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Irresponsible reporting on religion is dangerous

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 23, 2007 All Things Catholic

Normally I love writing this column, but this week I need to say something that gives me no pleasure at all. Here it is in a nutshell: Reporting on religion in the mainstream British press is not only sometimes dreadful, it's dangerous, and something needs to be done about it.

Making such a statement does not come easy. Journalists are notoriously reluctant to criticize the work of colleagues, and not just because it's a great way to make enemies. We know the agonies of fact-checking and finding balance, especially facing ever-tighter deadlines. Since I occasionally write for the British press and give interviews in the U.K., I understand that religion reporting is up against a ferociously competitive media market and a highly secular audience, where some over-simplification and even exaggeration is the price of doing business. Apart from that, I know it's dangerous for an outsider to give another culture advice, and I'm also painfully aware of how often I fail to live up to my own standards.

That said, the present situation is a disaster, with implications far beyond the United Kingdom, and someone from inside the guild needs to say so.

The latest case in point came on Monday, with an article in *The Times* of London on Anglican/Catholic relations. Under the headline "Churches back plan to unite under pope," the paper suggested that a reunion deal based on "radical proposals" had been struck between Catholic and Anglican bishops.

Coming as Anglican prelates from around the world were meeting in Tanzania to wrestle with a crisis related to the ordination of a gay bishop in the United States, as well as the deeper questions of authority that action raised, the story was a bombshell. It got wide international play; a Lexis-Nexis search on Tuesday turned up no less than 30 articles around the world based on *The Times* report.

The only problem is that the story was false -- not oversold or exaggerated, but false.

It was based on a draft 42-page document from the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission, a body created in 2000 to summarize 40 years of dialogue between the two confessions. (Basically, the idea was that the dialogues have produced valuable, but largely unread, texts, and somebody should issue a "primer" that might actually be picked up.) The document is titled "Growing Together in Unity and Mission."

Can it be read as a blueprint for reunion under the authority of the pope?

Here's the first line of paragraph seven, which appears on page five of the report: "This present context, which adds to existing differences between our two communions, is not the appropriate time to enter the new formal stage of relationship envisaged by the bishops at Mississauga." That's a reference to a meeting in Canada in 2000 when representatives of the two groups had discussed the possibility of greater structural unity.

In other words, "Growing Together in Unity and Mission" unambiguously says that now is *not* the time for reunion under the pope. There is simply no other way to read the document -- unless, that is, you're inclined to distort it.

The text outlines limited agreement about the pope as an agent of unity, and pinpoints various things Anglicans and Catholics can do together. But it also candidly admits that the two sides remain divided. It's a *status questionis*, not a "radical proposal" for anything. Five minutes with anyone involved in the dialogue would have made clear that there's no way Anglican/Catholic relations are at a point where official representatives of either side would agree to a sweeping plan for structural unity.

This is not an isolated case.

Over the years, I've found that the British press is the most likely to publish virtually any rumor about the Vatican floated in the Italian papers. Back in 2003, for example, when Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos celebrated Mass according to the pre-Vatican II rite in a Roman basilica, one Italian newspaper speculated that it would mark the end of a schism with the followers of late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. The staggering improbability of such an outcome meant that virtually no one else picked up the report -- except *The Times*, so the English-language Catholic world was atwitter with rumors based on thin air.

In November 2005, again following the Italian lead, the same paper reported that the Vatican would shortly drop its diplomatic recognition of Taiwan in favor of mainland China. While such a move has been rumored for decades, "shortly" came and went without the predicted development. In March 2002, British papers carried stories about a campaign within the College of Cardinals to force John Paul II to resign -- based, again, on a speculative piece in an Italian paper which turned out to be overblown.

To take another spectacular example, *The Daily Mirror* carried a banner headline in March 2006 proclaiming that Benedict XVI would visit England in 2007. Not only was the story false, but no one from the bishops' conference was even contacted prior to publication. Or, consider a *Daily Telegraph* piece from 2003 claiming that the Vatican was "suspending" talks with Anglicans due to the controversy over gay bishops, which was also false.

To top things off, this Monday, Feb. 19, *The Financial Times* carried a calendar item stating matter-of-factly that on Thursday, Feb. 22, Benedict XVI would issue a document approving the use of condoms under certain circumstances. Needless to say, no such document appeared.

All this without entering into complaints from some British Catholics about the way their media covered the sexual abuse crisis, though it's worth noting that a BBC official publicly acknowledged bias concerning one broadcast, and a tabloid story suggesting the church had offered a notorious pedophile priest a bribe of £50,000 to buy his silence turned out to be based on forged documents.

To be clear, this is not about "spin," or whether a news outlet has a "line" hostile to a church. It's about willful indifference to the facts, which in this business is akin to original sin. The pattern in the British press on religion too often seems to be "shoot first and check the facts later."

Explaining why this is the case would require a degree of cultural literacy about the U.K. I don't possess. All I can say is that a disproportionate percentage of misleading religion stories surface in the British press.

Of course, there are many, many exceptions. Some of the finest religion reporters in the world work in the British press, and British print and broadcast outlets often produce exemplary results. British media specialized in religion, such as *The Tablet*, do impressive work with limited resources. Yet I suspect most of my British colleagues will also be the first to recognize the reality I'm describing.

All this is not merely irritating, but dangerous.

In the first place, as much as some hierarchs and ecclesiastical bureaucrats might dispute the point, churches need the press to play its traditional watchdog role. It was a free press that forced the churches to confront the sexual abuse crisis, and today a free press is also running down stories of financial mismanagement. Institutions prefer to deny their own dysfunction, and an effective press won't let them get away with it.

The problem with the kind of sloppy coverage described above is that it enables apologists to dismiss any critical reporting as biased. Many reasonable people, familiar with the track record of the British press, are already inclined to write off even credible reports as fruit of the same poisonous tree.

Second, inaccurate stories such as this week's about a secret plan for union with the pope can wreak real havoc, in this case not only in Anglican/Catholic relations, but within Anglicanism. If the story were true, that might well be a risk worth running, but otherwise it seems terribly reckless.

Third, I know how important English journalism is around the world. The BBC and *The Times* still in many ways set the "gold standard." For precisely that reason, when the British press sneezes, the rest of us catch cold.

I am not suggesting greater government scrutiny, or any boycotts or pressure campaigns. I'm saying the culture of the British media must change, towards taking religion seriously as a news beat, and demanding the same standards as in any other area.

Freedom of the press, which in significant measure was born in England, means that journalists have the right to

treat religious bodies like any other social institution, no more and no less. In order to credibly execute the "no more" part of that equation, however, the press also has to live up to the "no less." If some British media have been a bit drunk on their freedom, now's the time to sober up.

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is **jallen@ncronline.org[1]**

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