**Religion on an Ordinary Day in UK News: Christianity, Secularism and Diversity[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Introduction**

In a *Times* feature on Hanif Kureishi (17.12.19, *Arts*, p.7), the author of the screenplay *My Beautiful Launderette* criticizes the response to Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* arguing that it was a disaster for Muslims in the UK. Adopting a liberal perspective, Kureishi advocates freedom of speech in the form of artistic licence, criticizing a culture of ‘no offence’. Yet ‘religious radicalism’, he suggests, is also an issue alongside the rise of the far-right. Although the interview is nuanced, with Kureishi discussing shifting and ‘multiple identities’, ultimately what *The Times* presents is its ideal assimilated ethnic subject in modern Britain, an ‘enlightened’ and ‘moderate’ Muslim. This is what religion looks like on an ordinary day in the British press in 2019 – at once diverse, tolerant and sympathetic whilst critical of Islam in any extreme form, where freedom of speech is a secular sacred value that is invoked in any discussion which seeks to critique Muslims. But how does this play out more widely and over time? As part of a wider international study (this issue), this chapter provides an in-depth analysis of how some of the UK’s press reports on religion on an ‘ordinary’ day in 2013, 2014 and 2015. Preceding the UK EU referendum and the election of Trump (2016), it allows us to consider the UK’s representation of religion (and identity) in a transitional period, and how far the politics of populism was a disruption or a continuation of popular political discourses.

In the time period, the Church of England continues to be the established church in this part of the UK whereby Christianity is institutionalized through, for example, the monarch’s dual role as head of state and head of the Church. In this sense, the Church of England has a significant role in public life and senior figures such as the Archbishop of Canterbury play a part in this. However, processes of secularization and patterns of immigration, increasing the diversity of the UK, have put pressure on the church-state relationship. In the context of a multicultural, multi-faith society, the heir to the throne, Prince Charles proffered to be ‘defender of faith’ rather of solely the Anglican church. The apparent ‘return’ of religion (due to religious diversity) is complicated by statistics on religiosity that show this to be in decline.

The last published census in the UK was 2011 so is somewhat dated but the Office of National Statistics estimates that the UK’s population in 2018 was 66, 435,600.[[2]](#footnote-2) In 2011, 59.3% identified as Christian (33.2m) and 4.8% as Muslim (2.7m) although other estimates of the Muslim population suggest this could be nearer 4m.[[3]](#footnote-3) Of the other established religious groups: 817,000 people identified as Hindu (1.5% of the population); 423,000 as Sikh (0.8 %); 263,000 as Jewish (0.5%) and 248,000 people as Buddhist (0.4%). 240,000 people identified with religions outside these categories including Paganism and Spiritualism. Around a quarter of the population said they had no religion (14.1m). More recently, Voas and Bruce (2019) completed a comprehensive analysis of the British Social Attitudes survey’s data on religiosity and religious attitudes gathered at several points from 1983 to 2018.[[4]](#footnote-4) They argue that the UK continues to secularize, partly due to generational factors whereby old people associated themselves with a Church and young people tended not to be affiliated. They argue that this is not just a disassociation from religious institutions, but that British people are becoming more confident in their non-belief. Only 38% identify as Christian, 66% do not attend church except on special occasions, 52% are not religious (are not affiliated to any religion), 33% describe themselves as very non-religious and 26% as atheists. The authors argue that contemporary spirituality has not risen dramatically in relation to population growth and tends to fulfil psychological and well-being functions. In terms of diversity, there has been an increase in identification with non-Christian religions (to 9% of the population).[[5]](#footnote-5) Muslims make up 5% (ONS) to 6% (BSA). Non-Christian religions also show higher levels of both religiosity and religious practice. In 2018, the indication was that the British were becoming more tolerant of this diversity, particularly young people, although wary of ‘extremism’. While these statistics appear to support the secularization thesis popular in sociology from 1960s-1980s, Knott at al. (2013, p.19) have argued that more people in the UK identify with a religion than not and the statistics show a complex picture, that the UK is ‘simultaneously Christian, secular and religiously diverse’.

Over the past 30 years, the UK has similarly been unsettled by the politics of neoliberalism and the acceleration of globalization that accompanied it. The increasing movement of people across the globe has destabilized identities and certainties, and led to a reassertion of nationalisms demonstrated by the EU referendum result, popularly known as BREXIT (2016). These realities first began to emerge in the late 1980’s in the UK, when the Rushdie Affair catapulted the religion and culture (of the Muslim Other) into the public eye. Divisions along cultural lines began to emerge and the scapegoating and demonization of Muslims (particularly by the UK’s conservative press) has furthered the politicization of Muslims, increasing racial tensions (Poole, 2002). Conflicts between far-right and anti-racist groups in 2001 led the then Labour Government to replace the post-war policies of multiculturalism with ‘community cohesion’ (Holohan, 2006). An anxiety about the ‘self-segregation’ of communities led to a policy of integration that has been strengthened by subsequent Governments. In the context of global terrorism, counter-terrorism measures such as the PREVENT strategy have further marginalized and emphasized Muslims in the UK as ‘suspect communities’ (Hickman et al., 2012).

