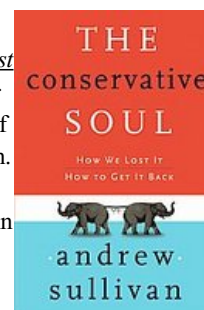
ANDREW SULLIVAN (AS): Thank you, Al. May I say, I've always enjoyed our interactions in the past, and respect, even though I disagree with you, where you're coming from, and respect the sincerity of your faith.

RAM: Well, I appreciate that, and I appreciate your willingness to come on the program, and I too have enjoyed our conversations in the past. I think, you know, our listeners are going to enjoy this conversation as well. I think it's because we both intend to be serious men of ideas.

AS: I hope so, and I think these are times in which we really have to be very serious and ask ourselves tough questions as well as asking others tough questions, because the stakes are so high, as I'm sure you agree. I mean, we face mortal enemies abroad. This is the second anniversary of the Islamicist murder of Theo van Gogh in the streets of Amsterdam for exposing some of the extremism in Islam that we're facing. And yet we have a government that seems also to be losing the war in Iraq, and asking those hard questions I know is painful, but I think it's our obligation to talk about it and debate about it as honestly as we can.

RAM: Well, and I certainly agree with that point. This is the kind of conversation that we need to have, and I want to congratulate you on having written a book, because it is a step of significant, I would say, responsibility to make an argument. I want to take the argument as seriously as you have made it in your book. And if I could kind of think of this in terms of concentric circles, I would say at the outer ring of my concern about the book would be Iraq, because I guess what I'd have to say to you is I agree with you that security is an essential part of what it means to be a conservative, a concern for national security. But it seems to me that a lot of those issues, including the war in Iraq, are essentially debatable issues, about which way is right to go. You're now, though, firmly, I guess, convinced that the war in Iraq is just wrong.

AS: No, I'm not. I supported the war in Iraq. I think and believe in it, and supported it quite ferociously, and gave the President the benefit of every doubt. But I'm looking at the reality, Al, and you can see it too. We didn't send enough troops, we didn't have a plan for the post-invasion, and not only that, they have not adjusted and they are very rigid. They have not been humble enough to accept that they have made mistakes. I don't believe—I don't think anybody can believe—that Donald Rumsfeld has done a fantastic job, which is what the President said yesterday. That's crazy talk, Al. I mean, it's not sensible talk. So I agree with the war. I think we have to fight this enemy. That's why I feel we have to tell the President he has to adjust his strategy. He has to face reality, instead of defending people who have failed him. Sometimes you have to fire people, and if you had a defense secretary that has presided over this terrible mess in Iraq, you should fire him, not tell him he's doing a fantastic job. That's denial, that's just in denial, and I think it's the job of conservatives to tell this President, get out of denial and deal with reality.



RAM: Well, I think the very word you used there is one of the two most interesting points that I encountered in your book, because you use the word “conservative” there. And I want to say, here at the onset, that I think when you look at the war in Iraq, that is not an issue on which conservatives rightly defined are necessarily going to be in unanimity. I think there could be a robust debate *among* conservatives about the proper way to approach the entire Middle East question, the proper way to approach the democracy question, the way to approach the prosecution of a war, this kind of asymmetrical warfare that Rumsfeld talks about.

AS: And I think that debate may be starting again and reviving in earnest. But look, the President has told us you’re either with him or against him. You’re either with him all the way, or you’re with the enemy. He hasn’t set it up so that we can have a rational debate about this. He has polarized us about this, which I think is unfair to conservatives, and I think it’s unfair to the troops, actually, to polarize the country around this and say you’ve got to back me one hundred percent or not at all. Why can’t you say, I support the war but I think we needed more troops, I think you’ve messed up, I think that we need to be realistic now about where we go. That kind of pragmatic conservatism, which was the hallmark of his father, he has lost. And I have to say, it’s very concerning to me, because there are, there is a missing soldier right now in Iraq. They abandoned this soldier. We don’t know where he is. They abandoned him to the Moqtada al-Sadr’s militia, who is calling the shots on the U.S. military in Iraq right now. I don’t think that’s a conservative thing, to have a Sadrite militia tell U.S. troops what they should be doing.

