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The Expected Places of Religion and Communities in Film

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In the 2014 movie, *Spotlight*, religion, represented by the Catholic Church, has an expected place for the community—the City of Boston, Massachusetts. And, the community of Boston, represented by the institution of a free press, has a corresponding expectation of the Church. In this paper, I explore these expectations as they are identified in the Oscar winning film, *Spotlight*.

Keywords: the Church, free press, priests, sexual abuse, investigation, *Spotlight*

Introduction

One of the topics of the recent Ray Smith Symposium: The Place of Religion in Film, was “religions keeping communities in their expected places, or institutions keeping religions in their expected places.”¹ This seemed to me to be a rather odd conference topic, but as I thought about what might fit under that topic I was struck by the idea of “expected places” and I was reminded of the conflict between the Catholic Church and The Boston Globe newspaper in exposing the sexual abuse of children by priests in the Boston area, as that conflict plays itself out in the 2014 Oscar winning film, *Spotlight*.²

In *Spotlight* the Catholic Church has a clear expectation for (or an expected place for) the Boston community. What is that expected place? And, The Boston Globe, representing the institution of a free press, has an expectation for the Church. What is that expectation? My purpose in what follows is to describe how *Spotlight* answers the questions asked by this particular Symposium topic.

What Does Religion Expect of the Community?

In the film, the question becomes: “What does the Catholic Church expect from the Boston community?” The opening scenes of the film give a powerful answer to this question.

*It is night, in a police station, 1976. An older cop is shown returning to the front desk where he joins a young cop. The young cop looks to him, curious, as he lights a cigarette.*³

YOUNG COP: How’s that going?

OLDER COP: The mother’s bawling and the uncle’s pissed off.

YOUNG COP: She’s not married?

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¹ *The Ray Smith Symposium: The Place of Religion in Film* was in international conference on the place of religion in film, hosted by Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, March 30, 2017 through April 1, 2017.

² *Spotlight* is directed by Tom McCarthy and it stars Michael Keaton, Mark Ruffalo, Rachel McAdams, Liv Schreiber, and Stanley Tucci.

³ All quotations from the film are taken from the screenplay, written by Josh Singer and Tom McCarthy.

OLDER COP: Divorced with four kids. I guess Father was helping out.

YOUNG COP: Helping out?

The older cop shrugs. The front door opens and Burke, fresh faced, 32, walks in. He wears a dark overcoat.

OLDER COP: Hey, Mr. Burke. They're in the back talking to the Bishop.

BURKE: And Father?

The older cop nods in the other direction.

OLDER COP: We put him in the break room.

BURKE: Any press?

OLDER COP: Some guy from the Citizen, but we sent him away. None of the big papers.

BURKE: Let's keep it that way.

Burke walks toward the interview room

YOUNG COP: Who's that?

OLDER COP: Assistant DA.

YOUNG COP: Gonna be hard to keep the papers away from the arraignment.

OLDER COP: What arraignment?

He's matter of fact. The young cop reacts, looks toward the priest sitting in the break room.

OLDER COP: You can tell Father Geoghan it won't be much longer.

In the interview room a Bishop talks in hushed tones with Shelia. Two young boys, 7 and 9, sit coloring.

BISHOP: Shelia, you know the good work the church does in the community. I give you my personal guarantee that I'm going to take Father out of the parish and this will never happen again. I'm should be indented to match Bishop

Assistant DA, Burke, enters the interview room.

BISHOP: We'll just be another moment, Paul.

BURKE: Of course, Father.

The Bishop turns back to Shelia. Burke eyes the kids.

BISHOP: Now Shelia, I'm going to give you my personal card.....

The young cop stands outside, smoking. He watches as the Bishop and Father Geoghan exit the station, get into a Town Car and are driven away.

What these first scenes show is that the Church expects the place of the community to be one of support, bordering on subservience. That is, the community is expected to support the Church and to protect the Church from perceived attacks on its reputation. In these first scenes, the community is represented by its officials, including policemen and the Assistant DA. The older cop describes the priest's behavior as "helping out," rather than as sexual assault on a minor. The police put Father Geoghan in the break room, rather than a holding cell, thereby showing preferential treatment to a representative of the Church. After the older cop tells the Assistant DA that none of the big papers have gotten the story, Mr. Burke, a representative of the city and not the Church, tells him to "keep it that way," thereby sheltering the Church from bad publicity.

