

Publisher pulls all copies of controversial new book on Church of England

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CANTERBURY, England (RNS) A new book examining the decline of the Church England was withdrawn from circulation by one of the U.K.'s leading publishing houses, Bloomsbury Publishing.

*That Was The Church That Was: How the Church of England Lost the English People* was supposed to be released on February 11.

Religious affairs correspondents from Britain's leading newspapers were preparing to review the book by Lancaster University professor Linda Woodhead and Andrew Brown, who writes regularly for the *Guardian*.

Then Bloomsbury issued a statement saying it was recalling all review copies of the book and asking that reviewers "immediately return the copy received."

Bloomsbury said only that it has received a legal complaint. Asked to clarify, its publicity agent, Lucy Clayton, said: "I only know that there's been a legal complaint. I cannot comment further."

Earlier, Bloomsbury sent copies of the book to religious affairs correspondents with a note describing the book by Brown and Woodhead as a "relentlessly honest" account of the disappearance of the Church of England from the center of public life.

Speculation mounted that the book 's publication was pulled because it contains a disputed passage about the sexual activities of various Church of England bishops and other leading lights in the Anglican community.

Writing in the weekly magazine the *Spectator*, Damian Thompson said the book contained rumors and speculation about the sexual identity of key figures in the established church, whose membership figures are at an all-time low.

Thompson describes the withdrawn book as “a compendium of [the church’s] most malicious gossip.”

*That Was The Church That Was* tells us something important about English Christianity, but not what the authors imagine,” Thompson writes. “It is the sort of scandal-obsessed diatribe that dying religious communities—one thinks of the Catholic Church in Italy or Ireland—are too weak and compromised to fend off.”