



Tuesday, February 13, 2007

PBS OMBUDSMAN

by topic...

The Ombudsman Column

Ombudsman's Mailbag

By Michael Getler

JANUARY 18, 2007

Two PBS offerings this week, both of them on Tuesday evening, Jan. 16 — a 90-minute Frontline documentary provocatively titled "Hand of God," and a 30-minute interview with President Bush by Jim Lehrer on the nightly NewsHour — produced a fair amount of quick-reaction and divided-opinion e-mail.

This is not surprising since there are not too many more controversial or divisive subjects than the revelation of numerous child sexual abuse scandals that rocked the Catholic Church from the mid-1990s until just a few years ago, and the heated debate now engulfing the country and its president over the U.S. invasion of Iraq almost four years ago.

Both of these presentations, oddly, have one thing in common; the viewer thinks he or she has heard it all before. Yet their importance lies, in my view, in both of them succeeding in advancing our understanding in some fashion about two enormously important subjects. In both cases, the lack of commercial interruption, central to the concept of public broadcasting, enhances the power of the documentary and the interview.

Taking Advantage

"Hand of God" is uncomfortable to watch, but it is definitely worth seeing because it focuses relentlessly on the very personal dimensions and scars left on what had been a very devout youngster and his very devout family. Rather than the more well-known story of hundreds of priests caught up in the unfolding scandal of abuse of children in their parishes for decades — a scandal that eventually led to the resignation of Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law in 2002 and new policies to deal with such abuses — this one focuses on a single man and his family. And that man, Paul Cultrera, who is now 57 and was abused as a young altar boy in the 1960s, happens to have a younger brother, Joe, who is now a top-notch documentary filmmaker.

Some of the e-mails sent to the ombudsman's office were sharply critical. One viewer called it an "appalling and hateful anti-Catholic spectacle." As I said, this is a very disturbing film and one can understand how it would be very painful for Catholics to view. And the film does not go out of its way to place things in any broader, balancing context. Yet it struck me that the side story of this film that focuses on the local neighborhood church, where faith and morals remained intact and where his family still worshipped (until the local hierarchy decided to shut it down) managed to convey the broader, understated message of the church that offers faith, community, solace and good works.

Mr. President, Welcome . . .

As for the Lehrer interview with President Bush, I thought this was the best one I have seen on television. I thought the questions were good, probing and captured a good deal of public, and now Congressional, attitudes challenging the war and the president. At the same time, I thought Bush presented himself well, in a more revealing and candid fashion — a function, in my view, of good questioning — certainly than in his more formal addresses to the nation about Iraq, including the one just a few nights before.

There are so many additional questions that one would want the president to be asked — about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, the link of that deterioration with the focus on Iraq, the failure to get Bin Laden, the enormous costs, the contractual fraud, the question of whether the U.S. commitment will last for many more years.

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Several of the letter writers, again, not surprisingly, found fault with the interview. Certainly there are frustrations. But for the time allotted, I didn't think there were wasted moments. And the interview generated a fair amount of news, including a **full column** in *The Washington Post* that captured several highlights.

During the course of the interview, there was one important point made by the president where I wished there had been a follow-up. It leaped out at me, and also to one viewer who also picked it up immediately. It goes to the issue of fact-finding, or what newspapers sometimes call "truth-squading" official statements.

In his speech to the nation on Jan. 10, and again in the NewsHour interview, the president invoked the attack in February 2006, on the Golden Mosque in Samarra, one of the holiest Shiite shrines, as an explanation of why sectarian violence started "spiraling out of control," as he said in the interview, and had "overwhelmed the political gains the Iraqis had made," as he said in his speech.

There is no doubt that this was an important event. Yet, in the immediate aftermath of his speech, two important newspaper articles — one on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* on Jan. 12 by the respected security analyst **Anthony Cordesman**, and the other on Jan. 14 by the also respected reporter **Mark Seibel** of McClatchy Newspapers, sharply disputed this timing and rationale offered by Bush for failures of U.S. actions, or lack of action.

History Reinvented

"This statement," Cordesman wrote referring to the president's speech, "reinvents history. The level of sectarian violence had built up steadily during 2005. The rise of sectarian and ethnic conflict was a major factor long before President Bush announced the previous strategy at the end of 2005, before the attack . . . on the Golden Mosque . . . an event whose importance the administration sharply played down at the time."

Seibel, who provided some of the best pre-war reporting when part of the now defunct Knight Ridder newspapers, wrote that "the president's account understates by at least 15 months when Shiite death squads began targeting Sunni politicians and clerics. It also ignores the role that Iranian-backed Shiite groups had in death squad activities prior to the Samarra bombing. Blaming the start of sectarian violence on the Golden Dome bombing risks policy errors because it underestimates the depth of sectarian hatred in Iraq and overlooks the conflict's root causes."