The Coalition Government of 2010-15 (of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties) and the majority Conservative Government post-2015 have continued and reinforced these approaches. This, combined with the negative representation of Muslims, immigrants and refugees in the UK’s mainstream media, has resulted in the normalization of Islamophobia. Previous studies have shown that Islam has had a growing presence in the UK’s media, interpreted through a negative lens, with only Christianity in general – that provides the backdrop to many stories, a result of its Christian heritage – rivalling the volume of coverage (Knott et al., 2013). Islam in the news also acts as a foil to Christianity; in this framing, it is Christians (and others) who are persecuted by oppressive Islamic rites. While research into the representation of Islam in the media has grown correspondingly (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017), there have been far fewer studies of coverage of religion in general. In the UK the most significant study comparing 1982-3 to 2008-9 found that, although traditional religious broadcasting may be on the decline, along with a drop in the number of religious correspondents, religion, driven by global and local events, has become central to contemporary political and social questions (Knott et al., 2013; Mitchell & Gower, 2012). While this may not constitute a form of ‘resacralisation’ (some of the coverage is critical of religion) (Knott et al., 2013, p. 7), it demonstrates the importance of discourses about religion in contemporary media content. In this context of heightened political and economic uncertainty, of the growth of Orientalism and nationalism, of defensive Christianity and secular liberalism, what visibility does the UK’s news media give to religion on the three days in question?

Methodological Note

As part of a wider project to compare the representation of religion on an ‘ordinary’ day internationally, the methodology (and conceptual framework) for this study is explained in greater detail in both the Introduction (Poole and Weng) and in Michels and Helland’s article in this special issue. However, to provide some context here, 17 September was chosen on the three years under study as a random day that would not be biased by any seasonal or special events. All countries chose a national and local newspaper as well as a free paper such as the *Metro* to provide a range of coverage. In the UK we chose *The Times* as our national newspaper due to its more central (political) positioning between other ‘quality’ newspapers and for continuity, as the author had already participated in a large study of the UK media’s representation of religion in which the newspaper was included (Knott et al., 2013). We chose the *Manchester Evening News* as our local newspaper to avoid a London bias (which can often be seen in national news) and as Britain’s largest city in the North. Although this therefore provides a partial view of the UK’s press, the results are in line with previous studies of the representation of religion (Knott et al., 2013).

The study used primarily quantitative content analysis, selecting all articles (the unit of analysis) that mentioned religion as a main issue or passing reference in the print newspapers on that day. The articles were then analyzed qualitatively and representative articles were selected in the following categories across all countries: Global, national and regional stories; stories about conventional and common religion, and the secular sacred. These categories drew on a previous study (Knott et al., 2013) which was familiar to all participants and offered a conceptual framework for analyzing institutionalized as well as popular religion (the supernatural), and sacred values (religion-like).

**The Three Days in the UK**

**17 September 2013** Globally, the traditional news values of conflict and terrorism are evident as the story of a mass shooting in America makes the front pages (Washington Navy yard) and the world hears of the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons in Syria. Nationally, following the global financial crash of 2008/9, the banking system is still subject to scrutiny with stories of banking blunders, fraud, tax avoidance and derivatization. Debates about the place of the niqab in public life resume as a judge bans a defendant in a trial from wearing the veil in court. Austerity is a regular feature of coverage and local news juxtaposes Conservative Party cuts with its lavish Manchester conference.

On **17 September 2014** the impending Scottish Referendum dominates the news given the possible break-up of the UK (this took place on 18 September 2014). What it means to be British is therefore very much a point of debate in this year. The police are under scrutiny as an inquiry investigates a high-profile scandal where hundreds of children, mostly in care, were groomed and abused over many years in the Northern town of Rotherham. The men accused were mostly Asian which resulted in debates about how these men were covered in the news (both nationally and locally). Globally, an Auschwitz guard, age 93, is put on trial for murder; and ISIS beheadings are in the news as a British man, Alan Henning, is threatened with (and subsequently dealt) this fate. This attracts the attention of both national and local news coverage. Local news highlights the Southern London-centric bias of the UK as it investigates whether Parliament could be moved to Manchester. All these stories demonstrate the prevalence of identity politics.

