

THE ALTERNATIVE

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Dear Reader:

This issue of the Newsletter is about church reform, mostly Catholic church reform. As the third essay argues, this problem is a concern not only for church members but for the whole world. The essay argues the need to see church reform from outside as well as inside. Christian-Jewish dialogue and Christian-Buddhist dialogue are rich sources of reform but the Christian-Muslim relation is today's key question. In Samuel Huntington's controversial *Clash of Civilizations* he says that the world's violence resides at the border of Muslim countries. He could have added that it is also at the border of Christian nations.

Neither Islam nor Christianity is going away, despite the hope of secularists since the eighteenth century. Each religion can be a powerful force for good but only if it controls an internal tendency toward violence in the name of God. Christians might not like the comparison but that is what makes the Christian church looking at its reflection in Islam a potential source of reform. Given their past and present records, genuine reform would be an ethic whose first principle is "do violence to no one." Sexual abuse as well as suicide bombing come under the judgment of that principle; so does any joining of religion to the pseudo-patriotic belligerence that ends in the insanity of war.

The first two essays are by reformers on the inside of church structure. The first is by an Australian bishop, Geoffrey Robinson; it is an excerpt from his book, *Confronting Sex and Power*. When the book is published in the United States it will probably get a lively reaction. The last fourth of the book has some useful suggestions for changing church structure, sure to generate horror from brother bishops, as it already has in Australia. The second essay is by Andrew Moran Greeley who has been urging Catholic church reforms for nearly fifty years. His proposals always come with the claim of sociological evidence as backing. Greeley is perhaps the best known Catholic writer in the United States. His sharp barbs, especially directed at Catholic bishops, may limit his power as an insider.

The two essays may seem to be just tinkering with intramural concerns, but that kind of change is what can set off other reforms. The sixteenth-century reformation was a good effort but it made a tragic mistake in identifying priest (and even monk) with clergy. Instead of starting with priest as a role conferred by Baptism and with an historical understanding of the development of a clerical class as a temporary deformation of church structure, Protestantism reinforced the two class system (clerical/lay). Robinson and Greeley approach this problem from different angles. Their proposals are mild first steps on the road to reformation.

CITIZENS OF THE CHURCH By Bishop Geoffrey Robinson

The Greek word *laos* (people) expresses the common element shared by all members of the church. The Latin term *laici* (layperson) was derived from the term *laos*, but in the process came to refer only to those who were not clerics. *Laos* expresses a positive concept (people), *laici* expresses a negative concept (those who are not clerics).

As an analogy, we can say that all people are citizens of their country. Most are also civilians, but this latter term is both negative and relative. It is negative because it really means “non-military” and it is relative because it has a meaning only in relation to the military. Some rights and obligations flow from being a civilian, but the major rights and duties of any individual flow from being a citizen, and the negative and relative term civilian cannot express the whole reality of citizenship. In a similar way, the term layperson, which is also negative and relative, cannot express the whole reality of the vast majority of the members of the church, and their major rights and duties cannot come from this term.

It must always be remembered that the first meaning of the word layperson is “non-cleric.” The full effect of the word would become apparent if we went through the Vatican documents substituting “non-cleric” every time we found the word laity or layperson. It would become evident that the basic perspective of the document was often a clerical one, just as we would be immediately aware that a document had a military perspective if it continually referred to the vast majority of citizens as civilians. In such documents the clergy or the military are the basic point of reference for everything in the document and everything revolves around them.

Take the perspective of the sacrament of marriage. From this perspective we may refer to the married and the unmarried in the church. Almost all clerics would come under the heading of unmarried, but would rightly object if this became the dominant perspective and the normal language, for they would say that to class them simply as unmarried does not do justice to their role in the life of the church and does not allow their full potential to be realized.

The sacrament that should determine the dominant perspective must be neither marriage nor orders but baptism. Here, however, we encounter the problem that, while we have a church equivalent of the term civilian (i.e. laity) we have no adequate equivalent of the more important term citizen. There is no easily accessible word that refers equally and impartially to the pope and a baby christened this morning in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. In the absence of such a term, church documents frequently use the negative term laity when they really intend the positive equivalent of the word citizen. But in doing this, they are once again giving a clerical tone to the document. A church document should never use the term layperson when it is referring to an activity that is common to all the members of the church and is neither reserved nor forbidden to clerics.