RAM: Well, I think that’s a very open question. I think the whole Iraq thing, I don’t mean that particular question, which I’m frankly not up on at the moment. But the whole question of the war, I think, is an open question. I think that regardless of how we got into it—and you spoke to that in terms of your own support for it in the beginning—the big question now, and I think the big question for Christians is, how do we get out of it in a way that best preserves human dignity and the values that we would hope to have shared not only here in the United States, but in Iraq.

AS: Here’s my question that I think Christians—and I don’t, you know, I am a sinner. I’m only a Christian in the sense that I do believe in Jesus’ divinity and in His ability to guide me and others. But I also know I’m prone to self-doubt and sin, and so I’m not—when I talk about what Christians should think, I want to say so with all humility. But here’s what I think. I think that the U.S., under this President, has tortured human beings. And I don’t think that’s a Christian thing to do. I think that’s an absolute no-no. We just found out two days ago of a young woman who was a servicewoman in Iraq who was forced to interrogate some prisoners by the method that Donald Rumsfeld and George Bush approved. And she couldn’t handle it and she left. She’s a devout Mormon. And she killed herself three days later, and we’ve just found out why she killed herself, because of this, because her conscience would not let her go along with this. I think Christians need to ask, what is the morality of torture? What is the morality of water-boarding? What is the morality of holding someone and putting them in a cold detention cell indefinitely and freezing them to hypothermia? What happened to America, that we have gotten to this place? Yes, we should debate these methods, but as Christians, we have to say no to this.

RAM: Well, I would say that if you look at that whole question, we’ve got to even define what we’re talking about in torture, but I wanted to give you the opportunity—and by the way, I think a serious Christian engagement on that question has to be rooted in a very long heritage of Christian thought in the use of violence and lethal force, in any context.

AS: Well, that’s back to St. Augustine and Aquinas.

RAM: I’ve tried to address that in my own writings, I’ve written an essay on this. But I wanted to give you the opportunity to speak about it, because that’s where so many in the media have been focusing in interviews with you. There are two words I really want to center in, in my conversation with you, because I think they’re the two crucial words to your project in this book, and they’re the words *Christian* and the word *conservative*. And you’ve entered the debate. As a matter of fact the title of your book is *The Conservative Soul*, and when we come back, I really want to ask Andrew Sullivan to define these terms as he uses them, because they are two of the most common terms used in the media today, and I have a very specific meaning when I use these words. And from reading Andrew Sullivan’s writings, especially in the book *The Conservative Soul*, I know he has his own definition. And I think that could be one of the most interesting conversations we could possibly have today. This is the place for intelligent Christian conversation. My guest today is Andrew Sullivan, author of *The Conservative Soul*, blogger at The Daily Dish, and as you know, one of the most interesting people now commenting in the news. You’ve heard him, you’ve seen him, now we have the opportunity to talk with him. Coast to coast, you’re listening to the Albert Mohler program.

[Commercial break]

RAM: Welcome back. I think I first saw the name Andrew Sullivan in the pages of *The New Republic*. He was editor of that journal from 1991 to 1996. He currently is senior editor. I always look for his columns, including when he wrote the TRB column. I never missed one of his essays. And I still find *The New Republic* one of the most fascinating journals of opinion in America today. Andrew, you have been writing about political issues for a long time, and indeed your Ph.D. is in political science from Harvard, back from 1989. You know, I'm trying to put all this together. You're somewhat difficult to place politically, but you supported John Kerry in the 2004 election, you worked with Democratic candidates, and you edited basically a center left magazine. And now you write a book *The Conservative Soul*. What is a conservative?

AS: Well, I've never worked for a candidate of any sort. I'm an independent writer. And when I was editing a liberal magazine, I annoyed the hell out of them by publishing a criticism of Hillary Clinton's healthcare plan, and publishing *The Bell Curve* and Camille Paglia and all sorts of people. I'm interested in stirring up debate, and then also making arguments. And yeah, I endorsed Bush in 2000, but thought by 2004 that the evidence of Bush's big spending and also by then, directed in the Iraq War, revealed that he was just not competent enough to be President of the United States, that he was out of his depth.

RAM: But that's not an ideological issue yet.

