

“Australian media traditions and the reporting of sexual abuse by religious leaders.”

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8th Australian Media Traditions Conference: Places, Spaces, Networks
and Intermedia

University of Queensland, 25th – 26th November 2013.

Abstract

Historically, the secular media has played and will continue to play a key role in public debate about the relationship between public, sectoral and personal moralities (Jakubowicz, 2009). This appears to be problematic however when it comes to conversations, discussions and inquiries that intersect with religion, the behaviour of religious institutions and the people in them.

The Prime Ministerial announcement of a National Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in 2012 appeared to ‘blindsides’ sections of the Australian news media, even though victims first publicly revealed sexual abuse by Australian clergy and religious leaders at least thirty years earlier. The establishment of the Commission provokes a number of important meta-questions in relation to historical patterns of abuse within and by religious organisations. Why did state regulatory bodies with responsibility to protect children in society fail to do so? Why did the mass of people within those moral-based religious organizations allow such abuse to occur and continue within their organisations?

This paper considers a third: why or how did the media, which claim Fourth Estate responsibility to bring such transgressions to public attention, overlook such a pattern of institutional abuse for so long? In the context of an overview of the gradual uncovering of the issue in the media, it examines news media traditions and practices that may have caused them to miss or allow to pass what has now emerged as a major failure of social regulation and protection. Included in this examination is the significance of the secular media’s stance that religion is of declining relevance together with a paradoxical deference by journalists to religious authority figures.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, established in 2012, emerged in the context of a recent growth in disclosures about child sexual abuse in state and religious institutions. These have

coalesced around a number of state parliamentary investigations and a growing realization that the abuse of children within Australian institutions in general and religious contexts in particular has potentially been very extensive and occurring for a long time.

This delayed recognition of the extent of the problem is noteworthy, given the first jailing of a paedophile priest in 1978 and an ABC exposure of extensive sexual abuse by Australian clergy and religious leaders in the early 1990's (Horsfield 1992, Horsfield 1993, Horsfield 1997). Alan Gill's book, *Orphans of the Empire* (1998), also identified abuse, including by religious bodies, as a significant element in the transportation of underprivileged and orphaned children to Australia from the 1830's to the 1960's.

Given this potentially large sub-terrain of systematic abuse of children in Australia, this long overdue establishment of the Royal Commission provokes a number of meta-questions about how social institutions in Australia, including religious organisations, are regulated and held accountable. Two obvious questions are:

- Why and how did state regulatory and crime enforcement agencies with responsibility to protect children fail so significantly to do so?
- Why did the mass of people, both leaders and followers within morality-focused religious organizations, allow such abuse to occur and continue?

This paper focuses on a third:

- Why did the news media, which claim Fourth Estate responsibility to uncover and bring social transgressions to public attention, overlook such an extensive pattern of institutional abuse in Australia for so long?

We propose that a significant reason for this failure lies in the traditions of Australian media practice in relation to religion in general.

The sexual abuse of both adults and children by religious leaders has a long history. In Christianity, warnings to clergy about engaging in inappropriate sexual relations and the sexual abuse of boys, go back to at least the fourth century (Council of Elvira, 306).

In the present time, the issue of sexual abuse of adults by clergy, either by coercion (sexual assault) or through abuse of their professional role (professional sexual abuse) began to emerge publicly in the US during the 1980s, in spite of churches using their significant institutional muscle to keep the issue suppressed. The power of churches was eventually broken by victims enlisting the equally powerful institution of contingency-fee based legal

action and winning civil settlements in the courts. In 1984, for example, the Lafayette Diocese of the Catholic Church in Louisiana was forced to pay close to \$20-million in compensation to victims of child abuse and their families in cases involving 21 church workers. (Reference from Horsfield 1992). The other major agent of change was church insurance companies, who threatened to withdraw liability cover from churches unless they took action to prevent it.

By the early 1990s, the Los Angeles Times reported that at least 2,000 cases of sexual abuse by clergy were pending in U.S. courts. Last year, *The Economist* magazine reported that reparation for sexual-abuse cases had cost the American Catholic Church more than \$3-billion so far and was causing widespread bankruptcies of dioceses around the country.

In Australia, the first public knowledge of sexual abuse in churches was the jailing of the paedophile priest Michael Glennon in 1978. The next major exposure was in 1992 in an episode of the ABC Compass program called *The Ultimate Betrayal*. *The Ultimate Betrayal* entered uncharted waters and sparked controversy by reviewing some major cases in the U.S. and looking at cases and research on sexual abuse in churches in Australia. On the day following the program, most capital city newspapers across the country referred to the program in one way or another. Many had follow up stories, responses and commentaries for several days after (for an analysis of the media responses see (Horsfield 1993).