The Synod of 1987 attempted to resolve this problem by giving a positive meaning to the word laity, defining laypersons by means of their “secularity” or involvement “in the world,” as though laypersons were in the world and clerics were not. This must be called a misguided attempt to

give a positive meaning to an essentially negative term. It has led to many anomalies, e.g., contemplative nuns would have to be considered as “in the world” because they are not clerics, but married deacons who work in a factory throughout the week would have to be considered as not “in the world” because they are clerics. It is not possible to give a positive definition to an essentially negative term.

Assigning the sacred to clerics and the secular to the laity comes too close to identifying the sacred with actions reserved to clerics and the secular with actions forbidden to clerics, while leaving out altogether the actions common to both. While it is sometime legitimate to speak of sacred and secular things, a complete separation between the two must be avoided. Spiritual and temporal, sacred and secular, church and world, faith and life all constitute the one reality created by God, and they interpenetrate and complement each other.

If Catholic people are to integrate their faith into their lives, a dualism between sacred and secular must be avoided, for all members of the church without exception live “in the world,” that is, in a world that is both sacred and secular. As Pope Paul VI said “the whole church has an authentic secular dimension.” This approach is necessary if the church is to fulfill its role of offering life to the full to the whole cosmos.

Since it would assist the change of mind and heart, I suggest that the term citizen be adopted by the church. The term appears to be compatible with the New Testament: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the house of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ himself as the cornerstone.”(Eph.2:19-20)

SHORT-TERM PRIESTS AS A LONG-TERM SOLUTION

By Andrew Greeley

I recommend that the [Roman Catholic] church experiment with a limited term of service for priests, a kind of priest corps like the Peace Corps or the Jesuit Volunteer Corps or the University of Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education. Young men would be invited to active service in the priesthood for a period of time – let’s say five years - then they would be given the opportunity to re-up, as they say in the military. But an ordained priest is a priest forever, bishops say trippingly on the tongue when they dismiss my suggestion as a stupid idea. Indeed yes, but his permanent identity as a priest does not demand that he serve actively in the priesthood all his life.

In fact, in recent years the church has permitted men to leave the active priesthood and return to the lay life in good standing. This often has been a humiliating experience. Rarely does anyone say to them, “God bless you and grant you a happy life. Thanks for the years of service.” My suggestion makes a virtue out of necessity. It says to a man, “If after you have served a term in the priesthood, you have come to believe that God does not want you to serve in the active ministry any longer, go in peace.” Who are we, in other words, to question where the Spirit leads a person?

Neither the church nor its people nor the priesthood itself is well served by a miserably unhappy priest. What are some of the reasons a man might want to leave? His parishioners get on his nerves; he can't stand teens; his fellow priests make him chronically depressed; he wants to begin a family of his own; the work is oppressive; he's bored and he shudders at the thought that he will be doing the same things for the next half century; he has served under three bishops, all of whom have been fools, and he can't take it anymore; he's exhausted, worn out, bone tired. Permission to return to the lay life as one who has finished his commitment to active service enables both him and the church to cut their losses.

This proposal would invite men to limited-term celibacy. The bet is that, while many of the young men might leave after a term or two, many others would discover that being a priest is exciting and rewarding work. Other problems with becoming a priest – the sexual abuse crisis, embezzlement, poor leadership, the idiots who are priests in your parish, clerical envy, and poor professional standards – exist in all denominations, and the abolition of clerical celibacy will not solve them. In the present turbulent and traumatic times in the church, many young men would not want to bring a wife into the clergy.

“Forever” is longer now than it used to be. In past generations, the average age of a priest at his death was much lower than it is today. Now the majority of us live to our golden jubilee. The church has not adjusted to the demographic revolution and its impact on marriages and the priesthood. It's time it did. Vows need not be lifelong. The ordinary monks in St. Benedict's Rule did not take lifelong vows. The Daughters of Charity in principle have vows of only one year. There is no reason in the nature of the church or the priesthood that men should serve in the active ministry all their lives – and in fact, today they do not.

