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When Not Seeing Is Believing

Andrew Sullivan on the rise of fundamentalism and why embracing spiritual doubt is the key to defusing the tension between East and West

By ANDREW SULLIVAN

Something about the visit to the U.N. by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad refuses to leave my mind. It wasn't his obvious intention to pursue nuclear technology and weaponry. It wasn't his denial of the Holocaust or even his eager anticipation of Armageddon. It was something else entirely. It was his smile. In every interview, confronting every loaded question, his eyes seemed calm, his expression at ease, his face at peace. He seemed utterly serene.

What is the source of his extraordinary calm? Yes, he's in a relatively good place right now, with his Hizballah proxies basking in a military draw with Israel. Yes, the U.S. is bogged down in a brutal war in Iraq. But Ahmadinejad is still unpopular at home, the Iranian economy is battered, and his major foes, Israel and the U.S., far outgun him--for now.

So let me submit that he is smiling and serene not because he is crazy. He is smiling gently because for him, the most perplexing and troubling questions we all face every day have already been answered. He has placed his trust in the arms of God. Just because it isn't the God that many of us believe in does not detract from the sincerity or power of his faith. It is a faith that is real, all too real--gripping billions across the Muslim world in a new wave of fervor and fanaticism. All worries are past him, all anxiety, all stress. "Peoples, driven by their divine nature, intrinsically seek good, virtue, perfection and beauty," Ahmadinejad said at the U.N. "Relying on our peoples, we can take giant steps towards reform and pave the road for human perfection. Whether we like it or not, justice, peace and virtue will sooner or later prevail in the world with the will of Almighty God."

Human perfection. Whether we like it or not. Justice, peace and virtue. That concept of the beneficent, omnipotent will of God and the need to always submit to it, whether we like it or not, is not new. It has been present in varying degrees throughout history in all three great monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—from their very origins. And with it has come the utter certainty of those who say they have seen the face of God or have surrendered themselves to his power or have achieved the complete spiritual repose promised by the Books of all three faiths: the Torah, the Gospels, the Koran. That is where the smile comes from.

Complete calm comes from complete certainty. In today's unnerving, globalizing,

sometimes terrifying world, such religious certainty is a balm more in demand than ever. In the new millennium, Muslims are not alone in grasping the relief of submission to authority. The new Pope, despite his criticism of extremist religion and religious violence, represents a return to a more authoritarian form of Catholicism. In the Catholic triad of how we know truth—an eternal dialogue between papal authority, scriptural guidance and the experience of the faithful—Benedict XVI has tilted the balance decisively back toward his own unanswerable truth.

What was remarkable about his recent address on Islam is what most critics missed. The bulk of his message was directed at the West, at its disavowal of religious authority and its embrace of what Benedict called "the subjective 'conscience.'" For Benedict, if your conscience tells you something that differs from his teaching, it is a false conscience, a sign not of personal integrity but of sin. And so he has silenced conscientious dissent within the church and insisted on absolutism in matters like abortion, end-of-life decisions, priestly celibacy, the role of women, homosexuality and interfaith dialogue.

In Protestant Christianity, especially in the U.S., the loudest voices are the most certain and uncompromising. Many megachurches, which preach absolute adherence to inerrant Scripture, are thriving, while more moderate denominations are on the decline. That sense of certainty has even entered democratic politics in the U.S. We have, after all, a proudly born-again President. And religious certainty surely cannot be disentangled from George W. Bush's utter conviction that he has made no mistakes in Iraq. "My faith frees me," the President once wrote. "Frees me to make the decisions that others might not like. Frees me to do the right thing, even though it may not poll well. Frees me to enjoy life and not worry about what comes next." In every messy context, the President seeks succor in a simple certainty—good vs. evil, terror vs. freedom—without sensing that wars are also won in the folds of uncertainty and guile, of doubt and tactical adjustment that are alien to the fundamentalist psyche.