When the younger cop says "it's going to be hard to keep the papers away from the arraignment," the older cop scoffs and says: "What arraignment?" This means that the legal authorities of the city will cooperate with the

Church and let the Church deal with the priest, even though a crime has been committed. When Mr. Burke enters the room where the Bishop is talking to the family of the victim, he sits quietly and the Bishop tells him that “We’ll just be another moment, Paul,” the Bishop uses the ADA’s first name, suggesting a personal connection between the two men, a connection that takes precedence over the official relationship between them. Mr. Burke, in deference to the Bishop replies: “Of course father.”

When the Bishop tells the mother of the victim that he “will take Father out of the Parish and that this will never happen again,” he is telling the mother of this Catholic boy (an ordinary citizen of the Boston community) how he wants her to understand the situation. Problem solved! The Church will take care of its own problems in its own way and it will do so quietly and without publicity. The Church does not expect any interference or challenge from the community, the people of Boston.

In a somewhat later, but still early scene, the new Editor of The Boston Globe, Marty Baron, meets with his staff.⁴ After getting to know the staff a bit, Marty asks the group:

MARTY: Uh did everyone read Eileen McNamara’s column this weekend?

HELEN: That’s the Geoghan case?

MARTY: Yes, what’s the folo on that?

BEN: It’s a column, what kind of folo were you thinking?

MARTY: Well, apparently this priest molested kids in six different parishes over the last thirty years and the attorney for the victims, Mr.indent to match Marty

EILEEN: Garabedian.

MARTY: Thanks Eileen. Mr. Garabedian says Cardinal Law found out about it fifteen years ago and did nothing.

CANELLOS: I think that attorney’s a bit of a crank. And the Church dismissed the claim.

EILEEN: He said, she said.

MARTY: Whether Mr. Garabedian is a crank or not, he says he has documents that prove the Cardinal knew.

BEN: As I understand it, those documents are under seal.

Silence. No one knows what to say.

MARTY: Okay, but the fact remains, we have a Boston priest who abused 80 kids, we’ve got a lawyer who says he has proof Law knew about it, and we’ve written all of two stories on this in the last six months. This strikes me as an essential story for a local paper. At the very least, we should go after those documents. Indent this and the sentence above.

CANELLOS: How would you like to do that?

MARTY: Well, I don’t know what the laws are here, but in Florida we would go to court.

BEN: You want to sue the Church?

MARTY: Technically we wouldn’t sue the Church. We would file a motion to lift the seal on those documents.

BEN: The Church will read that as us suing them. So will everybody else.

MARTY: Good to know.

What makes this scene particularly interesting is that the newspaper staff itself seems very reluctant to pursue further the case of Father Geoghan’s sexual abuse or, as the staff seems to suggest, they are very reluctant to take on the Church. When Marty Baron asks what follow up there has been, the staff response suggests that there is no need for follow up on “a column.” When Baron persists, “apparently this priest molested kids in six different parishes over the last thirty years and the attorney for the victims says Cardinal Law found out about it fifteen years ago and did nothing,” Canellos responds by saying that the “attorney is a bit of a crank,” and

⁴ Marty Baron has been the Editor of The Washington Post since December 31, 2012.

“The Church dismissed the claim.” This is followed by Eileen saying: “He said. She said.” All of these responses by The Globe staff suggest that there is nothing to follow up on. There may be nothing to follow up on, but the staff has not made any effort to find out whether that is true or not.

When Baron again persists (“Whether Mr. Garabedian is a crank or not, he says he has documents that prove the Cardinal knew.”), Ben responds by saying that “those documents are under seal,” as though that is the end of the matter. Then Baron continues, “We should go after those documents,” and Canellos responds: “How would you like to do that?” Baron suggests that The Globe ask the court to lift the seal on the documents, and now we get to the heart of the matter. Ben says: “You want to sue the Church?” When Baron says that technically they would not be suing the Church, Ben responds with: “The Church will read that as us suing them. So will everyone else.”