On **17 September** **2015** the European refugee crisis hits the headlines, no less so on this day, as Hungary unleashes tear gas and water cannons on refugees and the UK expects the first of its agreed quota. The race to be presidential candidate is already putting Donald Trump at the centre of coverage. The media reports on the arrest of a schoolboy in the US, when his homemade clock is mistaken for a bomb, and a powerful earthquake hits Chile. Nationally, the media continues its attack on the left-wing Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, while local coverage is more sympathetic. The political identity struggles that have shifted politics to the right in 2016, therefore, are very much evident in the coverage of the events of these three days, over these three years.

**Summary of the Newspapers**

***Media Landscape***

In the UK, the mainstream or legacy media (TV and newspapers) operates within a mixed-market model of funding comprised of mostly private organizations alongside the publicly owned BBC and Channel 4. While the BBC is publicly funded by a licence fee (although increasingly under threat), Channel 4 is funded by its own commercial activities (advertising), the other channels, likewise. Digitalization has allowed access to a multichannel environment through various retailers and offered free through *Freeview*. Newspapers in the UK comprise of five ‘quality’ newspapers and six tabloids (and their sister Sunday papers) with the addition of the *I* which is a middle-market centrist paper. There are a few freesheets like the *Metro* (see below). All but three of these national papers are centre-right (by the nature of their funding) excluding *The Guardian, The Independent* (online only since 2016) and *The Mirror,* and supported the Conservative party in the last election (2019). There is a significant regional press although readership is in decline. All these outlets have an online presence, and most of the quality newspapers now charge subscriptions as their funding model as print circulation declines, excluding *The Guardian* which partially relies on crowdfunding as open source media. The tabloid platforms rely on advertising. This ‘national’ media exists within an increasingly globalized and diverse marketplace of subscription TV and online news sources often shared through social media platforms known as a ‘hybrid media environment’ (Chadwick, 2017). While this has fragmented audiences substantially, there is a still a market for national news, as a trusted source of information, although this may be distributed in a variety of ways.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This section introduces the UK newspapers: a centre-right national paper, *The Times*; a free national paper, distributed through the rail networks, *The Metro;* and a local city newspaper, the *Manchester Evening News* (which from now on will be referred to as the MEN). Each of these will be dealt with in more detail in their own section but firstly, a short overview of coverage.

Unsurprisingly, domestic news dominates the UK papers overall but with *The Times* paying more attention to international issues which are largely absent from the local newspaper, the *MEN* (Table 1). Hard news dominates and yet the *Metro*, with its focus on entertainment, devotes an equal amount of space to features. In the *MEN*, advertisements are just as likely as news to include religion (Table 2). Religion appears equally as a main story or passing reference in articles overall, with *The Times* making more passing references to this whilst, if it is included in the *MEN*, it is more likely to be as the main story (Table 3). Conventional religion is much more common overall (Table 4), yet the *MEN* is more likely to feature common religion than *The Times* despite being a much smaller newspaper. This focus (on conventional religion) is reflected in the dominant topics of coverage overall which are Islam, and religion in general, followed by Protestantism, Roman Catholicism then Judaism (Table 5). It should be noted that most of the references to religion in general are Christian (a reflection of the Christian heritage of the UK), so this would be the highest topic of coverage if combined with Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The rise in coverage of Islam is political and has been explored elsewhere (Poole, 2002; Knott et al., 2013). Other significant topics are spilt across the papers - *The Times’* treatment of the secular as religious-like, the tabloid focus on gambling in the *MEN*, and inclusion of horoscopes (fortune-telling) in this and the *Metro*.

Table 1: Volume of articles: International/Domestic stories in UK newspapers 2013-15

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *The Times* | *Metro* | *MEN* | *Total* |
| Domestic News | 41 | 24 | 46 | 111 |
| International | 50 | 13 | 1 | 64 |
| Mixed | 27 | 12 | 2 | 41 |

Table 2: Volume of articles: Genres in UK newspapers 2013-15

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *The Times* | *Metro* | *MEN* | *Total* |
| Advertisement | 3 | 3 | 14 | 20 |
| Cartoons | 3 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| Editorial | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Features | 10 | 11 | 6 | 27 |
| Front page | 2 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Images | 3 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| News | 63 | 12 | 10 | 85 |
| News in brief | 4 | 8 | 4 | 16 |
| Obituary | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Opinion | 10 | 0 | 1 | 11 |
| Public Reader Responses | 2 | 7 | 3 | 12 |
| Reviews | 6 | 4 | 3 | 13 |
| Sports | 8 | 2 | 7 | 17 |

Table 3: Religion as either the *main issue* OR *passing reference* in an article in UK newspapers 2013-15

