

Results of a fearless inventory of one's own motives

Here is a statement by someone who describes himself as a "truth fanatic":

Organized religion is hate masquerading as love. Which inevitably leads you back to the religion as it originally existed, before it was corrupted. It leads you to become a fundamentalist. You can see where the Church lost the answers by giving up its fundamental principles. So you find your beliefs evolving toward fundamentalism. But then I found out that there weren't answers in fundamentalism, either. You see some of the same contradictions.

So far, from the sound of it, we could be tracking the spiritual journey of someone who evolved out of Christian fundamentalism and is now a liberal Protestant or secular humanist. This statement, however, starts red flags waving:

There are two fathers, God and the devil. And all the children of God possess something none of the children of the devil possess, which is the gift of love. The devil could not program love into his children because love is something he doesn't possess or understand. It's beyond his knowledge. All the children of the devil possess is greed, hatred, envy, and jealousy.

Both statements were made by Dan Lafferty, a member of a tiny splinter sect of already schismatic Mormons, to writer Jon Krakauer in a Utah prison almost 20 years after Lafferty murdered his 24-year-old sister-in-law and 15-month-old niece. Lafferty

committed this crime because a "revelation" from God was delivered to his brother Ron. Krakauer published a book-length study of this religiously motivated murder titled *Under the Banner of Heaven* (Anchor Books, 2004).

After almost two decades spent as a convict, with ample time to reflect upon the state of his mind when he murdered a young mother and her baby – both family members – and to ponder what he had since discovered during his search for truth, Lafferty came to see himself as mistaken in many of the religious beliefs that he held on the day of the crime. What he "realized" during his quest was that he had put too much faith in his brother and not enough in himself. He, Dan – no one else, and certainly not his brother, who accompanied him to the house – is the man who has been designated by God to be the modern Elijah: "I'm sure I will be the one who identifies Christ when he returns," he tells Krakauer.

When Krakauer asks if it has "occurred to him that he may in fact have a great deal in common with another fundamentalist of fanatical conviction, Osama bin Laden," Lafferty becomes thoughtful:

I've asked myself that. Could I be there? Is that what I'm like? And the answer is no. Because Osama bin Laden is . . . a child of the devil. I believe his real motivation isn't a quest for honesty and justice, which maybe were his motivations in his earlier life. Now he's motivated by greed and profit and power.

Krakauer then asks Lafferty if perhaps he resembles one of Osama's followers, and watches "a shadow of doubt . . . flicker across his mien. But only for an instant, and then it's gone." Lafferty's answer:

I have to admit, the terrorists were following their prophet. They were willing to do essentially what I did. I see the parallel. But the difference between those guys and me is, they were following a false prophet, and I'm not.

I believe I'm a good person. I've never done anything intentionally wrong. I never have. At times when I've started to wonder if maybe what I did was a terrible mistake, I've looked back and asked myself, "What would I have done differently? Did I feel God's hand guiding me on the twenty-fourth of July 1984?" And then I remember very clearly, "Yes, I was guided by the hand of God." So I know I did the right thing. Christ says, "If you want to know if something is true, believe. And I'll help you know the truth." And that's what he did with me.

I'm sure God knows I love Him. It's my belief that everything will work out, and there will be a happy ending to this whole strange experience. I've just had too many little glimpses through the thin fabric of this reality to believe otherwise. Even when I have tried not to believe, I can't.

I believe I'm a good person. I've never done anything intentionally wrong. This statement eerily echoes that of an earlier historical figure – one who was not as ostensibly deranged as Lafferty, yet anticipated Lafferty's manner of verifying his own goodness. Czar Nicholas I, on his deathbed, made his final confession to a priest of the Orthodox Church. Looking back on a lengthy reign of heartless cruelty, brainless repression, and violent military aggression in the Caucasus, and reviewing his brutish opposition to every progressive idea, every social and political reform, and every attempt to lighten the darkness of feudal Russia, Nicholas said to his confessor, "I believe I have never done evil knowingly."

Here is how Leo Tolstoy, in a single paragraph of his memorable novella *Hadji Murad*, took the measure of this autocrat and captured a whole branch of the psychology of evil:

Nicholas frowned. He had done much evil to the Poles. To justify that

evil he had to feel certain that all Poles were villains. He regarded them as such and hated them in proportion to the evil he had done to them.

At the center of this evil is the unshakable conviction imparted by narcissistic certainty:

When the Emperor had to make a decision, it was only necessary for him to concentrate for a few moments, until the spirit moved him. Then the best possible decision would present itself to him, as though an inner voice had told him what to do.

What can be more morally infallible than an active conscience?

