

The Alternative

Final Issue

Dec. 2020

Dear Reader,

This is a special and final edition of this Newsletter. After 45 years it is time to bring it to an end. Some of you as readers go back to the first issue. This newsletter has always had a small but loyal readership; something that was intended.

In the early 1970s about a dozen of us attempted to found a new kind of educational organization to which we gave the ambitious name of Alternative Religious Education, incorporated in the state of New York. For a few years we offered our services to communities large and small. We did some good programs, but financing was a problem and eventually the members moved on to other things.

This newsletter is a reminder of that past and the hopes which were high in the 1960s and early 1970s. Progressive movements, we thought, were going to bring about great changes in churches and society. The hopes at that time were unrealistic but a great many of the progressive movements of today were begun in the 1960s. What we did not realize then was that a powerful reaction was about to set in.

Today's young people are facing an even bigger task of reform in racial equality, economic justice, and care of the environment. There is a broader coalition of black and white, the young and the not so young, but they are faced with a herculean task. This newsletter offered brief essays that tried to contribute a few insights on important questions.

I thank the readers who have responded over the years and all the readers who found this newsletter worth reading.

THE ALTERNATIVE NEWSLETTER: GUIDANCE FOR ALL SEASONS

By Anthony J. Fasano

My brother, Maurice, now deceased, worked all his life—mechanic in a garage, welder in Grumman’s airplane factory, delivering milk on a weekend, cleaning offices in the evening. After high school, he had chosen to work rather than attend college.

In his late sixties, he began receiving and reading the Alternative Newsletter. He told me once that he respected and saw great insight in the editor’s, Dr. Gabriel Moran’s, analysis of words. That was especially true for the words, “liberal” and “conservative.” Labels are often unhelpful to meaningful conversation, he noted. “I see what he is saying; he’s right.”

That a working man, with little advanced education, would speak of the deep insight and value of the Alternative, is high, very high, praise indeed.

Starting in 1974, for forty-five years, every calendar quarter saw a new edition of the Alternative. The Newsletter grew as an outlet for Alternative Religious Education, an association of about 12 members, women, and men. Each member placed their particular strength — communication, reflection, graduate education—into a “traveling school” that brought exciting and then-current knowledge to Catholic parishes, professional groups, gatherings of all kinds.

In the early years of the association, many members contributed to the Newsletter essays on ideals, ideas, and practices. I was able to write my thoughts on dance, special education, various religious traditions. Writing for readers was in fact a way to deepen my own understanding and foster skill in communication through writing. I am grateful for the opportunity the Alternative presented me.

As members moved to different callings, the Alternative President, Gabriel Moran, continued the Alternative Newsletter. Interesting and wisely, he gathered ideas from publications and speeches—New York Times, scholarly books, TV commentaries, films. Harnessing and integrating these ideas into a writer’s format, he presented clear and readable insights into many aspects of human life: forgiveness, aging, Church leadership, law, and political realities. His writings show a profound grasp of insights from many intellectual “giants:” Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Erik Erickson, Father Richard McBrien. Ludwig Wittgenstein. His writings also have a very large doze of common sense. But his style presented these insights in an inviting, careful manner. As one reader

described her experience. “I like it that he can write so plainly and directly about subjects that he knows so deeply.”

His grasp of intellectual history and contemporary philosophy enabled him to offer helpful and hopeful guidance to myriad readers/searchers from many walks of life. Moreover, a listing of his influence on many institutions--both academic and professional--includes a wide spectrum: Fordham University, Bronx NY; Child Protective Court, Chicago, Illinois; University of Birmingham, England; Alliance Theological Seminary, New York; Catholic Relief Agency, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; American University, Paris, France, Manhattan College, Bronx NY, Episcopal Bishops Conference, Caracas, Venezuela.