Marty Baron has brought up the claim that a priest has sexually abused “kids in six different parishes over a period of thirty years,” he identified a pattern of very serious criminal behavior. Imagine having a serial rapist on the loose in the city for thirty years. The Globe would be all over such a story. And, when Marty adds that the Cardinal has known about these crimes and done nothing to stop it he is identifying one of the most revered public figures in Boston as complicit in the sexual abuse of children. Imagine that a police officer had known the identity of the serial rapist and had done nothing to stop it. The Globe would be all over that story as well. But, because we are dealing with the Church, the staff of The Globe, the very people who represent a free press, are reluctant to even investigate the story. The Globe itself has bought into the Church’s expectation that it, the Church, alone, should deal with the behavior of priest and that it should do so quietly, without public exposure.

A short time later, in Ben’s office, Mike asks of the suit filed by The Globe to unseal the documents: “You think the suit has a chance?” Robby responds: “Depends on the judge.” Ben adds: “And what parish he belongs to.” This brief exchange is another example of the Church’s expectation for the community, including the judiciary. And shortly after this exchange, now in Marty’s office, Ben asks: “Who’s the judge in this case?” Marty responds: “Uh, Constance Sweeney.” Ben says: “Tough.” Marty asks: “Why’s that?” And Ben’s response is: “Good Catholic girl,” again identifying the Church’s expectation for the community.

Later we discover that Marty Baron has asked the *Spotlight* team to scrub the Geoghan case, that is, to take a much closer look at the case. The *Spotlight* team is a four person investigative team that selects its own stories, takes all the time it needs to investigate them and it does this in secret so that those it investigates do not know they are being investigated.

MATT: So we’re dropping the Boston PD?

MIKE: I vote yes.

ROBBY: No, we’re just setting it aside for now. I don’t need to tell you guys, we need to be more discreet than usual. Everybody’s gonna be interested in this, not just the Herald. I don’t want the Chancery getting wind of this before we know what we have. These lines should be indented to match Robby.

When Matt responds, “Good luck with that,” it indicates that many people in the community, maybe including people who work for The Globe, will work to protect the reputation of the Church—the very expectation that the Church has for the community.

Later in Richard Gilman’s office (Gilman is the publisher of The Boston Globe), Marty says: “I’d like to challenge the protective order in the Geoghan case.” Gilman responds: “You want to sue the Church?” (We have heard this question before.) Marty replies: “We’re just filing a motion. But yes.” Gilman asks Marty if he thinks

“it’s that important” and Marty responds in the affirmative. Then Gilman says: “Because, obviously, the Church will fight us very hard on this. Which won’t go unnoticed by our subscriber base. 53% of them are Catholic.” Marty tells Gilman that he thinks that The Globe readers, including Catholics, will be interested in the story and Gilman gives Marty the okay.

Two *Spotlight* reporters, Robby Robinson and Sacha Cohen, meet with Eric Macleish, an attorney who has helped to settle many complaints against the Church. After some preliminary pleasantries, Robby asks Macleish: “You’re familiar with the Geoghan case?”

MACLEISH: Sure. Eighty plaintiffs. All individual cases, Garabedian must be swimming.

ROBBY: And the allegations against Cardinal Law.

Macleish considers the question.

MACLEISH: Look, it’s tricky. You need to understand these are shitty cases. The statute of Limitations is only 3 years and most of these victims don’t come forward until long after that.

SACHA: Why is that?

MACLEISH: They’re kids. Shame. Guilt. And they come from tough neighborhoods, nobody Wants to admit this kind of thing. So you’re screwed on the time limit and even if you argue your way around that, the charitable immunity statute caps damages at twenty grand.

SACHA: Twenty grand for molesting a child?

MACLEISH: That’s the way the system works. The Church is tough.

What we learn here is that the system is rigged against the victims and that the Church uses that rigged system to protect its assets as well as its reputation.

At one point Marty Baron is asked to pay a courtesy call on Cardinal Law. In their conversation, Cardinal Law says: “... If I can be of any help, don’t hesitate to ask. I find that this city flourishes when its great institutions work together.” This represents the expectation of the Church for the community and its institutions. But, Marty Baron responds by saying: “Uh, thank you. Personally I’m of the opinion that for the paper to best perform its function it needs to, uh, stand alone.” And here we get the first glimpse of what a free press might expect of the Church, or what it might expect of religion in general.

There are a number of other scenes that show that the Church expects the place of the community to be deferential, even subservient. This expectation applies to all segments of the community from parishioners to elected official and government employees. This is the picture of the Church’s expectations for the community painted by the movie.