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *The Times* | *Metro* | *MEN* | *Total* |
| Main Issue | 50 | 25 | 33 | 108 |
| Passing Reference | 68 | 24 | 16 | 108 |

Table 4: Frequency of articles within the categories: Conventional and Common Religion, Secular Sacred, 2013-15.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *The Times* | *Metro* | *MEN* | *Total* |
| Conventional  | 83 | 35 | 27 | 145 |
| Common | 16 | 9 | 18 | 43 |
| Secular Sacred | 19 | 5 | 4 | 28 |

Table 5: Significant topics: UK news 2013-15 Table 6: Significant topics: UK news 2013-15

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Significant Topics | **as a main issues *or* passing reference** |  | When religion is the **main issue only** |  |
| Topic | Frequency Overall |  | Topic | Overall |
| IslamReligion General  | 4242 |  | Islam | 26 |
| Protestantism | 19 |  | Religion General | 24 |
| Roman Catholicism | 15 |  | Protestantism | 13 |
| Judaism | 9 |  | Judaism | 9 |
| Secular Sacred –Religion-Like | 7 |  | Roman Catholicism | 6 |
| GamblingFortune Telling | 66 |  | Fortune Telling | 5 |

***The Times***

*The Times* is one of the longest-standing newspapers in the UK (18th century) and is still considered part of the ‘quality press’. It is owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News UK (part of News Corporation) and has a conservative leaning.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the period from 2014 to 2019 its daily circulation rose slightly from 384,304 (2014)[[8]](#footnote-8) to 404,155 (2016)[[9]](#footnote-9) to 406,280, making it the UK’s biggest selling quality newspaper.[[10]](#footnote-10) According to *campaign, The Times*(and *The Sunday Times*)also have over 300,000 digital-only paid subscribers (out of 539,000 subscribers in total) and five million registered access users of its digital content*.*[[11]](#footnote-11)*The Times* has traditional news values which are evident in its focus on conventional religious topics (Table 7&8), which often feature in international news (Table 1). This corresponds with earlier studies of religion news in *The Times*, including the attention to Islam since it became politicized, and linked to security, in the wake of 9/11 (Poole, 2002; Knott et al., 2013).

Table 7: *The Times:* Significant topics Table 8: *The Times:* Significant topics 2013-15

2013-15

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Significant topics **as a main issues or passing reference** |  |  | When religion **is the main issue only** |  |
| Islam | 32 |  | Islam | 20 |
| Religion General | 14 |  | Religion General | 7 |
| Protestantism | 13 |  | Protestantism | 6 |
| Roman Catholicism | 7 |  | Secular Sacred – Religion-like | 4 |
| JudaismSecular Sacred – Religion-like | 66 |  | Roman Catholicism Judaism | 33 |

***The Metro***

The *Metro* is a free, daily, tabloid-style national newspaper distributed throughout the UK’s public transport services on weekdays only. It was founded in 1999 and is owned by the Daily Mail and General Trust group. Its circulation is on average 1.3m, making it the UK’s third largest daily (in 2019 this grew to 1.4m).[[12]](#footnote-12) It was launched to rival existing London newspaper the *London Evening Standard*. Although it has a large news section, a similar proportion of the newspaper is allocated to features, with a focus on entertainment, and this accounts for the advertising revenue it receives (120m in 2014). [[13]](#footnote-13) As a national tabloid, the *Metro* falls between the two other papers featured here, with a balance of international and national news, and conventional and common religious coverage (with more emphasis on the conventional) and more metaphorical references than *The Times*. Similar news topics (to *The Times*) appear on Islam, references are made to the religious identity or spirituality of celebrities, and much of the coverage has a populist angle and tone.[[14]](#footnote-14) The newspaper has similar news values and content to a middle-market UK tabloid such the DMG owned *Daily Mail* with a slightly lighter tone (and celebrity focus), given it is aimed at commuters.

Table 9: *Metro*: Significant Topics 2013-15 Table 10: *Metro*: Significant Topics 2013-15

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **As a main issue or passing reference** |  |  | When religion is **the main issue only** |  |
| Religion General | 13 |  | Religion GeneralIslam | 77 |
| Islam  | 8 |  | Fortune-TellingRoman Catholicism | 33 |
| Roman Catholicism | 4 |  | Protestantism | 2 |
| New Religious MovementsProtestantismFortune-telling | 333 |  |  |  |