I remember in my own faith journey that in those moments when I felt most lost in the world, I moved toward the absolutist part of my faith and gripped it with the white knuckles of fear. I brooked no dissent and patrolled my own soul for any hint of doubt. I required a faith not of sandstone but of granite.

Many Western liberals and secular types look at the zealotry closing in on them and draw an obvious conclusion: religion is the problem. As our global politics become more enamored of religious certainty, the stakes have increased, they argue, and they have a point. The evil terrorists of al-Qaeda invoke God as the sanction for their mass murder. And many beleaguered Americans respond by invoking God's certainty. And the cycle intensifies into something close to a religious war. When the Presidents of the U.S. and Iran speak as much about God as about diplomacy, we have entered a newly dangerous era. The Islamist resurgence portends the worst. Imagine the fanaticism of

16th century Christians, waging religious war and burning heretics at the stake. Now give them nukes. See the problem? Domestically, the resurgence of religious certainty has deepened our cultural divisions. And so our political discourse gets more polarized, and our global discourse gets close to impossible.

How, after all, can you engage in a rational dialogue with a man like Ahmadinejad, who believes that Armageddon is near and that it is his duty to accelerate it? How can Israel negotiate with people who are certain their instructions come from heaven and so decree that Israel must not exist in Muslim lands? Equally, of course, how can one negotiate with fundamentalist Jews who claim that the West Bank is theirs forever by biblical mandate? Or with Fundamentalist Christians who believe that Israel's expansion is a biblical necessity rather than a strategic judgment?

There is, however, a way out. And it will come from the only place it can come from—the minds and souls of people of faith. It will come from the much derided moderate Muslims, tolerant Jews and humble Christians. The alternative to the secular-fundamentalist death spiral is something called spiritual humility and sincere religious doubt. Fundamentalism is not the only valid form of faith, and to say it is, is the great lie of our time.

There is also the faith that is once born and never experiences a catharsis or "born-again" conversion. There is the faith that treats the Bible as a moral fable as well as history and tries to live its truths in the light of contemporary knowledge, history, science and insight. There is a faith that draws important distinctions between core beliefs and less vital ones—that picks and chooses between doctrines under the guidance of individual conscience.

There is the faith that sees the message of Jesus or Muhammad as a broad indicator of how we should treat others, of what profound holiness requires, and not as an account literally true in all respects that includes an elaborate theology that explains everything. There is the dry Deism of many of America's Founding Fathers. There is the cafeteria Christianity of, say, Thomas Jefferson, who composed a new, shortened gospel that contained only the sayings of Jesus that Jefferson inferred were the real words of the real rabbi. There is the open-minded treatment of Scripture of today's Episcopalianism and the socially liberal but doctrinally wayward faith of most lay Catholics. There is the sacramental faith that regards God as present but ultimately unknowable, that looks into the abyss and hopes rather than sees. And there are many, many more varieties.

But all those alternative forms come back to the same root. Those kinds of faith recognize one thing, first of all, about the nature of God and humankind, and it is this: If God really is God, then God must, by definition, surpass our human understanding. Not entirely. We have Scripture; we have reason; we have religious authority; we have our own spiritual experiences of the divine. But there is still something we will never

grasp, something we can never know—because God is beyond our human categories. And if God is beyond our categories, then God cannot be captured for certain. We cannot know with the kind of surety that allows us to proclaim truth with a capital T. There will always be something that eludes us. If there weren't, it would not be God.

That faith begins with the assumption that the human soul is fallible, that it can delude itself, make mistakes and see only so far ahead. That, after all, is what it means to be human. No person has had the gift of omniscience. Yes, Christians may want to say that of Jesus. But even the Gospels tell us that Jesus doubted on the Cross, asking why his own father seemed to have abandoned him. The mystery that Christians are asked to embrace is not that Jesus was God but that he was God-made-man, which is to say, prone to the feelings and doubts and joys and agonies of being human. Jesus himself seemed to make a point of that. He taught in parables rather than in abstract theories. He told stories. He had friends. He got to places late; he misread the actions of others; he wept; he felt disappointment; he asked as many questions as he gave answers; and he was often silent in self-doubt or elusive or afraid.