The program used victim accounts to film a re-enactment of an act of abuse involving a young boy. A 2012 retrospective program identified this as a bold action:

Compass 1992 Re-enactment

PRIEST: Now you were smoking, don't try and deny it.

BOY: Okay, but please, don't tell my parents. My dad will kill me.

Geraldine Doogue (voice over, 2012)

Nothing like this had been seen on television before

Compass 1992 Re-enactment

BOY: You're not going to whack me again, are you, Brother?

PRIEST: No, no, I'm not going to hurt you this time, just drop your pants.

(Transcript of original re-enactment in *The Ultimate Betrayal*, 1992 as seen in *The Churches on Trial*, Dec, 2012)

Compass was deliberately “non-sensationalist” in its approach and careful consideration was given to how to address the issue sensitively. The decision to use a child actor was vetted by child welfare authorities. There was a

realization also that people who had suffered such abuse would be watching and the significance of this was not lost on those working at Compass. To avoid any leaks or misuse, the videotape of the program was kept out of the ABC tapes area (where programs are kept before being put to air) so that none of the news and current affairs programs could get access to material prior to its broadcast.

Most controversial was the estimate given that the number of alleged perpetrators of sexual and professional abuse in Australia comprised 15% of all clergy.¹ Though the estimate was widely seen and criticized at the time as sensationalist and lacking substance,² the impact of the program in identifying a buried issue was significant. Centres Against Sexual Assault around the country reported that in the days following the program they were inundated with calls from women reporting assault by assault. One such centre reported receiving its yearly average of such calls in four days. Most calls were new reports. One of the most outspoken critics of the program was the Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane, Peter Hollingworth, who later was forced to resign from his appointment as Governor-General of Australia in the wake of revelations of his own failures to deal with cases that had been presented to him.

Though the Compass program focused more on adult victims of clerical abuse, it cleared the way for the exposure during the 1990s of the more taboo issue of sexual abuse of children. Apart from a few exceptions, such as Chris McGillion's reports in the SMH (McGillion 1993) and two further ABC *Compass* programs, reporting was limited to individual cases that had been brought to court or where convictions had occurred.

The issue flared up for a period at the turn of the decade, primarily because of Peter Hollingworth's appointment and then forced resignation as Governor-General was a front page news story, and when Channel 9 *60 Minutes* produced a program examining abuse within the Roman Catholic Church.

The issue did not capture widespread media attention again until 2012. Two Parliamentary Committee investigations commenced in Victoria and New

¹ Peter Horsfield, Uniting Church theologian, 1992. "...The figures that I have seen are figures, which are much more in line with other professions of around 15% of clergy. So if you look at that figure it's a pretty major figure." (Transcript of original re-enactment in *The Ultimate Betrayal*, 1992 as seen in *The Churches on Trial*, Dec, 2012)

² Channel 10 newsreader, 1992, "A television program which claimed as many as 3,000 Australian clergymen are sexual abusers has been criticised as sensationalist and lacking substance." (Transcript Compass program, *Churches on Trial*, Dec. 11, 2012)

South Wales³ began to uncover serious allegations about institutional abuse and police handling of abuse cases, prompting a wider recognition of the need for a National Royal Commission.

It's proposed that a major reason for journalism's failure to investigate further and uncover what has since emerged as a long-running major social scandal, has a lot to do with the checkered history of the coverage of religion in Australian journalism. Though a major social phenomenon, the coverage of religion in Australian journalism has been much less developed and taken less seriously than many other social issues that affect fewer people. A number of reasons can be proposed for this.

One is the widely accepted perspective of modern secularization that religion is a declining force in the modern world and as a matter therefore of diminishing concern. The sociologist Steve Bruce, for example, reflects this in his statement:

In a nutshell, I will argue that the basic elements of what we conveniently refer to as 'modernisation' fundamentally altered the place and nature of religious beliefs, practices, and organisations so as to reduce their relevance to the lives of nation-states, social groups, and individuals, in roughly that order (Bruce 1996).

A similar secularization perspective could be seen in the disciplines of media and cultural studies, which showed little interest or could see little relevance in religion to their study and understanding of media (Murdoch 1997).

How this has affected the coverage of religion in the news media has been the subject of significant study in the U.S.

Unlike Australia, in the U.S. there have been a number of studies looking at the place of religion coverage in the modern newsroom. A 1986 study by Lichter, Rothman and Lichter (Lichter, Rothman et al. 1986) found that journalists were more irreligious and more politically liberal than their readers and viewers and the public at large, though this view was challenged by a 1993 report by Dart & Allen, *Bridging the Gap*, (Dart and Allen 1993) which found that writers, their supervisors and their managing editors showed a higher level of religious interest and involvement.