Before moving on to the expected place of religion by the institution of a free press, I would like to point out what seems to me to be the justification for the community’s showing deference to the Church. In the very first scenes we find the Bishop saying to the mother of a child who has been sexually abused by a priest: “Shelia, you know the good work that Church does in the community.” Because the Church does good in the community it should not have its reputation stained by exposing its crimes.

Later, after playing golf with Jim Sullivan (an attorney), Robby meets his wife in the country club parking lot.

BARBARA: How’s Jimmy?

ROBBY: Good. He brought up the suit.

BARBARA: Really? What'd he say?

ROBBY: (sarcastically) He was thrilled about it.

BARBARA: It's not a surprise, Robby. The Church does a lot of good in this town.

And later, Robby talks to Jim again at a Catholic Charities fund raiser. Robby is now pushing Jim about his (Jim's) involvement in the cover up.

JIM: So this is the Robby Robinson I've always heard about but never met.

ROBBY: Listen to me, Jimmy. You want to be on the right side of this.

JIM: You're talking about the Church, Robby. Look around. These are good people who've done a lot of good for this city. Should be indented to match Jim.

And finally, Robby is talking to Peter Conley at a bar. Conley is a wealthy supporter of the Church.

ROBBY: So, you here for the Cardinal?

Conley: No, no, I wouldn't presume to speak for the Cardinal. (pause) You gotta lot of people here who respect you, Robby, respect your work.

ROBBY: Good to know.

Conley: It's cause you care about this place. It's why you do what you do. It's who you are. But, people need the Church now more than ever right now. You can feel it. And, the Cardinal may not be perfect but we can't throw out all the good he's doing over a few bad apples. Should be indented to match Conley

If I understand these scenes correctly, the argument is this: If the Church does "good work in the community," "does a lot of good in this town," and "has done a lot of good for the city," then the people of the community, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, should not publicly attack or even embarrass the Church. The Church does good for the city. Therefore, the people of the community should not smear the reputation of the Church. Put this way, the argument sounds plausible.

But, what the argument means in this particular situation is: Since the Church does good things in the community, the community should ignore the fact that more than 200 priests have sexually molested well over one thousand children in the Boston area. And, the community should ignore the fact that a Cardinal of the Church aided in the sexual abuse of those children by allowing known pedophiles to move from one parish to another. Put in these more stark terms, it is difficult to imagine how anyone would accept the argument.

What Do Institutions in the Community Expect of Religion

Now let me turn to the expectations of the institution of a free press for the place of religion (the Church) in the community. We might expect here that we would simply look for comments by the *Spotlight* team regarding the place of the Church, much as we looked for comments by the Church to indicate its expectations for the community. For several reasons, however, finding the expectations of the *Spotlight* team (or the institution of a free press) for the Church takes us on a different path.

First, throughout the movie many members of The Globe staff seem to accept as their own the Church's expectations for the community. In the scenes noted earlier, when Marty Baron is asking the staff about follow up on the Geoghan case, he continually meets resistance. "He said. She said." Garabedian is "a bit of a crank." The documents you want are "under seal" by the court. "You want to sue the Church?" And so on. This means that many of the comments by The Globe staff do not reflect the expectations of a free press for the Church.

Second, since the *Spotlight* team is different from the general staff of the newspaper, we might look at what

the *Spotlight* staff has to say (representing the institution of a free press) about their expectations for the Church or the expected place of the Church. The focus of the *Spotlight* team, however, is on the project at hand. And they must stay focused on that project in order to bring it to a successful completion. This means that the *Spotlight* team does not spend its time discussing the nature of a free press or what the expectation of a free press might be for the Church.

Third, the institution of a free press is quite different in design than the hierarchy of the Church. There is no Pope to rule over a free press. This means that the expectations of a free press rely in large measure on the individuals that make up the institution, rather than the structure of the institution. What if Mary Baron had not continued to press his case in the face of resistance from The Globe staff? What if the publisher had not given Marty the green light to “sue the Church?” What if any member of the *Spotlight* team had not been as diligent as they were or as persistent as they were?

Given these difficulties, how will we determine the expected place of religion for the institution of a free press? When Robby explains to Marty Baron the nature of *Spotlight*, he says that it is “a four person investigative team.” He also says that “we keep our work confidential.” And when Marty responds to the Cardinal’s suggestion that the Church and The Globe “work together,” Marty says: “Personally I’m of the opinion that for the paper to best perform its function it needs to, uh, stand alone.”