***The Manchester Evening News* *(MEN)***

The *MEN* is a daily regional newspaper which covers the city of Manchester in the North West of England. According to the last census data (2011), Manchester had a population of 503,000, however, Greater Manchester, the areas around Manchester, included 2,682,528m people.[[15]](#footnote-15) This included a high proportion of people in a younger age group (25 - 44). Its population is fairly diverse with 66.7% being White, 14.4% Asian, and 8.6% Black. There is also a large Chinese community (2.7%) and residents of a mixed background (4.7%). 15.8% gave their religion as Muslim in the last census, compared to 5% in England, and 48.7% as Christian (England: 59.4%). At the time, Manchester had a higher unemployment rate than the UK as a whole, lower wages and lower life expectancy, as with many cities in the North of England. This diversity is not reflected in the *MEN* (based on this sample). Previously part of the *Guardian Media Group* (up to 2010), it dates back to 1868. It is now owned by Reach PLC, until recently known as Trinity Mirror (2018), the UK’s largest newspaper group, which also owns the tabloid left of centre daily national newspaper *The Mirror,* and many other regional titles. Like all regional papers, its circulation was down on previous years in 2016 (by 14%) but still sold 51,800 copies daily in this year, and was the third largest regional paper in the UK (down to 33,633 in 2019)[[16]](#footnote-16) (Press Gazette, 25 August 2016). Adopting a tabloid style, the newspaper has two main areas of focus: crime and sport, with some entertainment news. Religion comes in two main forms – religious rituals (Religion General), particularly weddings and funerals; and common religion (gambling, metaphorical references to religion in sport). Most coverage of religious rituals features in adverts and where a crime has occurred (the desecration of a Jewish graveyard, for example). Gambling also features in the same way. Being a regional newspaper, the *MEN* focuses on mainly local then national news, with very little international coverage. Common religion is more likely to feature in the *MEN* than in the other newspapers, and as the main issue of the article. If we combine its stories on psychic powers, fate and destiny, fortune-telling, chance and luck, this would be the second largest topic. Conventional religion also features in stories about religious schools and the charitable acts of religious groups. There is little difference in the significant topics when religion is the main issue of an article except to say that, when it is included, coverage of the secular sacred is more likely to be a main issue.

Table 11: *MEN*: Significant Topics Table 12: *MEN*: Significant Topics

2013-15 2013-15

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **As a main issue or passing reference** |  |  | When religion is **the main issue only** |  |
| Religion General | 15 |  | Religion General | 10 |
| Gambling | 6 |  | Gambling | 3 |
| Roman Catholicism | 4 |  | Judaism | 3 |
| JudaismProtestantism | 33 |  | ProtestantismSecular Sacred – HumanismIslam | 222 |

**What Are The Newspapers Saying About Religion?**

***Global Stories***

As previously noted, *The Times* is more likely to have an international focus when it comes to talking about religion both in its own coverage and compared to the other papers. News about Islam dominates in this category, or Islamist groups engaged in conflict and terrorism abroad. This not only reflects the news framework that has developed about Islam in the contemporary period but also broader news values that focus on conflict, particularly when cultural proximity is an issue (Hall, 1992; Poole, 2002; Knott et al., 2013). However, 2015 was also the height of the current refugee crisis in Europe (partly driven by conflict in Syria) and this was covered by all three papers including the *MEN’*s only international story. In a double-page article *The Times* leads with an interview by the controversial right-wing Hungarian PM, Viktor Orban. Using his words, the article begins with ‘Europe's identity is fundamentally threatened by the mass influx of migrants, most of them Muslims, who will live together in parallel communities that won't integrate if they are allowed in’ (LeBor, 2015, p. 34-35). This is in keeping with *The Times’* position on refugees entering the UK, and the associated cultural threat, but the article allows these ideas to be aired explicitly while the newspaper retains an image of balance (the spread follows a teaser on the front page and news coverage of the ‘Border battle’ on the previous two pages that make only one reference to religion quoting the Croatian PM who offered safe passage through Croatia regardless of ‘religion and skin-colour’). The article repeats common tropes about Islamic expansion, cultural invasion and population explosion which the newspaper neither critiques nor questions. The *Metro* also warns that ‘First of UK’s Syrians will land in days’ (Tahir, 2015, p. 6-7) and although this is balanced by coverage of violence against refugees at the Hungarian border, overall a security discourse dominates in its depiction of ‘anti-terrorist’ units ‘responding’ to the onslaught. The crisis is described as an ‘exodus’ and migrants ‘aggressive’. These articles link the movement of refugees to an increased terrorist threat to Europe, a dominant theme of coverage across UK newspapers in the Summer of 2015. This story is covered by the *MEN* because of the capture of an aid worker from Manchester, Alan Henning, by the Islamic State (who was subsequently beheaded). The article is a positive profile of Henning and works to keep his captivity in the public eye and appeal for Government intervention (Payne, 2014, p. 7; also covered by *The Times*, p.19*).* While this does reinforce the link between Islam and terrorism, there is also a reference to Manchester’s chief imam who calls on ‘proud Muslims’ to condemn evil. There have been fierce debates about whether it is appropriate for Muslims to make public condemnations of terrorism (Modood, 2019) and this coverage also emphasizes the ‘good/bad’ Muslims binary (Mamdani, 2004) but it is also a nod to the newspaper’s audience demographics (which may include local Muslims) in distancing Islam from the ‘evilness’ of ISIS. There is not much nuance in these global stories about Islamic State; Muslims are referred to as extremists, radical, terrorists, jihadists and militant. Whilst *The Times* does demonstrate diversity by including numerous conflicts involving different Islamist groups, the overall image of Muslims presented is as aggressors whilst stories about Jews focus on their victimhood, particularly with reference to the Holocaust, explored in more detail in the section on *Conventional religion*.

