Opinion



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by Michael Sean Winters

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On their website, Project Veritas states that their mission is to "[i]nvestigate and expose corruption, dishonesty, self-dealing, waste, fraud and other misconduct in both public and private institutions in order to achieve a more ethical and transparent society."

This week, the tables were turned when The Washington Post revealed that someone trying to spread a false story to the news organization was seen entering the Project Veritas office in Mamaroneck, New York. Project Veritas refused to disclose whether the woman worked for them. Further investigation by the Post indicated that this was not the first time the woman, Jaime T. Phillips, tried to insinuate herself and her agenda into their organization.

Project Veritas should be closed down. Anyone funding its operations, or using its products, makes themselves complicit with the very worst kinds of public distortion and malicious political activity. I have long been suspicious of any group that fails to see the difference between truth and falsehood, between journalism and propaganda. Project Veritas not only fails to see such distinctions, it consciously rejects them, seeking to expose "dishonesty" while practicing it, and in the process committing the worst kind of public fraud.

In this latest episode, Ms. Phillips claimed to have had sexual relations with GOP Senate candidate Roy Moore, relations that ended in her procuring an abortion with his insistence. Obviously, it was an explosive charge, and the Post let her know they would need to corroborate it. Parts of her story did not add up, and the Post discovered a GoFundMe page in which the woman said she was relocating to New York to work "in the conservative media movement to combat the lies and deceipt [sic] of the liberal MSM [mainstream media]." They followed her to the offices of Project Veritas.

The obvious significance of the charges, had they been aired by the Post and then found to be false, would have been to discredit the Post's earlier reporting about the alleged sexual misconduct by Moore. Indeed, in this weeks' long cultural reckoning with the pervasiveness of sexual misconduct by men in positions of authority, I have worried that someone would lodge a false accusation, akin to the Rolling Stone story about the University of Virginia, and that such a false allegation would undercut the effort to hold men accountable for their reprehensible behavior. In addition, in the case of Moore, it beggars belief, literally, that so many self-proclaimed Christian

activists are indifferent to the idea of an alleged pedophile entering the U.S. Senate.

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Project Veritas's founder, James O'Keefe, is described on the group's website as "an award-winning journalist and writer." This is a bit like describing Leni Riefenstahl as "an award-winning film maker" without any further elaboration. O'Keefe is most famous for undercover tapes of Planned Parenthood leaders discussing the sale of body parts from aborted children. Those tapes displayed just how indifferent to human life some executives at Planned Parenthood had become. But other episodes were shadier, involved racial stereotyping, and you only have to look at the website to realize the group is too full of themselves for their own good. They forgot one basic truth: Pride goeth before the fall.

That was not the only truth Project Veritas forgot. "At a time when it is harder and harder for the public to distinguish real from fake news, there is a special place in hell reserved for those who conspire to destroy trust in one of our great journalistic institutions," says Mark Silk, a former reporter and editorial writer at the Atlanta Journal Constitution, and now a professor at Trinity College. "Their goal is nothing less than to undermine the role of the press as guarantor of civic health envisioned by the founders of the country and enshrined in the Constitution." Silk is teaching a course this semester on journalism and the public good. He also heads the Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life where I am a senior fellow.

Conservative Catholics should be especially keen to distance themselves from Project Veritas. The group and O'Keefe have been cited approvingly by, for example, The American Catholic, LifeSite News and Church Militant. The irony is that these are the groups usually complaining about the "dictatorship of relativism."

"One of the most worrisome aspects of America's polarization, a polarization that has been both radicalized and normalized by President Trump, is the withering appeal of real objective truth, *veritas* indeed, in public life," says Stephen Schneck, former director of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies. "And now here's an organization called Veritas that's ironically trying to normalize Trumpian post-truth."

Fordham theologian Charles Camosy worries about the impact of these latest revelations on the pro-life movement. "That the traditional pro-life movement could be associated with such tactics not only shows just how far we've drifted for our respect for the truth, it shows how much we are willing to sacrifice to give Republicans political power," Camosy told me. "It is yet another huge, very public story which undermines the movement's witness in ways that are so profound it is impossible to calculate the damage that has been done. Imagine a young woman, skeptical of abortion, but focused on the culture's awakening to sexual violence reading this story. Though she might be sympathetic with pro-lifers on the merits of the arguments, it would be virtually impossible for her to identify with the movement."

One wishes that Project Veritas would lose its funding, shutter its doors, and slink off into obscurity. That is unlikely. Mr. O'Keefe has indicated he will continue his work, but it is not journalism. "We live in unbelievable times and investigative reporting doesn't really happen very often anymore," he told students at Southern Methodist University this week. Really? This is a golden age of investigative journalism. Every day, reporters at The New York Times or The Washington Post or other outlets break important stories. Journalists have every reason to be proud of our profession this past year, but O'Keefe is not a journalist: He is a hack and a propagandist, one who harms the causes he espouses and tarnishes everything he touches.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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