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In Search of a Winning Script: Moral Panic vs. Institutional Denial

‘This is really a witch hunt’, one of the American cardinals explained on his way to Rome last April to meet with Pope John Paul to discuss the scandal over the institutional pedophilia taking hold of the American Catholic Church. Another described his fear of irrational policy responses to ‘the present atmosphere of panic’ (Dulles, 2002). ‘Anti-Catholic, anti-religious media bias’ accounts for the scandal, another explained. In earlier years, Church officials had viewed the problem in terms of deviance, implying ‘the adult is not the seducer – the kid is the seducer’ (Butterfield and Hontz, 2002). By the end of the trip to Rome, the cardinals were blaming ‘homosexual priests’ for the scandal (Q&A, 2002). This strategy backfired, as queer activists responded in force, organizing pickets at Catholic churches across the country. The Church Ladies for Choice, an ACT UP affinity group/guerilla theatre troupe in New York, went as far as to start the Pedophiles against Gay Rights, ironically wearing black short-sleeve shirts and clerical collars, carrying placards, and heckling the Gay Pride parade as it passed St. Patrick’s Cathedral in June, 2002.¹

Over the months since the clergy sex scandal broke with news of former priest John J. Geoghan Jr’s conviction for pedophilia in January, 2002, claims makers have attempted to wrest control of the definition and social meaning of the scandal. The result was a series of competing narratives. Those abused by clergy defined the problem in terms of abuse of power, arrogance, and institutional denial, while the Catholic Church spun the scandal as media hysteria without foundation. In many respects, the claims and counterclaims have functioned as a case study in social problem definition, as dueling interest groups have aimed to land a script for the story that strikes a winning chord with the culture (Best, 1989). The following essay will consider the implications of the competing scripts: moral panic vs. institutional denial – and their readings of the clergy sex scandal.

Moral panic

By describing the scandal as a ‘witch hunt’, the Church is suggesting that the scandal amounts to moral panic, a term that, by its very nature, suggests the response is out of proportion with the actual problem. In many of the countless media frenzies over sex witnessed in recent years – from the attacks on public sex to Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinski’s frolics in the Oval Office – the argument that the response was out of proportion with the problem has effortlessly become a winning script. A clear majority of Americans viewed Clinton’s impeachment as a classic moral panic without foundation. At the scandal’s peak, the Democrats won seats in congress. While the clergy sex scandal may be many things: a call for institutional accountability, a delicious story of moralist come-uppance, even a cautionary tale of the implications of sexual repression – it is not is a moral panic.

Stanley Cohen first defined the term in 1972, suggesting moral panics occur as:

... A condition, episode, person or groups of persons emerge to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented as a threat to societal fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people ... (Cohen, 1972: ?)

In the case of the current scandal, few, if any, moral barricades appear to have been erected. The ‘right-thinking’ people ducked the issue. In a May deposition, Boston’s Cardinal Law testified that he could not remember receiving letters in 1984 warning him about Father Geoghan’s past history of abuse of over 200 children. Instead, Law transferred him from one parish to another, where Geoghan continued to work with and abuse children (Belluck, 2002).

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) have outlined five specific indicators of collective behavior that occur during moral panic: volatility, hostility, measurable concern, consensus and disproportionality. Fear about the social threat presented by a particular group of outsiders or deviants begins the pattern. Volatility is followed by hostility, as the targeted group is perceived as a threat to social order, a stereotype of evil, and thus treated with anger. After volatility and hostility come measurable concern. These first three characteristics of moral panic are evident within the church clergy scandal. Volatility about the social threat to the Church hierarchy has been followed by hostility to the Church’s accusers. In one example, a priest who’d repeatedly molested a boy during camping trips preemptively informed the young boy he was with that he would ‘burn in hell’ if he told anyone (Butterfield and Hontz, 2002). In another case, the priest

implied the children involved were ‘damaged’ well before they came into contact with a molesting priest (Keneally, 2002). In other cases, Cardinal Egan of New York used legalese to challenge the legitimacy of accusations. Measurable concern about the scandal has emerged, as newspapers from coast to coast have covered the story, particularly as the American School of Cardinals went on an unprecedented trip to Rome in April.

Where the script breaks down for the Catholic Church’s interest groups is around consensus and disproportionality, the final two components of Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s (1994) panic schema. For the panic script to work, there must be widespread agreement about the threat by this group. As of yet, there seems to be no consensus among the Church or the faithful. To the Church’s dismay, accusers are successfully finding redress in court and the media.

Finally, the perceived threat presented by the deviant group must be far greater than can be verified with measurements of harm. The Church’s argument that the anxieties about behavior are larger than the ‘problem’ is perhaps the most damning aspect of the competing responses to the scandal. By its very nature, this script assumes the angry response of those accused is out of proportion with the problem at hand. Yet, in the case of the problem at hand, the pain witnessed by thousands and thousands of those abused by clergy is real beyond measure. Many are scarred with traumatic wounds they will carry for the rest of their lives, quietly managing nightmares and lingering problems of ill emotional health and feelings of betrayal. Some have killed themselves (Butterfield and Hontz, 2002), while others have fought back and won settlements. In many respects, the response to the institutional abuses at hand barely scratches the surface of the moral bankruptcy that preceded it. Some have even compared the Church’s denials of the pattern of abuse to Pope Pius XII’s failure to speak out against the Holocaust during World War II (Goodstein and Stanley, 2002). In both cases, silence resulted in dire consequences. Yet, if recent years are any indication, the sex-negative ideologies sustaining the Church’s systematic abuse are receiving increased scrutiny.