Perhaps the most important gift of Gabriel’s writings is the compassion and understanding he offers in every essay. He respects his readers and his students. Twenty-two women and men offered tributes to Dr. Moran in the booklet celebrating his life and work. They spoke movingly of his influence, for some, profound influence, on their personal lives. I believe I speak on behalf of them when I write: “We are thankful to you for your breath of learning, and the disciplined, hard work that made that profound depth come to be. And the care you took in helping each one of us become wiser and more confident, and more joyful persons.”

Note: An enduring legacy of Dr. Moran’s wisdom and insights presents itself in the catalog of his writings. See the website, www.gabrielmoran.net. *Biography and Publications*. Page 2 Essays, page 3 Alternative Newsletters.

THOUGHTS ON APPROACHING THE END OF LIFE

By Gabriel Moran

It is sometimes assumed that a dying person has acquired a new wisdom that everyone else needs to be informed of. I have not recently gained any knowledge of great mysteries, but these are thoughts that I have had over the years and I have gathered them together at this moment of my life.

The question that confronts everyone who is soon to die is whether there is anything beyond death. The answer is that no one knows. There is evidence that each person uses for taking up an attitude to their own death but no single piece of evidence is conclusive.

Some people say that it is obvious that nothing follows death. That is their answer and there certainly is evidence from viewing a person die and what happens to the body afterward. People who are sure of this answer usually dismiss any other evidence as superstition or ignorance. There is, however, the history of religion and other unusual phenomena that offer different kinds of evidence.

The people who loudly proclaim their atheism have always seemed to me silly. Why live one's life based on a negation – the absolute certainty that “theism” is wrong. Atheism must be distinguished from agnosticism which is surely an honorable attitude. An agnostic is someone who does not know. Similarly, the term “sceptic” simply means someone who questions. I think being agnostic and skeptical is compatible with Christianity.

The Christian Church, and specifically the Roman Catholic Church, has always had a definite and detailed picture of what happens at death. The soul goes before a court presided over by Jesus, God's son. The judgment passed on each one's life is up or down: heaven or hell. Purgatory was an early addition for the saved who still needed suffering to purify them before heaven. The separation of a private, immediate judgment and the last judgment is a somewhat clumsy answer to the situation of a soul that is without a body.

I think that the idea of eternal hell fire was a metaphor from the New Testament that ran amok. Eternal fire is scientifically unintelligible and morally deplorable. How could a God whose creation was good and who cared for each creature give up on a valued human being. A terrible aspect of the teaching was the claim that part of the joy of those in heaven was watching the suffering of those in hell.

There was always a metaphorical or symbolic element to these images of judgment, followed by heaven or hell. It seems obvious that whatever the process or event it could not be literally carried out as it is described in the New Testament supplemented by later lurid details. Augustine, Dante, or Johnathan Edwards were great writers but not necessarily experts on God's punishments.

Augustine was forced to invent “limbo” for unbaptized babies. He could not stomach saying they were thrown into hell, so he put them on the edge (the limbo) of hell. That belief seems to have been one of the first things about death that Catholics stopped believing. They understood that limbo was a preposterous and illogical idea. But that raised a question about the billions of other unbaptized souls. Where did they go?

I may have imagined or projected a drastic change in the thinking of Catholics. But until recently, most Catholics seemed to hold to these images of judgment, resurrection, and eternal rewards. Seemingly, many if not most Catholics, no longer accept that graphic description in its details.

Christianity was successful in part because it gave personal and powerful images to guide one's life and images of a life after death. That remains its strength but also its weakness. When some of the imagery is no longer credible, a person might just dismiss what the imagery stands for. There might be some truth to the teachings despite the imagery not being accurate. For example, people who seem to be horribly vicious often die with good consciences. Is there any corrective to that beyond death?

When people ask me what religion I am, I answer: my religion is Catholic, my church is the Roman Catholic Church which is a very imperfect expression of the Catholic religion. As Augustine said, the true or universal religion goes back to the beginning of the human race. That position was formulated in the nineteenth century as an "original revelation." That makes sense to me. If anything can be called divine revelation, it is the universe. Christianity and other religious expressions have their meaning within this original revelation of being.