Here is a sampling of the letters.

About that 'Hand of God'

Talk about journalistic integrity out the window! Not only did Frontline's "Hand of God" caustically, tastelessly indict every member of the Catholic hierarchy, it also made not even the slightest mention that the vast majority of Catholic hierarchy, from parish priests right up to the Pope himself, are uprighteous and true to the demands of their vocations.

Gloria Duenwald, Hoven, SD

The documentary on the Boston diocese was a diatribe about the Catholic Church, the hierarchy etc. I did not see one comment that would reflect favorably on any aspect of the church. What would Pope Benedict have to do with the story? The featured man is obsessed and it seems to consume his whole life. After 40 years he needs to move on — I mean get real — there must be other aspects to his life. Many of his comments were self serving. The whole story could have been told in 20 minutes unless PBS is on an anti-Catholic kick.

Grand Rapids, MI

I watched your program about the priests tonight and must say it made me cry. I am a 71-year-old woman that went to Saint Joseph's grammar school in Sacramento, CA. Whatever things were not done to me to humiliate and scare me at St. Joseph's were certainly done in High School when I boarded and roomed at Holy Rosary in Woodland, CA. I can only sympathize with any altar boys that were molested by priests or nuns, and tell you that little girls were not treated any different.

Sacramento, CA

Viewed "Hand of God" tonight on PBS; excellent!! I suggest you repeat the program several times so as to inform as many people as possible.

John Alrich, Santa Barbara, CA

I just finished watching the Frontline episode entitled "Hand of God." It was a completely biased piece of journalism with no balance whatsoever. This program just further enforces the view that PBS is a very biased organization which panders exclusively to the liberal point of view.

Wilsonville, OR

Is There Another Agenda Here?

Tonight on Frontline you aired a documentary on the sexual abuse of priests in the Boston area and it was nothing less than an appalling and hateful anti-Catholic spectacle. The whole scandal is a very tragic affair for all concerned, it goes without saying. But the media uses it as a vicious attack against the Catholic Church in general, against the wonderful, dedicated and innocent clergy who are by far the great majority and against the Catholic religion itself and everything it stands for. It is like lynching a whole family for the crimes of a few members. Would you dare produce a similar program about the Jews or Muslims? No! That would be anti-Semitic or hate propaganda and you would be afraid of violent Muslim reaction around the world. Why is the Catholic clergy singled out when sexual abuse is 100 times worse in the public school system as well as in every other profession and religious group? I in no way condone or minimize this horrible scandal in the Church and my heart goes out to the true victims as well as those who are falsely accused or whose reputations are tarnished by the crimes of certain priests (fewer than 3%, a percentage far less than any other professional or religious group). What is the real agenda behind this anti-Catholicism, the politically correct bigotry that is so rampant in our sex crazed, decadent western culture? Is it because the Catholic Church is one of the few institutions left that condemns the twisted sexual obsessions and perversions in our society along with abortion, the ultimate child abuse, euthanasia and all immorality?

Jean-Paul Laniel, Pierrefonds, Montreal

Thank you for showing "Hand of God," a documentary about one family's experience of clergy sexual abuse and the hierarchy's deceitful and arrogant response. As a practicing Catholic, I believe that this sort of truth-telling is like Jesus cleansing the temple. I hope that we will hear his voice and harden not our hearts.

Robert Brown, Atlanta, GA

The topic of clergy sexual abuse is not only a timely topic but one that most people, including average Catholics in the pew, do not understand. This film captures the truth in such a way that Catholics and others can begin to see the terrible damage and destruction molestation leaves in its wake. The arrogance and systemic clericalism creating the milieu conducive to covering up such abuse is depicted in an honest and forthright manner. By their own words and behavior, the hierarchy of the church clearly demonstrate their lack of compassionate concern of those harmed. The well being of the "flock" is of little concern compared to their own narcissistic needs, career ladder, and financial concerns.

Maryville, TN

Thank you so much for airing "Hand of God." It was such a moving story. I am not Catholic but have been saddened by the abuses in the church. I feel airing the truth is a step in the right direction of putting the blame where it belongs.

Princeton, IN

Congratulations re your excellent documentary entitled "Hand of God." I thought only Toledo had a priest problem . . . guess it is worldwide.

Toledo, OH

The Frontline episode entitled "Hand of God" about clergy sexual abuse and the church's cover-up is the best I've seen on this subject. It should be aired at least once a month so all Catholics will see it and put pressure on those in power to admit the truth and repent — and actually do the right thing. Maybe then healing can begin.