What these brief exchanges suggest is that the role of a free press in society is to expose the truth, especially when the truth is that other institutions in society are corrupt. A free press must be independent of other institutions. A free press cannot “work together” with the very institutions it investigates. And, it must keep its work confidential because the persons or institutions that it investigates do not want to have the truth exposed. A free press plays an adversarial role in society, adversarial toward those institutions with something to hide from the public, whether those institutions are found in business, government, education, or religion.

We might also look at the behaviors of the *Spotlight* team to see what its expectations are for the Church. Many of the behaviors of *Spotlight* are behaviors we would expect from an institution that has as its purpose exposing the truth. Members of the team work hard. At one point Ben stops by Mike’s apartment, “this shithole,” where Mike is living alone. Ben chides him for not spending enough time with his wife. And, in another scene, Garabedian asks Mike if his wife minds him working so much.

In what is identified as “Summer Victim Montage,” Sacha and Matt are shown going out and about in JP, Dorchester, and Mission Hill, trying to find victims. They are often unsuccessful. When they do find a victim they are often not welcome. The simple leg work involved in finding the victims is time consuming and the results are often failure. Yet the *Spotlight* team persists.

The team not only works hard to “get the story,” but they also persist in the face of many obstacles. The documents they need are “under seal” by the courts. The lawyers who have handled abuse cases cannot talk about those cases. In many cases there are no public records of settlements between victims and the Church because the cases were settled out of court and everyone signed a non-disclosure agreement. The team has to find out where priests were at any given time and, although the Church kept directories of the priests, the record used code words like “sick leave” and “unassigned” to indicate that a priest is not working in any particular parish. The movie gives us many scenes of the *Spotlight* team working hard and facing obstacles, and these scenes are compatible with how we would ordinarily understand the behavior of a free press.

Given the material of the film, I think it is fair to say that the expected place of religion by a free press is to be an example of legal and morally correct behavior. This is just what the *Spotlight* team expects of the Church in the City of Boston.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do in this essay is to answer the questions posed by the Conference topic (What does the Church expect the place of the Boston community to be? And, what is the expected place of religion by the community's institutions, in this case, a free press?), as those questions are answered by the movie, *Spotlight*. In the movie, the Church expects preferential treatment by members of the community. It expects to do what no other institution would be allowed to do, namely, deal with the sexual abuse of children without protecting children and without the public finding out about the misdeeds of the Church. The Church expects no stain on its reputation. And the reason for this expectation on the part of the Church is that the Church "does good work in the community."

The expectation of a free press for the Church, however, cannot accommodate the Church's expectation for the community. A free press expects the Church to behave both legally and morally. It may even expect the Church to be an example to the community of legal and moral behavior. When the Church does not behave legally or morally, when the Church is corrupt, a free press will expose to the public that misbehavior so that the Church can be held accountable. A free press has the same expectation for other institutions in the community as well—business, government, education, law enforcement, etc.—and it cannot abandon that general expectation in the case of the Church. It cannot give the Church the preferential treatment that the Church expects from the community.

Beyond the Story

At the end of the movie there are two interesting questions that we might ask. The story of the film is limited to the Boston community. But, are there other similar stories to be told? The answer comes from the film, but not from the *Spotlight* story. At the end of the film, a list appears on screen. It is a list of more than one hundred communities in the United States where "major abuse scandals have been uncovered." This list is followed by another list of over one hundred communities in more than thirty different countries "where major abuse scandals have been uncovered." From these lists we see that the Catholic Church of Boston is only the tip of the iceberg.

The second question is: Do other religions or religious organizations have expectations for their communities similar to those of the Church in Boston? What does the Church of Latter Day Saints expect of the people of Utah? What do orthodox Jews expect of the State of Israel or the City of Jerusalem? What does the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice expect of the people of Saudi Arabia? What does the Supreme Leader of Iran expect of the citizens of Iran? If we were to explore these and other religious communities, my suspicion is that we would find that religion in its many forms often has an expectation of preferential treatment by the communities in which it exists. After all, many religions understand the laws of God to supersede the laws of man. So, many religions may have the expectation of preferential treatment, not only the Catholic Church. And, that preferential treatment calls for the same scrutiny of religion by a free press that we find in *Spotlight*.