***National Stories***

Global politics have raised concerns about national identities which has partly manifested in debates about borders as seen above. On a national level Islam continues to be the Other by which ‘British values’ are defined. Extremism has been represented almost exclusively as a feature of Islam prior to 2016. The veil, particularly the niqab, has become symbolic in the UK press, of this extremism and other negative values ascribed to Islam such as the repression of women. It has therefore become a battleground for defending ‘British values’. This was evident in a story covered by both the *Metro* and *The Times* in 2013 on a court ruling which requires the defendant to remove her veil in court. This witness is constructed negatively as both ‘intimidating’ and ‘hidden from view’ which is consistent with stereotypical images of women in niqab in the UK. The judge is cited as saying ‘the niqab has become the ‘elephant in the room’ for British courts’ (Radnedge, *Metro*, 2013, p. 8; Gibb and Pitel, *The Times*, 2013, p. 6). Liberty, a campaign group for civil liberties, is quoted in the *Metro* as supporting the ruling. *The Times* includes a side article which reveals the investigation by the Labour Party of a ‘left-wing activist’, who led the campaign to overturn a ban on veils at a college in Birmingham, for use of inflammatory language, a common strategy to attack left-wing policy and elites that have contributed to what is often perceived as a dilution of Britishness. However, *The Times* also presents the UK as a tolerant society - whilst the veil is to be condemned, it should not be banned - here it constructs a positive representation of the ‘in-group’ in the face of the backward practices of the outgroup; this would be ‘un-British’ (Rifkind, 2013, p. 29). That Islamic practices are problematic and obstructive to the effective operation of legal processes in British society is explicit here. The issue is extended to wider society by mentioning the Prime Minister’s objection to the veil in other public institutions. Whilst Islam is represented as the censorious actor in the matter of veiling, critics have noted how the issue is demonstrative of a more widespread struggle over the control of women’s bodies (Williamson, 2014).

A particularly interesting story about national identity, in that it provides a counterpoint to the predictable normative discourse on (the threat of) Islam and the endorsement of (unquestioned) British values, featured in all three papers on this day in 2015, but in the *MEN* it was overtly linked to a non-religious identity (of the journalist). In her Entertainment column, Sarah Walters discusses newly-elected Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s refusal to sing the National Anthem during a Battle of Britain remembrance ceremony at St Paul’s Cathedral. Jeremy Corbyn has been widely vilified in the right-wing press as an advocate of socialist policies so this was another opportunity to emphasize his ‘disloyalty’. This was evident in both *The Times* and the *Metro* who used the event to undermine Corbyn’s character (although at this stage in his leadership it remained at the level of ridicule).[[17]](#footnote-17) However, the *MEN* does sometimes reflect the values of its mostly Labour constituency of Manchester. This is not to claim that there is a connection between political position and religious identity in this paper, but that its politics allows space for a more sympathetic stance on Corbyn. Walters strongly identifies with Corbyn’s position as a Republican but also objects to the song as an atheist herself. She constructs a compelling argument locating her opposition to religion in her scientific upbringing and quotes freedom and integrity as principles that those being remembered fought for. Here, the ‘British values’ being invoked are similar to those often raised by the conservative press, but are used here to defend an opposite cause. It is a rare instance of an articulation of an atheist identity in British news media and of an overt reference to (non) religious identity in the *MEN*, where religion, in the main, tends to be included as a feature of the UK’s religious heritage or expressed in its common form. It should be noted that in all newspapers, coverage of this incident was secondary to how it was reported when it broke earlier in the week (as front-page news in the *Metro*). In *The Times*, as well as having political mileage, this story was used to define an exclusionary version of Britishness (constructing a nationalism that draws on a white Christian identity), a version which does not include atheism or socialism.