Patricia Y., La Mesa, CA

Viewing the Frontline story of Catholic priest molestation as revealed by the man who kept it secret for 30 years, was very painful for me. I was molested in June 1946, as an 11-year-old, by a guest priest who visited St. James Church in Wilkinsburg, PA, recruiting children for a 5-day "Retreat" (if you can imagine!) which was conducted at St. Vincent College in Latrobe, PA. My matriarchal Catholic mother signed me up for it and sent me packing. The molestation occurred during a recreational swim in a lake on the campus. It was my first sexual experience, and so traumatic I didn't tell anybody about it until 2004, 58 years later, and then only to my older sister. As a 71-year-old man, I can attest to a similar experience that the victim of your story endured and the derelict response of church hierarchy to quash any and all attempts to reveal its ages-old dirty little secret. What's worse is knowing that this pedophilia has been happening for centuries with the full knowledge and participation of Catholic clergy at all levels of its hierarchy.

Victor Kelley, Monroeville, PA

I am writing regarding your very anti-Catholic content of pretty much all of your programming. I was once anti-Catholic and am familiar with these underlying tactics.

Your special on Martin Luther was entirely from an anti-Catholic perspective and did not include the sorrow that Martin Luther had for his actions towards the end of his life. In his own writings he stated that he had caused division and that there were as many churches as there were heads within the church.

Then last night on "Hand of God," you show Joe's film which is full of homosexual priests abusing post pubescent young men and never mention the word homosexual. I have written Joe several times and he is saying that the problem was not homosexuality, yet all of his examples are of homosexual acts with young men, not girls, ever. In fact the real problem here is homosexuality. The problem that surfaced later was the hierarchy of the Boston diocese trying to save face, and that was an abuse, but not the real problem. The problem lies within the realms of the illegal acts of homosexuality, which were illegal in the USA during the period they occurred.

Omaha, NE

"Hand of God" was a story that should have been told years ago. It is my feeling that there is a cancer in the Catholic Church that tangles itself among the clergy and the problem has not been addressed properly. The fact that the Pope elevates the position of one of the enablers makes us wonder just what the position of the church is regarding this situation.

J. Browman, San Jose, CA

More on God's Hand

After viewing Frontline: The Hand of God, I was left with a strong sense of an anti-Catholic agenda. I will not deny that the Catholic Church has had its share of horrendous scandals, but since credible research has shown that this kind of scandal is widespread in all strata of social, religious and education institutions, I question why PBS coverage seems to be limited to the sins of Catholics. Perhaps Catholics are the last group left in the U.S. that can be stereotyped without fear of political incorrectness. While I can understand the reaction of the father of the victim saying that priests are nothing but a bunch of hypocrites (or something to that affect), I cannot imagine a national program allowing a similar statement about any other group of religious/spiritual leaders. I also thought the camera was worked in a way that totally disrespected our sacred symbols, especially the Eucharist and the crucifix.

Gerard Cooney, Stroudsburg, PA

Excellent production except failed to put in perspective abuse problems (which are horrible) vs. the total church and all the good priest and all the positives and well being of the church. The uninformed, after watching this production, would never consider the Catholic Church, as a teacher/leader in their faith. What a shame. Putting stories in perspective after watching today's media presentations is so important.

Gerald Golden, Holt, MO

I have nothing against the Roman Catholic Church and for PBS to justify a hate-themed concept like I watched in "Hand of God" was uncalled for. Our Christian Church is a well honorably reputed and nobly established organization. Why not show how they run schools and hospitals around the world and attempt to do scriptures' directives.

Miguel Reyes, El Paso, TX

I cannot tell you how disappointed I am in your running the story against the Catholic Church. Granted we are very flawed, but the number of pedophiles is miniscule compared to the good we have done. I hope you can show a balanced portrayal of my beautiful church by showing just one of the many things the Catholics have done.

Clarice Osborne, Roseburg, OR

Interviewing the President

Briefly, I was both offended & embarrassed by the responses Bush gave to the interview Jim L. did on tonight's show. Jim did a great job. Bush came off as someone who has no idea what we are doing in Iraq or the Middle East, no idea what "winning" means & gave us no substantive reason for us to continue on this failed venture. His war is insanity.

Charles Brown, Naples, FL

What happened to the journalistic integrity that once made PBS and NewsHour great? No longer do the journalists ask hard questions of our government officials or of corporate officers. Is it because corrupt Republicans now 'manage' PBS? What a pathetic spectacle the NewsHour has become! Jim Lehrer allowed Bush to tie Al-Qaeda to Iraq — again — even though it is a LIE.

Gayle L., Bellingham, WA