Hoover, in his later study *Religion in the News* ((Hoover 1998)) found that the attitudes of journalists in the U.S. towards religion went "beyond ignorance or indifference to outright suspicion and hostility." On the reception side, this led

³ The Victorian Parliament Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations, and The Special Commission of Inquiry

to significant criticism of journalism's inability to deal with religion in a substantial way. On the production side, he found a number of reasons for this deficiency. Journalists reported great difficulty in handling the "transcendent claims and affirmations" of religion through "the rationalistic terms of conventional journalistic criteria and practice" (p.75); making religion stories fit established news criteria such as political, fiscal or scandalous behaviours; dealing with religious groups themselves and how they feel their faith should be represented; managing their editors' attitudes towards religion; identifying the public interest angle in a story that is often personally authentic but publicly inauthentic. Hoover advocated that the complexities are such that the best reporting on religion is generally done by a religion journalism specialist, who has built sufficient knowledge of the area to manage the complexities and prejudices.

There have been few similar studies of the reporting of religion in Australia, and none of this quality or depth. Until the 1960's, when Australian society was widely identified as Christian in origin and morality, the retrospective and prospective reporting of religion and religious events in newspapers was largely accepted and expected. Interpretation of the meaning of any religious events was provided largely by religious leaders through quotes reported verbatim and uncritically. In the broadcast media, early battles in the regulation of radio resulted in commercial broadcasters setting aside an hour a week for the broadcast of religious material provided by religious organisations. The same condition was carried through to television (Horsfield 2006). For the national broadcaster, the coverage of religion was a requirement of their charter, though unlike the commercial stations, the ABC retained editorial independence.

This situation began to change in the 1960's, when broader social changes broke the nexus between overt Christianity and social policy. Newspapers gradually ceased reporting on religious events as a matter of course, and applied more stringent news criteria to their selection of religious news stories. As time went on and it was perceived by journalists and editors that religion was of little relevance to the political, social, cultural and economic landscape, the coverage of religion became less and less. To our knowledge, Barney Zwartz who writes for the *Melbourne Age*, is the only person writing for an Australian newspaper with a byline of Religion Editor.

This ideological dismissal or blindness to the relevance of religion to modern social and political life underlay the scramble by journalists to find usable perspectives to understand and report on the unexpected eruption of militant Islam into global consciousness through the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre. Paul Marshall addressed this in the book *Blind Spot: When journalists don't get religion* (2009). Marshall examined various

pronouncements made by the Al-Qaeda network to explain its violent actions, demonstrating that prior to the events Al-Qaeda did not fail to tell the world its reasons but did so often: through “videotapes, audio tapes, declarations, books, letters, fatwas, magazines, emails and Web sites.” Marshall found the Al-Qaeda narrative consistently contained religious and historical references, many of which were ignored by journalists or sometimes even removed from their reports.

Since 2001 there has been a number of research studies into media and religion in Australia, though almost exclusively on the reporting of Islam. These focus particularly on journalistic framing of Islam as terrorist and militant (Aly 2007, Aly 2008, Aly 2009, Aly 2010) or representative of the “other” (Dunn 2001, Poynting and Perry 2007, Kabir 2008, Mansouri and Wood 2008, Hebbani and Wills 2012). There is still no research on how Christianity is reported in the media, nor on how religion coverage is managed in the Australian newsrooms.

It’s in this context that journalistic reporting of World Youth Day was curiously out-of-step with how often and when religion is reported by the news media in Australia. For that reason how and where it was reported provides an interesting case study.

As is usual with a Papal visit, an official broadcaster is appointed, in this case SBS. What was not usual was how the event dominated the front pages of newspapers and more often than not led Sydney TV news bulletins for more than a week. Why was so much time and so many resources devoted to one religious event?

There was no doubt it was news and created to be that way: its proximity, scale and pageantry and magnitude was surpassed only by the Olympics eight years earlier. It involved hundreds of thousands of young people and the Pope, arguably the most recognizable religious leader on the planet, and major World Youth Day events, in particular the Papal Mass, have a global audience of around a billion. It was a pictorial and televisual feast with an A-class celebrity and thousands of happy, singing young people. It had timeliness, currency, human interest and action. When WYD put religion into the streets of Sydney, the normally reserved and unimpressed news media appeared almost swept up in the euphoria of young pilgrims (Koutsoukos, 2011).