***Regional Stories***

When religious news appeared in the UK’s regional newspaper, the *Manchester Evening News*, the story would resonate highly in the news values of this paper – with an emphasis on crime. This was evident across all the categories of religious news: conventional, common and the secular sacred. One example of this was ‘Headstone Yobs are given Graveyard Ban’ (Britton, 2014, p. 11) which covers the sentencing of two teenagers who vandalized headstones in a Jewish graveyard in Greater Manchester (with an accompanying image of damaged gravestones). The article not only highlights the sacredness assigned to death in British society but other typical features of reporting: the economic costs of the damage, and a negative representation of youth as ‘Baby-faced louts’ on a ‘rampage’. This article is typical of how the news represents young people as a threat to traditional values in society, and how religion often serves as a useful symbol of these. The fact that the cemetery is Jewish is incidental in this case but serves to represent respectful tradition (and order) versus disorderly defiance;[[18]](#footnote-18) the story operates through its relationship with wider reporting to maintain hegemonies in society. The story also demonstrates how news is gathered around particular news sources (such as the criminal courts), and that religious news is therefore also a product of these processes which contribute to the maintenance of social hierarchies and order. Outside the topic of crime, most other *MEN* news articles tend to feature as *News in brief* or include religion as a passing reference; a few articles report on the missionary work of religious groups in the community.

***Conventional Religion***

Conventional religion, defined as institutionalized religion, world faiths and religious movements (Knott et al., 2013 p. 10) is covered throughout this article so this section refers mainly to Christianity and other world faiths (with less attention on Islam that is dealt with in some depth elsewhere). Conventional religion dominates in *The Times*, as an establishment newspaper, whereas there is more emphasis on beliefs and practices in the other newspapers particularly imagery around weddings and Christmas, strongly featured in adverts. Weddings (and other religious traditions) also appear across the newspapers when other news values are strong – crime, celebrity and unexpectedness, for example ‘Man, 27, arrested over Massey funeral attack’ (*MEN*, 2015, p. 2).[[19]](#footnote-19) Adverts and stories about religious schools also feature regularly in the *MEN.* *The Times* tends to focus on key members of the Christian church when they speak out on social and political issues as in ‘Bishop attacks Gove on use of food banks’ (Gledhill, 2013, p. 16) and is in direct contrast to the collective representation of Muslims. An article (Binyon, 2015, p. 1-2) on attempts by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, to offer solutions to global rifts in the Anglican church, particularly around homosexuality, is supported by an editorial that seeks to maintain the Church of England’s dominance in this community: ‘he is determined to focus Anglicans on the most serious issues confronting Christians today’. While the newspaper is nuanced enough to show the struggles in the Church over issues such as gay rights, it supports its own position in these debates, and in the case of global issues, usually backs the Church of England. *The Times* offers a view of religion that is broadly moderate Christianity alongside secular liberalism which casts anything outside this position as extremist, particularly relating to Islam and atheism (including secular socialism). Two images are also worth noting here – one of these is a photograph of a group of veteran actors’ re-enactment of Leonardo de Vinci’s *The Last Supper* (also in the *Metro,* 2013), newsworthy for its visual impact, but also celebrity and comedic value (the *Metro* refers to the actors’ ‘God complex’). Humour is also evident in a *Metro* image of Pope Francis (2015), who is temporarily covered by his mantle in a gust of wind, offering the opportunity to pen the headline ‘In the name of the father, the son and the holy gust’. While these provide opportunities for poking (light-hearted) fun at religion, other images of face coverings symbolize something darker - the front-page image of a Syrian women in hijab trying to cross the Hungarian border while a masked policeman holds her back were both images of extremities (to *The Times*, 2015). Both international news ‘Slumdog composer facing fatwa’ (*The Times*, 2015, p. 40) and national news about Islam emphasizes extreme ideology ‘Universities ordered to fight extremism’ (*The Times,* 2015). However, at times Muslims are also represented as victims as in ‘Mosque attacked during EDL rally’ (*The Times,* 2014, p. 4), but this victimhood is based on another extreme ideology, that of the far-right, where Islamophobia is distanced from the mainstream.

Jews (in this sample) are always represented as victims, subject to anti-Semitism, both historically and in the present as in ‘Soldiers copy comic’s anti-Semitic salute’ (*The Times*, 2013, p. 38) which reports on French soldiers mimicking an anti-Semitic comedian’s salute (again locating racist behaviour elsewhere). Coverage of other religions is sparse and mostly features in international news such as a story on the positive effects of Buddhism (*Metro*, 2014). Mormons also feature in the *Metro* when the story is sufficiently unusual, extreme and consequential; twelve die in ‘Mormon’s flood hell’ (2015, p. 27). Generally, to be newsworthy other religions have to have a novelty value or resonate highly in other news values to be included or fit within a themed section such as a graduate supplement in *The Times* that features the value of faith-based student societies ‘Skydiving Hindus put fun into faith’ (Graduate Career supplement, 2014, p. 5).