God-as-Omniscience, by definition, could do and be none of those things. Hence, the sacrifice entailed in God becoming man. So, at the core of the very Gospels on which fundamentalists rely for their passionate certainty is a definition of humanness that is marked by imperfection and uncertainty. Even in Jesus. Perhaps especially in Jesus.

As humans, we can merely sense the existence of a higher truth, a greater coherence than ourselves, but we cannot see it face to face. That is either funny or sad, and humans stagger from one option to the other. Neither beasts nor angels, we live in twilight, and we are unsure whether it is a prelude to morning or a prelude to night.

The 16th century writer Michel de Montaigne lived in a world of religious war, just as we do. And he understood, as we must, that complete religious certainty is, in fact, the real blasphemy. As he put it, "We cannot worthily conceive the grandeur of those sublime and divine promises, if we can conceive them at all; to imagine them worthily, we must imagine them unimaginable, ineffable and incomprehensible, and completely different from those of our miserable experience. 'Eye cannot see,' says St. Paul, 'neither can it have entered into the heart of man, the happiness which God hath prepared for them that love him.'"

In that type of faith, doubt is not a threat. If we have never doubted, how can we say we have really believed? True belief is not about blind submission. It is about open-eyed acceptance, and acceptance requires persistent distance from the truth, and that distance is doubt. Doubt, in other words, can feed faith, rather than destroy it. And it forces us, even while believing, to recognize our fundamental duty with respect to God's truth: humility. We do not know. Which is why we believe.

In this sense, our religion, our moral life, is simply what we do. A Christian is not a Christian simply because she agrees to conform her life to some set of external principles or dogmas, or because at a particular moment in her life, she experienced a rupture and changed herself entirely. She is a Christian primarily because she acts like one. She loves and forgives; she listens and prays; she contemplates and befriends; her faith and her life fuse into an unself-conscious unity that affirms a tradition of moral life and yet also makes it her own. In that non-fundamentalist understanding of faith, practice is more important than theory, love is more important than law, and mystery is seen as an insight into truth rather than an obstacle.

And that is how that kind of faith interacts with politics. If we cannot know for sure at all times how to govern our own lives, what right or business do we have telling others how to live theirs? From a humble faith comes toleration of other faiths. And from that toleration comes the oxygen that liberal democracy desperately needs to survive. That applies to all faiths, from Islam to Christianity. In global politics, it translates into a willingness to recognize empirical reality, even when it disturbs our ideology and interests. From moderate religion comes pragmatic politics. From a deep understanding of human fallibility comes the political tradition we used to call conservatism.

I remember my grandmother's faith. She was an Irish immigrant who worked as a servant for priests. In her later years she lived with us, and we would go to Mass together. She was barely literate, the seventh of 13 children. And she could rattle off the Hail Mary with the speed and subtlety of a NASCAR lap. There were times when she embarrassed me—with her broad Irish brogue and reflexive deference to clerical authority. Couldn't she genuflect a little less deeply and pray a little less loudly? And then, as I winced at her volume in my quiet church, I saw that she was utterly oblivious to those around her. She was someplace else. And there were times when I caught her in the middle of saying the Rosary when she seemed to reach another level altogether—a higher, deeper place than I, with all my education and privilege, had yet reached.

Was that the certainty of fundamentalism? Or was it the initiation into a mystery none of us can ever fully understand? I'd argue the latter. The 18th century German playwright Gotthold Lessing said it best. He prayed a simple prayer: "If God were to hold all Truth concealed in his right hand, and in his left hand only the steady and diligent drive for Truth, albeit with the proviso that I would always and forever err in the process, and to offer me the choice, I would with all humility take the left hand, and say, Father, I will take this—the pure Truth is for You alone."

That sentiment is as true now as it was more than two centuries ago when Lessing wrote it. Except now the very survival of our civilization may depend on it.