

JOURNALISTIC RESPONSIBILITY

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RECENT protests against the publication of 'obnoxious matter' in the pages of certain newspapers have done little more than echo what the General Council of the Press had already said on this subject. At one of its earliest meetings—last October—the Council declared itself to be 'deeply concerned by the unwholesome exploitation of sex by certain newspapers and periodicals', and placed on record its view that 'such treatment is calculated to injure public morals' and is contrary to the standards of journalism which the Council is duty-bound to maintain.

Strong words! But verbal condemnation by itself is insufficient. The Press Council is a voluntary body representing newspaper proprietors, editors and working journalists. It has no statutory powers. Its apparent inability to do anything effective to improve matters raises anew, for the individual pressman, the whole question of journalistic responsibility.

Strangely enough, the Royal Commission on the Press (1947-49) had little to say on this subject of the unwholesome exploitation of sex, being concerned rather with cases of alleged political bias and of inaccurate reporting. What it did say, however, was often sound, and should be recalled. Sensationalism, for instance, it described as 'partly an extreme manifestation of the peculiar values reflected in the popular newspapers, partly a desire to provide the excitement which the reader is believed, and has been taught, to expect'. And this, as one witness expressed it, is done by publishing prominent and detailed reports of crime, of the relations between the sexes, and of extraordinary or scandalous behaviour, which 'minister . . . to the imaginative gratification of the reader'.

Such reports, 'prominent and detailed', are evidently what the Press Council had in mind when it spoke of editorial treatment calculated to injure public morals. In the stern language of theology, the newspapers responsible for this sort of thing are guilty of creating 'occasions of sin' for their readers. But I think it would be a gross exaggeration to say that all or most of the 'popular' national dailies consistently offend in this way or that even the

most sensational of them are obsessed by sex and crime to the extent that some recent protests would seem to suggest. (So far as the provincial press is concerned, we have the authority of the Royal Commission for saying that the 'provincial newspapers to some extent act as a corrective to the faults of the nationals'.)

An appendix to the Royal Commission Report, moreover, shows that 'except in *The Daily Mirror*', the amount of space given to news of sex interest by the national dailies is not large; but the space given to news classified under the heading of 'law, police and accidents' is considerable. How considerable?

The most up-to-date figures I can find relate to the year 1947. Then the percentage of total news space devoted to items in this category was as follows: *The Times*, 3 per cent; *Daily Telegraph*, 8 per cent; *Daily Express*, 13 per cent; *Daily Herald*, 8 per cent; *Daily Mail*, 11 per cent; *Daily Worker*, 7 per cent; *News Chronicle*, 12 per cent; *Daily Graphic*, 11 per cent; *Daily Mirror*, 23 per cent.

The newspaper which prints most 'law and police' news is of course *The News of the World*. It is not a hypocritical paper and never pretends to be leading a campaign against vice, which is more than can be said of some of its competitors in the field of Sunday journalism. What *The News of the World* concentrates in one issue at the week-end has, for the most part, already appeared in the national and provincial press throughout the week. Even the most respectable regional dailies and county weeklies give fairly full coverage to court proceedings, and sometimes their almost verbatim reporting of a particularly unsavoury case makes them unsuitable for family reading. Is journalism of this kind to be condemned as unwholesome?

In attempting to answer such a question it has become usual to quote the legal maxim that in England justice should not only be done but should be seen to be done. I know that this argument can be used to excuse the reporting of salacious details from the courts; but there is something in it, all the same. Consider, for a moment, prosecutions involving sex offences. The provincial newspaper with a sense of responsibility and sound journalistic standards usually reports such cases briefly. But occasionally a well-known national or local figure is arraigned. What then is the duty of the newspaper? If the report is brief, readers may imagine that influence has been exerted to prevent publicity; if detailed, it stands the risk of giving scandal.

Publicity in such cases is often stated (by lawyers as well as editors) to be a necessary part of the punishment of the guilty. It is also defended as a warning to the innocent and a deterrent to the evilly disposed. These points can be made too much of, but there is some truth in them. In fairness we should try to think of what would be the effect if the entire British Press followed the example of *The Christian Science Monitor* and excluded all crime news from its columns. Might there not be more crime—and more fear of criminals—than there is already?