Interviews were sought from more than 40 journalists across newspapers and television outlets. To achieve a manageable sample, they were limited to those who had written at least four stories about the event. Thirteen journalists agreed to be interviewed. What was revealed with a wide variance

in the knowledge and understanding of the religious domain on which they were reporting. One participant cited attending WYD as a schoolboy in 2000 in Rome. Others referred to extensive knowledge through church contacts, personal and professional. Other confessed no knowledge at all prior to their secondment to its coverage and little overall knowledge of religion, Christianity included.

Preliminary analysis of responses by interviewees about their approach to covering religious stories, issues and events revealed that most adhered to the view that they would “treat it like any other story.” Reporters with an exposure to Catholicism, whether through upbringing or schooling, agreed their understanding of the religious rituals helped their reporting in that they knew what they were witnessing. But as one journalist admitted, while he could explain Catholic ritual, he couldn’t do that in a mosque and so wouldn’t explain it.

“So I probably shouldn’t give the Catholic scene any free ticks and explain what’s going on there either...” (Interview, Senior TV reporter, Sydney, 2012)

WYD was conceived for the purpose of evangelizing Catholic youth. In 2008 this international religious event was staged in Sydney in an atmosphere of a Catholic Church grappling with the clerical abuse scandal. Earlier that year Pope Benedict XVI had met with abuse victims in the U.S. There was an expectation that a Papal apology to abuse victims in Australia would follow. The Vatican carefully managed journalists’ questions on the Papal plane about whether the Pope would apologise to Australian victims of clerical abuse during his visit. When the apology did eventuate, it was given at a mass in St. Mary’s cathedral that was closed to most media and open to only three chosen victims of abuse. There was little media questioning of this institutional containment of the issue, reflecting an uncharacteristic journalistic deference to the Papal charisma and serious deficiencies in Australian journalists’ understanding of the scope, significance and implications of the sexual abuse scandal for the institutional church and therefore their ability to know how to frame the issue.

To explore this further, journalists who reported on WYD were asked, “Was there an active consideration to link WYD with the sexual abuse scandals?” The answers were varied and included some surprising responses. A senior journalist at one newspaper said the two stories (WYD and the sexual abuse scandal) should not be linked as it wasn’t “appropriate.” Another said someone had been assigned to the story but it took the appearance on the ABC’s 7.30 report of Anthony and Christine Foster whose two daughters were victims of a former Melbourne priest to make the connection:

*“... It was really **unavoidable** (my emphasis) for them to do it. I think it was always there, always there for us as the secular media, always there, as an issue which needed to be dealt with...” (Interview, newspaper journalist, 2012)*

A television journalist described a balancing act when it came to reporting:

“So the incongruity of it all had to be front and centre of our World Youth Day coverage, because we were talking about young people in the church. And we’re talking about the injustice done to young people in the church. And the line being, faith alone was not enough, for the victims and their families.” (Interview, broadcast journalist, 2012)

A senior newspaper journalist responded to a follow-up question as to whether a lack of engagement by journalists with religious institutions had allowed sexual abuse to continue, answered that the question “shocks me slightly, because in my narrative, the media are the heroes” (Phone interview, 2013).

This response is understandable because without exposure in the media the issue would simply have stayed hidden. When pressed on whether the media could have done more earlier, he answered:

I have to say yes, that’s probably a fair question. But to the extent that it’s come out at all, I think the media is the main hero.” (Phone interview, 2013)

This view overlooks the reality that it has been the victims and their advocates are the main heroes, persisting to have their stories told by a reluctant media.

One newspaper has actively sought to confront the Catholic Church about the issue of sexual abuse. Since 2007, The Herald based in Newcastle NSW, has reported the stories of sexual abuse victims in the Newcastle and Hunter Valley region. The main journalist involved has since given evidence to the NSW Special Commission of Inquiry into sexual abuse by two priests in the area. Her view contrasts markedly. She said the media missed the point and in 2008 was swept up in the coverage of the event.

What I have got through all this stuff is the media has not got what the issue is about, the child sex abuse issue.

With regard to her newspaper and its approach to the event, she said

Certainly from the Newcastle herald’s point of view, the victims were part of WYD.

The question arises whether, if there was a greater level of knowledge and facility with the subject of religion among Australian journalists, the coverage of the constructed news event of WYD would have been more effectively critical and the disparity between the institutional avoidance of dealing appropriately with the sexual abuse of children and their constructed public celebration of how youth are valued may have been more effectively addressed.

Though there are fewer Australians regularly involved in institutional religion, these institutions still exercise significant influence in the political and social arena, with political leaders still showing deference to church authority. It can be argued that the lack of understanding and familiarity with religion by the news media in general because of an ideologically-based perception of its

irrelevancy has allowed senior representatives of these religious institutions and their actions to escape scrutiny of the so-called Fourth Estate.

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