Those who bother to discuss my proposal tend to be bitterly against it. For many liberal Catholics it is a matter of absolute faith that celibacy is the critical weakness in the church. They think it is the cause, for example, of sexual abuse in the priesthood, though the problem is virtually the same among married Protestant clergy. It is not clear that a married clergy has solved the problems of Protestantism. As the Jackson Carroll from Duke Divinity School has shown, marriage and family are the most demoralizing problems among Protestant clergy.

I am accused of advocating a “compromise” – keeping celibacy as a norm though establishing possible term limits. In fact, I think that celibacy is a positive good, and my research shows that it is. It does not interfere with happiness for most priests and may contribute to it. On the other hand, I am accused of putting the “jewel” of clerical celibacy in jeopardy. Indeed the flight to high-sounding and ethereal spirituality is a form of obscurantism that refuses to consider three facts: permanent celibacy is a serious obstacle to priestly vocations; life expectancy is much longer than it used to be; and in the absence of some modification, celibacy is doomed.

The final argument is that if the church is faithful to its commitment to permanent celibacy, God will provide priests for us. Thus we do not and even should not consider modifications. This is one of the favorite cop-outs of bishops and conservative laity. Blame God.

ISLAMISM AND CHRISTIANISM

By Gabriel Moran

The peace of the world in the future largely depends upon the relation between Christians and Muslims. Given the inevitable encounter of the two religions, there seem to be only two possibilities: either they will learn to cooperate, coming to some mutual understanding or else they will engage in violent activity, harmful to both religions and to the whole world. On Nov. 6, 2007, Saudi King Abdullah met with Pope Benedict XVI and presented him with a golden sword which did not seem to be a helpful symbol of their relation. But at least it was a more hopeful step than the Pope's ill-advised comment in his speech at Regensburg last year that set off a worldwide Muslim protest.

Christianity and Islam are not the only religions of the world. But with more than a billion followers in each camp and with passionate commitment demanded in each of them, the Christian church and the Muslim *ummah* dwarf other religions in size and in the power to do both good and evil. World leaders – that is, political and intellectual world leaders – tend to dismiss the importance of religion and as a result they are usually ignorant of the history and organization of any religions. They also underestimate the power of religion. During the Iran hostage-taking in 1979 it was said that everyone in Washington was speed reading the Quran; in 2007 there is still a profound lack of understanding of Islam in particular.

Occasionally, when a terrorist acts in the name of religion there is a rush by some people to condemn the religion; that action is followed immediately by other people who wish to distinguish between the genuine form of the religion and a few dissidents. This sequence has occurred many times in recent decades with reference to Islam. The intention to make such a distinction is admirable. A few days after Sept. 11, 2001, George W. Bush gave a speech at the National Cathedral that defended Islam while condemning the bombers. It was one of Bush's better offerings and it may have had some good immediate effects. But is there anyone who thinks that Bush knows Islam well enough to distinguish between genuine and false developments or to understand why disaffected Muslims are outraged at the United States?

Christians and Muslims tend to see their own religion as the opposite of the other. A visitor from another planet might first be struck by their similarity. The two religions emerged from reform movements allied with Jewish religion. Each conceives itself as a capping stone to true religion that runs from Adam through Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Islam, of course, has one extra prophet, Jesus, before the final "seal of the prophets," Muhammad.

The Christian claim to be the last word was overruled by the Quran. Muslims did not negate the Christian religion. In fact, Muhammad saw the Torah, Gospel, and Quran as a single narrative. But what is intended as a complement may be received as an insult, a regular occurrence when one religion claims to complete another. Nevertheless, in lands under Muslim control, Jews and Christians were "protected peoples." Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived peacefully in medieval Spain under Muslim rule. It is not a coincidence that when Ferdinand's Christian army drove the Muslims out of Spain, the expulsion of the Jews followed a few months later.