AS: Well, it was in the sense that I—the spending was an ideological issue. You know, I'm a small government conservative. I think that, you know, the government should balance its budget. I used to think conservatism meant. . . Let's talk about that issue, because since 2000, they have increased spending, these Republicans, faster than any Democratic Congress since FDR. No one disagrees with that, that's the fact.

RAM: Well, and I would acknowledge that if you are a balanced budget conservative, you've got some real issues with this administration.

AS: Also if you're a libertarian conservative, like I am, you know, in which I'm basically happy for you to live your life and me to live mine—what I used to call the “leave us alone coalition,” in which evangelicals could actually join forces with all sorts of other people who have different ways of life in agreeing that government should leave us all alone to ourselves, like I've been against hate crimes laws my whole life, and any PC-left bossiness. But I'm afraid that what's happened is that the Republican Right, the hard religious right, has used the government to expand its own power and betrayed the message of the Gospel in the process.

RAM: Okay, one of the things I want to ask you. I want to tell you how I understand you in a few minutes, and I want you to tell me how you understand me. And we'll understand each other.

AS: Well, I don't seek to understand you or label you in any way.

RAM: Well, you did in your blog today. You called me a fundamentalist on your blog today.

AS: Well you are, I think, aren't you? Wouldn't you agree?

RAM: Well, then you're describing me, alright? So I want to make sure we do this honestly.

AS: Of course, you're an intelligent fundamentalist.

RAM: Well, that's nice. I'm glad at least you don't think that's an oxymoron. But let's just talk for a moment about the words that I think are most crucial to this argument. And I want to ask you, define a conservative, or define conservatism.

AS: I believe deep down, conservatism is the notion that human beings are imperfect, that we ought not have heaven on earth, that the role of government is therefore very limited, and that people can only save their own souls, the government cannot do it for them. And therefore, the government should be small, it should tax as little as possible, it should spend as little as possible, as we should have a strong defense, but mainly limited government, both in the private sphere and in the fiscal area. That's how I define it.

RAM: And you are a proponent of the legalization of same-sex marriage?

AS: Yes, because I'm a conservative. I actually believe the institution of marriage is a good and wonderful thing. I've seen my own family, my sister get married, and she thinks, wouldn't it be good for you to settle down with someone else and contribute to your partner in fidelity and responsibility? I don't see why gay people, that isn't something the conservatives should ask gay people to do.

RAM: Well, I think it's because conservatism has also been defined by tradition, and especially being a British conservative, I think you'd understand that. The basic principle coming down from people like Lord Acton and Salisbury, that—when you're talking about an institution like marriage, it is what it is, and it is the union of a man and a woman.

AS: The British Tories are now endorsing gay marriage.

RAM: Well, I'll also suggest that they're not very consistent with their own political philosophy, and they're certainly not consistent with the arguments that Tories of the past made as conservatives, because if marriage is this thing, then to change it, even in terms of gender, is to make it something it never has been. But when we come back, I want to return to this, as we're talking with Andrew Sullivan today, about the definition of what it means to be a conservative, his suggestion that it's rooted in the essence of doubt. And I want to talk, even more importantly, about what it means to be a Christian, because if you're going to put these words together, Christian conservative, for them or against them, we better understand what we're talking about here. This is the place for intelligent Christian conversation, and we'll be right back.

[Commercial break]

RAM: Welcome back. It is always a rare stewardship when you have the opportunity for a truly intelligent exchange of ideas, and that doesn't always happen in the media, and I consider it a privilege to be in conversation today with Andrew Sullivan, author of *The Conservative Soul*. I think we respect each other enough, we can just say right up front, cut to the chase, we disagree on the meaning of conservative, and here, the definition of Christian. And so, Andrew, we were talking about your definition of conservatism, and it's a definition of conservatism that I would have to say leans more into the libertarianism than into the conservatism just on the basis of respecting institutions and traditions.

AS: Well, I think as a Burkean—you know, I think one remembers that Burke supported the American Revolution as a Tory. So, sometimes society changes and conservatives have to adapt to those changes, just as the emergence of women, for example, in our society led to the adoption of universal suffrage for women. And I think at this point no Christian is saying that women should not have the vote. And so you adjust, and I think that therefore if what we've seen in the last twenty years—the emergence of gay people in our society—conservatism has to adjust and say, what's best, what's the best policy to deal with these people? Do we encourage them to form relationships, or do we keep ignoring them, or what do we do with them?