In any case, the Press being a mirror (in some cases, no doubt, a distorting mirror) of a society made up of sinful men and women, it must inevitably contain a certain amount of news which fails to edify. So it was in Robert Burton's day three centuries ago when the news-books and currantoes told of treasons, cheating tricks, robberies, and enormous villainies of every kind, 'subtlety, knavery, candour and integrity, mutually mixed and offering themselves'; and so, presumably, it will always be. But to say that is not to justify the sort of treatment which the Christie case, for example, was given in so many daily newspapers, national and provincial, in this country. Such reporting sells newspapers—there is no denying that. But, as the Royal Commission pointed out, the Press cannot be considered purely as an industry: the inescapable fact that it is the main source of information, discussion, and advocacy imposes upon it responsibilities greater than those resting on an industry which does not deal in information and ideas.

How is that responsibility to be exercised? In attempting to answer that question we should, I think, recognize that it is one which affects others besides newspaper proprietors and journalists. As Mr Beverley Baxter remarked in the House of Commons debate on the now defunct Press Council Bill, if mass circulations are based on 'vice, squalor, rape and sex crimes of every sort', the blame lies not only with those who produce the papers but also with the public, many of whom, under the guise of hypocrisy, say that they buy sensational newspapers 'for the sports news' or 'for the crossword'.

The vast circulations enjoyed by the most sensational journals are also an 'appalling criticism' of the teaching profession, as Mr Chuter Ede, a former schoolmaster, confessed: the public of today are the schoolchildren of yesterday. The fact is that in this

matter of the Press and its relationship to society all of us have our responsibilities, and there is no doubt that Catholics, a large and fairly close-knit minority, could exercise an enormous influence for good if they all heeded the appeal made by some bishops to withhold their custom from the newspapers which offend against Christian moral standards.

A different and more onerous responsibility rests upon those engaged in the newspaper industry and the profession of journalism. There is nothing to be said for the proprietor of a newspaper which builds its circulation on the unwholesome exploitation of sex; although it should be borne in mind that not all those guilty of this moral crime are formal sinners with bad consciences: in our semi-heathen society which tolerates the vast contraceptive industry and provides so many thousands of candidates for divorce every year, it is hardly surprising that there are men of business who see nothing 'wrong' in making profits out of salacious journalism. But it should be noted that the offenders probably belong to a proprietors' organization represented on the General Council of the Press!

So far as the individual editor or journalist is concerned, the problem is exacerbated to an even greater extent by the breakdown of belief. One professional organization of journalists, I am told, was obliged to wind-up its ethics committee because of the difficulty of applying objective judgments in the absence of an agreed frame of reference. (It possessed an agreed code of conduct but no agreed interpretation of it!) Yet the Press Council speaks of its bounden duty to maintain 'standards of journalism', and the context shows that it means moral standards. Clearly it should possess a code applicable to the whole of British journalism and informed by definite Christian concepts of 'right' and 'wrong'. All turns on whether there is a sufficiently active Christian leaven in journalism. Here, surely, is a field in which much might be achieved by Christian action, but it is idle to suppose that Catholics alone could achieve it. There would have to be co-operation between Catholics and other Christians at all levels—in the chapels and branches of the National Union of Journalists; in the branches of the Institute of Journalists and the Guild of Editors; in the publishers' organizations. (Significantly, the Union has a tiny but vociferous and influential Communist minority; but no recognizable Christian grouping, so far as I know.) Catholics might

well provide the necessary leadership, if only because they possess the clearly defined philosophy which can give force and expression to what non-Catholic Christians often vaguely 'feel' to be right.

If Christian influence and humanist goodwill together succeed in producing a code of conduct for the Press Council, how could it be applied? I envisage a situation in which a newspaper is named as a transgressor against the code—a code which, it must be remembered, newspapermen have themselves hammered out and sealed with their collective approval. If, after a reasonable period, it shows no sign of mending its ways, it is blacklisted by the Council and by the organizations represented on the Council. Members of the Union, the Institute, and the Guild are warned not to work for it. The proprietorial society to which it belongs suspends its membership.

Whether this is legally feasible I do not know; the Press Council is, of course, not a privileged body. But the idea is perhaps worth some serious consideration.

NOTE

In the May issue of *BLACKFRIARS*, *Prophecy and Papacy* by Alec R. Vidler was described as published by S.P.C.K. It is in fact published by the S.C.M. Press at 25s.