The other shining example of Muslim-Christian cooperation was sixteenth-century India. While Christians in Europe were killing one another, in India the Muslim Emperor Akbar presided over a court composed of Christians, Hindus, Zoroastrians, and Muslims. Akbar invited Portuguese Jesuits to his palace and sponsored lively debates with Muslim mullahs. Akbar, and his son Jahangir who succeeded him, were fond of Christian paintings and statues. Akbar was an unusual ruler but Christians and Jews generally lived without oppression under Muslim rule. The Christian record is not so positive.

Neither Islam nor Christianity looks much like the reform movements begun by Jesus and Muhammad. Both reformers were considered dangerous because they upset the social, economic, political, as well as the religious establishments of their times. Each reformer gathered a small group – apostles or companions – who carried on the message of the founder and aggressively missionized the surrounding world. Both movements became religions, institutions subject to internal conflicts and a struggle over who has legitimate claim to the founder's mantle. In the Christian church, the main reform of the sixteenth century gave birth to Protestants and Roman Catholics. At first, they were called different religions but very quickly became two versions of a religion called Christianity. Muslim struggles for reform issued early in Shi'ite and Sunni versions of Islam.

Early in its history, Islam was out in front of Europe in philosophy, science, and social reform. Medieval European philosophy was dependent on Arabic translations of Greek philosophers. Thomas Aquinas was in respectful dialogue with the great Muslim thinker Ibn Rushd. The center for medicine and studies of the human body was Baghdad where the genius Abn Sina carried out his work. Islam, however, became frozen under the impact of the jurists called the Ulama, and that was followed by the onslaught of European colonialism. (The term "holy war" was coined by Christian crusaders; in the Quran there are just wars and unjust wars but no war is holy).

Both religions remain vulnerable to would-be reformers who turn the religion into a hard-edged ideology that brooks no opposition. Only the perfectly pure members who conform to the code are on God's side; everyone else in the world is a real or potential enemy. These religious reformers call for an end to intermediaries between God and the people. But the obvious intermediaries are the reformers themselves who can justify any violent tactics because they are carried out in the name of God. The Muslim division of the world during the Crusades into dar-al-Islam (the world of belief) and dar-al-Harb (the world of unbelief) is understandable for the times but no longer accepted by responsible Muslim leaders.

As Islam has struggled in modern times to emerge from colonial oppression, it has produced some angry reform movements. A typical but powerful example is an eighteenth-century movement led by Abd al-Wahhab. In the early twentieth century this intolerant and vicious Wahhabi sect made allies with the new Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and has since been a powerful force in that country. (The sect was supported by the United States as an ally against Soviet communism; a young Saudi named Osama bin Laden was hired by the U.S. to oversee the successful campaign against the Soviets in Afghanistan.)

Another reform movement in Islam was led by Sayyid Qutb who during two years in the United States was appalled at the materialism of the country. He returned to Egypt in 1950 and was determined to establish a total Muslim system. Qutb was hanged in 1966 for his subversive activities but his Muslim brotherhood is still very active. Out of this reform was born the term "Islamism," a political, economic, religious ideology. It is in deadly opposition to non-Islamist attitudes within Muslim countries and its counterpart ideology in Christian countries.

I have suggested in my title the term "Christianism" as the parallel to Islamism. Within Europe and North America it may be difficult to recognize Christianity but outsiders know it well. European countries think of themselves as post-Christian but Christian ideas and attitudes are still present below the surface. A secularized Christian world has not left behind Christian ideology. What saves Europe these days from aggressive Christianists is exhaustion from twentieth-century wars. European countries do not know how to deal with Muslims but they would like to find peaceful ways. The same is not true of the United States.

Almost no one doubts that the chief Christianist country in the world today is the United States of America. The exception, of course, is the United States which sees itself as a peaceful nation intent on spreading freedom to the rest of the world. A missionary stance has been present since the planting of the British American colonies and the founding of the nation of the United States. This modern experiment has always been an uneasy combination of evangelical Christianity and secular enlightenment. These two forces see themselves as deadly opponents but they are in full agreement that "America" has a mission to the world.