RAM: And I understand that point. I just have to come back and say that if there were a verse in the Bible that said women should not vote, I'd be obligated to hold that position, but there is no such—

AS: But you don't really, because, like take the gay thing. In Leviticus, it's quite clear that homosexual sex is condemned. It's an abomination. But it's also clear that we should be subject to the death penalty. It says that very clearly.

RAM: And so in the theocracy—

AS: But you don't believe that.

RAM: No, but I don't believe it—no, that's not true. I do believe that Israel was obligated to that under the dispensation of the law as a theocracy. But we are not, in the New Testament church, a theocracy. And that's, by the way, why I think you're wrong to call me or others basically, theofascists or something like that.

AS: I haven't called you that. I haven't called—that's not fair. I haven't said that. In fact, there's a long section of the book—and I'm grateful for you reading it—in which I specifically say that the Christian right has every right to make their arguments in the public sphere.

RAM: But not to make it public policy.

AS: Well, I think that when it gets into private choices about how people want to live their life, you live it as diverse society. And I think Christians are best able to influence the world by their own examples, not by passing laws to control the lives of other people. And I think that's where we've gone wrong. And people like David Kuo, you know, who wrote this book *Tempting Faith*, who went into the administration with all good intentions, thinks that God and Caesar have gotten too close together and that too much power has been sought. Jesus did not seek power. He let go of power. And when Christians become too interested in wielding power of government, then I think they are being tempted into something that they don't really believe.

RAM: But I basically agree with you on that. I do not believe that the Kingdom of God is going to come by political action. I do not—

AS: Karl Rove is not Jesus, you know, but I fear that the Religious Right has gotten much too close to Karl Rove, much too close to the Republican party.

RAM: And I've never heard anyone with that confusion, by the way.

AS: Christians should not be aligned with one party or another. We should be talking about first things, about our souls, about life and death, not involved in legislation and political activism and recruiting people to the polls and all that stuff. It's not what I think we should be doing.

RAM: Well, and I would also have to say that if you're talking about those first things, though, Andrew, you're going to have to eventually get down to policy decisions and you're going to get down to party platforms, and there I think there are some very clear choices. And as one Christian here, there's no doubt with priority issues of life and death for me, especially when it comes to unborn life and the sanctity of marriage, I know where I've got to go.

AS: Well, then we can agree to disagree. Though I will tell you this, that I personally could have nothing to do with abortion. I think it is a moral evil. You know my writing. I've always said that. But I also understand that some people profoundly disagree with me, and I don't think that they're completely nuts, and I think that they have some arguments that need to be considered about the right of women to control their own bodies, and some balancing acts here. I'm for balancing these things out. I'm not for entirely black and white. I don't think in a diverse society you can have black and white on some of these subjects.

RAM: But that's a very slippery argument, because it always then leads to what's the next thing that's no longer black and white, the next thing that's gray. And, I mean, no matter which side you're on in this argument—whether you think it's an ascent or a descent—you've got to admit there's a progression there. You say the church should be really focused on Gospel issues, spiritual issues. And that's where I want to come down, because you identify as a Christian, a Catholic Christian, and yet you oppose some of the key teachings of the church. And then, you know, I'm not speaking as a Catholic but as a theologian.

AS: Well, I can say the whole creed—

RAM: No, I understand that, but you are very much against—

AS: —that I say every Sunday, with full conviction, so I don't, on those fundamental issues, I don't think that I disagree. I do think that the current hierarchy has taken too strong a position politically in certain areas, and I think that people of conscience can disagree with them.

RAM: But you also argue throughout your book—and I have read it very carefully—that there really is no sure certain doctrinal understanding. In fact, when you talk about God, you really lean into the fact that we cannot even have a sure and certain knowledge of God. That's an unusual argument for a Catholic to make.

AS: I don't think so. I think that Augustine, or St. Paul, who said that we see through a glass darkly as humans, that Jesus Himself on the cross at the very end doubted His own Father. "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

RAM: Well, that's an eccentric reading--most Christians don't read that as doubt.