Silence equals death

Some 13 years after the ACT UP took over St. Patrick’s, the recent scandal offers the opportunity for a long-overdue conversation about a dangerous source of anti-sex ideology, spearheaded by the Catholic Church. To review, ACT UP and the Women’s Health Action Mobilization organized the take-over action as a collective challenge to the Catholic Church’s increasingly aggressive anti-choice, anti-gay, anti-abortion, anti-safe-sex, and anti-woman stance, exemplified in New York by Cardinal O’Connor’s statements of support for Catholics blockading abortion clinics. ‘Stop The

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Church', as the demo was called, was held on Sunday morning, December 5, 1989 at St. Patrick's Cathedral; it drew well over 5,000 people to the streets. Inside, over 100 people were arrested laying down in the aisles of the church, chanting 'your dogma is killing us!' (Morgan, 2002). It remains one of ACT UP's most famous direct actions.

Yet today, much remains the same. While Cardinal O'Connor is gone, his dangerous policy of endorsing abstinence-only sex education has been adopted on the federal level. Public policy, from welfare reform to HIV prevention, promotes the Church's approach. Currently, the United States delegation to the United Nations Special Session on Children has blocked policy on adolescent sexual reproductive health rights because it does not call for abstinence-only policy. The U.S. delegation is pushing to have the document rewritten with explicit anti-abortion language. 'The US is standing alongside Sudan, Libya, Iran and Pakistan in their retro-minded ideology on reproductive issues?', ACT UP's Kellie Casper (2002) pondered, continuing, 'in effect this virtual buffet of ultra-conservative ideology is helping to keep women at risk by denying them the education that could save their lives'. And the global AIDS Crisis has continued to swell.

From international development to the current church scandal, sex-negative ideology has vastly reduced discourse about healthy sexuality. As with missile defense programs, which no credible evidence supports, ideology is often more important than proof or results. Take abstinence-only sex education policy for example. After a comprehensive review of peer-reviewed research on the approach, the University of California at San Francisco Center for AIDS Prevention Studies (CAPS) recently concluded that there is no evidence that abstinence-only programs reduce sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, or delay sexual initiation. Instead, the CAPS report cites credible research that clearly demonstrates that comprehensive sex education can achieve positive behavioral changes, while not encouraging increased sexual activity. The report concludes: 'The growing prominence of the abstinence-only approach will likely have serious unintended consequences by denying young people access to the information they need to protect themselves' (Collins et al., 2002). Certainly few boys or girls were able to protect themselves from 'celibate' priests who taught them the virtues of abstinence (see Butterfield and Hontz, 2002).

Abstinence-only sex education policy did not emerge from a vacuum. Its antecedent is the Church's celibacy policy, which is currently under fire. In many respects, the two approaches – abstinence and celibacy – walk hand in hand, driven by the same sex-negative ideology. Both breed cultures of sexual shame and secrecy. Let us not forget that much of Laud Humphry's fieldwork for his seminal study on public sex, *Tea Room Trade*,

was conducted in bathrooms while the author was a seminarian. Unlike the thriving public sexual cultures throughout cities across the world where men have organized communities of protection, eros and democratic exchange, the back room sex within the bathrooms of Catholic seminary was rarely discussed or openly acknowledged; protection from HIV and other harms were sorely lacking. This was the story of a number of queer former Catholic seminarians, who later tested HIV positive (see Shepard, 1997).

The cultures of sexual shame and protection rarely overlap. Sex is food; few of us can exist without it. Yet, when sex education teaches it is best to abstain and remain celibate, shame and stigma are the inevitable responses to failed attempts to live up to the policy's unrealistic demands. Within such a context, there is no need to learn to negotiate safer sex or prevent disease. No need for condoms or protection if priests and teenagers are not sexually active. This unrealistic approach is why Church opponents describe the current scandal as a case of institutional denial. Unfortunately, the consequence of such denial is a dangerous lack of protection for those at risk.

While there are certainly boys and girls under 18 who seek sexual outlets, even with elders, within a context of negotiation and mutuality, such interactions are a part of healthy sexual expression. Without such an exchange, the result is the coercive exercise of power witnessed over the last few months. Without justice, there can be no pleasure. Without acknowledging the need for sexual expression, joy rarely enters the fold.

A call for institutional accountability

Competing camps have explained the current scandal using countless permeations of the moral panic vs. institutional denial scripts. As much as anything, the pedophilia scandal can be seen as a morality play about impermeable institutions. While countless other professions, such as social work, mandate that cases of abuse be reported to the state for investigation, the Catholic Church failed to record cries for help from victims until they hit the papers. Rather than a moral panic, the response to this scandal is a call for institutional accountability. It's a call for a reassessment of a dangerous use of sex-negative ideology to obscure healthy democratic discourse.

Stoning Michaelangelo's David because it was 'obscenely naked', burning witches, McCarthy-era mass dismissals of 'sex perverts' from the U.S. government, blacklisting screenwriters, and countless other red scares amounted to moral panics. In the current case, a man found guilty of abusing his power and molesting some 200 children has been found guilty. The church sex scandal is many things – including a threat to the culture of patriarchal political structures – yet it is not a moral panic. In the end,

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it may be the beginning of an open-ended discourse about sex, justice and abuse of power.

Note

1. Full disclosure – the author of this essay is an active member of the Church Ladies.

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