"America" is the name of a dream with Christian and secular variations. Secular enlightenment brought the Christian dream from the endtime to the midst of time, but it still has an apocalyptic tinge. In both cases, we are as Madeleine Albright said "the indispensable nation," the beginning of the Kingdom of God or the beacon of freedom, democracy, and peace. To much of the rest of the world, the American dream is a frightening nightmare. The cry of "Death to America," which has been popular since the Iranian hostage-taking, properly identifies the enemy not as the United States but as the political/religious ideology easily manipulated by U.S. politicians.

The missionary impulse deserves the name Christianity, an ideology whose roots are in a distortion of the Christian religion. Catholics and Protestants in the United States should be concerned that the news media now identify the term "Christian" with a political/religious minority who think of themselves as the only true Christians. Like Islam, Christianity can be a powerful force for good. But also like some Muslims, Christians who think they have a direct line to God can be the source of violent conflict. Their attitude to other nations is similar to the nineteenth-century British schoolmaster who said: "Boy, you will believe in the Holy Ghost by five o'clock today or I will beat it into you." England has provided the template and the United States government seems intent on repeating every mistake of imperial Britain, including the democratizing of Iraq.

Christianism is not simply a religion. Like Islamism, it is a social, political, economic set of ideas fueled by religious passion. Its obvious proponents are preachers who wish to reestablish "Christian America," which thankfully has never actually existed. Fortunately, these

ideologues who use Christian language do not have their own army and air force. The really frightening people are government leaders who have absorbed Christianity from their childhood and are oblivious of its condescension and aggression. George W. Bush is the current pope of Christianity but unlike Benedict XVI he does have an army, an air force, and a military budget of five hundred billion dollars. With all good intention and culpable ignorance, he has wreaked havoc with other people's lives. According to Robert Draper, in his ironically titled biography, Dead Certain, Bush has no doubts about his policies. In a struggle between good and evil, one cannot be distracted by collateral violence.

The danger on the left is to rant at Bush and think that his removal will make the country right. In 2004 when Bush's proclivities were fully evident, fifty-eight million voters endorsed him. And beyond that, many on the political left agreed with his ends while wishing to have different means. Voting to give Bush the power to do what was necessary to remove a foreign dictator was a recipe for disaster. Bush launched his "crusade," a word he innocently used because it is a central category of Christianity. Nothing so unifies Islamism as the Christianist crusader's cry "God wills it" or the contemporary version "America says so."

The most frightening thing that has happened since 2001 is that the United States has almost disappeared into America. Throughout the history of the country there has always been a tension between the existing nation-state and a dream that has biblical origins. "America" was Europe's dream of the promised land. The dream sustained poor immigrants who believed that life would be better for their children. It sustained the country through a savagely fought internal war "testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." It remains a wonderful and hopeful idea so long as it does not become the religion of the nation. A nation-state that thinks of itself as God's chosen people destined to lead the world can do unimaginable damage. The secular left is oblivious of its own complicity in the Christianity of the American idea. The progressive movement in the United States had its origins in evangelical preaching.

The most important force for restraining Christianity has always been the Christian churches. Protestant, Catholic, (and Jewish) communities have benefited by the pull of America but they must not let themselves be absorbed by an idea that becomes an ideology. The 500 year-old idea of America needs to be restrained by older religious traditions. The dream of freedom and justice for all has to be anchored by 2000 years of Christian, 3000 years of Jewish, and 1400 years of Muslim beliefs and practices.

Catholics and Jews had a difficult time finding acceptance in a country that proclaimed religious tolerance. Eventually they could find a place under the aegis of America because they are biblical religions. As a non-biblical religion, Islam has a more difficult task. Nevertheless, the future of religion in the United States largely depends on whether Muslims can find acceptance, bringing both new energy and a new mirror of self-criticism for religions already present. Christianists have no place for Islam; all they can see is their own reflection in Islamism. All other Christians and Jews have the responsibility of recognizing Muslims as siblings in the family of Abraham (Avraham, Ibrahim). The three religions have to present a united front in creating a world of religious diversity that is dedicated to peaceful cooperation.