AS: Now, if Jesus can doubt on the cross, doubt is part of faith.

RAM: Well, we should doubt the things that are not certain. We should doubt the things that are not certain. But let me ask you this--just because when you talk about those who identify as fundamentalists, and you know, frankly, I'm not even going to argue over the word. But you say that a fundamentalist is determined by the text. And I just want to be right up front and honest with you. Insofar as it is possible, given my own fallibility, I want to find what I believe in the *text* of Scripture. And you find that hopelessly wrong-headed, according to this book.

AS: Well, because the Scripture contradicts itself on many occasions, and you have to have some interpretation of it, which means the text itself won't tell you how to live your life. Only Jesus can help you live your life.

RAM: But how is He going to do that outside the text of Scripture? Where do you have access to Jesus?

AS: Well, the text of Scripture is very important, but you have to interpret it, and you have to think about it in terms of your own life, and reconcile your own conscience and moral reasoning with what it is saying. And that's a journey and a process. It's not a moment, you know? And it's the process that I'm talking about, as I think you know.

RAM: It is a process, but I would argue it's a process that should lead from doubt into certainty, rather than from certainty into doubt. Andrew, I appreciate you joining us today on "The Albert Mohler Program." You can find his writings at AndrewSullivan.com, The Daily Dish accessible at TIME.com, and his new book is *The Conservative Soul*. Andrew, thank you for joining us today.

AS: Thank you very much for such an interesting conversation. God bless.

RAM: Alright, we'll continue this conversation in various ways, I'm sure, in months to come, and I'll continue this conversation with you in just a moment when we come back with some final thoughts. A lot to think about here. We'll be right back.

[Commercial break]

RAM: Welcome back, folks. There really was no time for calls. That was a very interesting conversation. It needed to continue. And I have to admit to you right up front, this is the most difficult kind of program to contemplate, to have someone like Andrew Sullivan on. Because when you have a guest, it really is an obligation to let him make the point he wants to make, even as you try to really focus on the issues that, as host, you think are most important.

I wanted to focus on the definition of conservative and Christian, and as a Christian theologian, the most important of those words for me is *Christian*. And that's why at the end of the conversation I appreciate the fact that Andrew Sullivan really was very honest about the fact that his Christianity is not defined by Scripture. He says, you know, that he sees it as contradicting itself. And furthermore, it's not seeking certainty. And, that raises the whole question of the kind of certainty we should seek. And it comes back to the fact that I, as a Christian, am obligated to biblical authority. I don't know anything about Jesus other than that revealed in the Scripture. I have no basis to speak about any of these issues.

And you know, we all really operate out of our deepest commitments, and Andrew Sullivan is very honest about his homosexuality, and you know, when you come down to how we envision, for instance, biblical authority, if one is pressing for the normalization of homosexuality, you can't have what you call Christianity, if you intend to identify as a Christian, dictated by Scripture and established in the clear teachings of Scripture. And it's not just Leviticus and the theocracy of Israel. It's Romans 1. It's Paul's letter to the Corinthians. It's Paul's letter to Timothy. The Scripture is very, very clear about the sin of homosexuality.

That's why I pray for Andrew Sullivan. And I told him that, and I don't mean that condescendingly, I mean that as genuinely as a Christian I know to say. I pray for him. I'm not so concerned about winning an argument. That's one of the reasons why I didn't want to interrupt too often. I wanted to have a respectful conversation. My main concern is not to win an argument. My main concern is not even over the definition of conservative. I think he's dead wrong. I think any conservative that presses for that kind of libertarian vision that leads to the normalization of same-sex marriage is a

conservative of a very eccentric and wrong-headed definition. Conservatism is based in the effort to conserve that which must be conserved, such as the institution of marriage as what it is.

But my greater concern is for his definition to Christianity, because not only is it sub-orthodox, I just don't believe that Andrew Sullivan is submitting himself to the teaching of the Christian Gospel and to the authority of Scripture, which is the only way that saves. It points us towards repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. I pray that way for Andrew. I pray that way for you as well. Let's pray for him together as Christians, and let's continue this conversation. I'll meet you tomorrow.

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