The very imperfect Roman Catholic Church is what I devoted much of my life and writing to. I have no regrets about that although I feel sad to consider the state of that church. I find a strange parallel between the Roman Catholic Church and the United States of America. In the 1960s there was an unrealistic expectation by many of us that both institutions were on the way to radical reform. The 1970s put an end to that hope; the structures remained almost entirely unchanged.

The best thing about the Roman Catholic Church for me was association with the Christian Brothers. When I left the Brothers in the 1980s, I thought my connection had been severed. But after stepping away for a few years I found that it was possible to maintain friendly relations with past and current brothers. Old men in this country do not usually have long-standing friendships. I have been blessed with an extraordinary number of friends. I try to graciously accept their generosity

When most people approach death, I suspect they look back at the life they have lived and are probably unsatisfied. They could have done much better. What they need to accept is that if they did the best they could at the time, there is no point in regrets. When it is said that someone accepts dying what is actually meant is that they accept their life. The great surprise of my life was that Maria Harris burst into

it and became central to it. She gradually changed me during our forty years together and I became a different person. The best writing I perhaps ever did was the memoir I wrote after her death. I did not so much write it as let it flow out of me. (The essay can be found on my website gabrielmoran.net).

The fundamental religious question is often taken to be: Do you believe in God? What is usually assumed by critics is that the question means “do you think that there is a big being named God?” The word “believe” is okay here if one means by it “believe in” which is a fundamental attitude that underlies all knowledge rather than “believe that” which is a substitute for knowing something and is held on the authority of someone else. This is not an obscure, technical difference; it is basic to life and daily experience.

The world does not divide into believers and nonbelievers; everyone believes in something. People believe in someone, a body of people or a cause to which they devote their lives. What would you be willing to die for? The modern nation-state tries to get its citizens to devote their lives to the survival and health of the state. This “nationalism” seems to be quite successful around the world. But isn’t there something greater than the state by which to measure the state?

I believe in God as recited in the Christian credo does not refer to believing that a god exist. It means trusting in the only god there is. God is not a being, even a big, powerful being. I agree with Thomas Aquinas’s view that to say “god is a being” would be reductionistic. In Aquinas’s language, god is the “to be” of things which may sound like gibberish, but Thomas was struggling at the limits of language. He uses double negatives as is typical of mystical language. For example, “god is not not being” which says that god is not one of the beings of the world but that does not mean there is no god. There is no language which can make direct assertions about god.

Most religions have nothing to say “about” god because they know language can only lessen the reality. The word “god” is a social science term that collapses the difference between religions. Each of the religions has an intimate way to point to or evoke the holy One beyond words. That name is genuinely used only in a situation of reverence. G-d is found in silence, not the silence that rejects language but the silence that is beyond speech.

Although I am skeptical of anything which is said about an “afterlife,” I find it impossible to think that the universe and the humans are simply meaningless. After all the millennia of human existence, the fundamental philosophical and religious

question remains unanswered: Why is there something rather than nothing? There is no scientific answer to this question because it is not a scientific question. Many scientists do not seem to realize that anything they can say about the beginning of the universe is not an answer to the question of why.

Until something greater appears, the humans are the center of all intelligibility in the universe. It does not matter that they are tiny in relation to the size of the universe. As Chesterton said, “man is small compared to the nearest tree.” In understanding the universe, humans have yet to meet their superior. Any meaning of “g-d,” or perhaps better “divine,” would have to be superior to the human mind and its unlimited desires.

Pantheism meaning that everything is divine does not seem to be an adequate answer. An integrating of personal qualities and a universal reality seems demanded, but we have no way to speak of that. Thomas Aquinas’s most important line in the *Summa* is: “Since we cannot know what God is but only what God is not, let us proceed to investigate the ways in which God does not exist.” Which is what he did: investigate everything in the universe that is not God. And after all that exploring Thomas ended the last part of his life in silence. As T.S. Eliot, wrote: “We must not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we began and to know the place for the first time.”

As I see my own time coming to the end, I am grateful and at peace. Thank you and farewell.