Although it is often suggested that the media is anti-religious, this shows that the newspapers are actually largely supportive of (a moderate form of) Christianity, and perceive this as promoting positive values, which is further reinforced through a backdrop of a Christian heritage in language, history and landscape (religious buildings).

***Common Religion***

Crime is also the focus of the *MEN’*s major stories containing common religion (articles that feature the supernatural outside of established religions). Gambling features largely in this ‘popular’ regional newspaper, both in adverts and news.[[20]](#footnote-20) On Thursday 17th September 2015, these key topics were combined in a front-page news story: ‘Big Sack: McDonald’s staff fired after reports they used restaurant takings to gamble at casino’ (Scheerhout, p, 1, 4). The moral narrative of these stories is that crime does not pay, ‘They were always going to get caught once they started losing’. While the article is suggestive of a relationship between gambling and crime, the normative representation of gambling in the news is that it is acceptable in moderation (a message of responsible gambling), only when it becomes excessive and results in other anti-social behaviour does it become newsworthy. This is unsurprising given the substantial support the newspaper receives in advertising revenue from Bookmakers. This article is another example of the law and order discourse of the newspaper, which is further reinforced in the composition of this page, appearing adjacent to another crime article and a report on the appointment of a new police chief. Gambling is another way of representing the poor as problematic and undisciplined, requiring management by authorities, discourse which at the time contributed to the justification of severe austerity measures.

Deviance is also a theme of common religion stories in the other UK newspapers. *The Times* features an obituary on Max Beauvoir, a Haitian voodoo Priest (2015, p. 62) which treats this topic with a mixture of seriousness and triviality while also emphasizing the deviance. In a newspaper that draws on both rationalism and traditional Christian values, it is inevitable that unorthodox religions will be linked to spirit possession; Beauvoir is labelled ‘not quite a shamen’ due to his quite significant scientific background. In the same way these practices are Othered, they are assigned to ‘Others’ whether that be of gender, ethnicity etc due to their unconventionality (and in doing so are further marginalized). Yet, in the tabloid papers, common religion is mostly treated lightly. Supernatural beings are a source of fun in the *Metro’s* ‘By ‘eck, summat wicked this way comes…’ (Ashmore, 2014, p. 26). In keeping with its emphasis on entertainment, this is linked to the launch of a new TV series on vampires, *The Strain*. It reports on the findings of a survey which shows that there are more sightings of supernatural beings in Yorkshire than any other UK county (hence the colloquialism in the headline). Although based on the research of an expert on the paranormal, the *Metro* keeps things light - the article is supported visually by a Halloween style image listing the type and locations of ‘Spooky sightings’.[[21]](#footnote-21) This approach to common religion, as a form of entertainment, is fairly standard practice, particularly in the *Metro* and the *MEN*. It is no coincidence that it is in these popular papers that common religion, featuring the belief systems of ordinary people, receives more attention. Sometimes however, it is treated with seriousness, as it is seen as important in making sense of everyday life, coping with misfortune, and demonstrating commitment. This approach can be seen in articles on hope, for example ‘Café that serves up hope is named top tourist attraction’ (*MEN*, 2017, p. 18). These regional stories demonstrate the commitment and authenticity of regular people. This is evident in sports reports with their references to chance, and fate and destiny; and the language of common religion is also embedded metaphorically in media discourse as in ‘witch-hunt’ and ‘magic solution’. The reporting of common religion demonstrates how religious phenomena outside organized religion are often treated as either trivial or eccentric (and can therefore be dismissed). Yet its recurrence reveals a very human trait in searching for the meaning of life with reference to the human experience (hope, fate) and other life forms. On one hand we are presented with skepticism towards popular beliefs whilst on the other they are perceived as an important part of living in a complex contemporary society, as necessary ‘situational’ beliefs (Stringer, 2008).

***Secular Sacred***

As argued above, although not always mentioned explicitly, these newspapers demonstrate a worldview which treads a line between moderate Christianity and secular liberalism. This perspective informs the moral position the newspapers take on many sacred issues to the extent that it has become normalized and so assumed to be natural by journalists and their imagined audiences. However, challenges to this normative identity invite discussion and a reassertion of this position (or a struggle between the two sometimes competing positions). An example of this is in a column in *The Times* by Matthew Parris, a regular political writer, broadcaster, and former Conservative MP. In an article titled ‘Crisis of faith’ (2014) he juxtaposes his own ‘secular liberalism’ against the growth of religious bigotry in the UK, mainly in the form of radical Islamic belief, as reported by his moderate Muslim friends. Like much reporting on this subject, it contrasts an assumed secular society’s (‘we liberals’) ‘patience’, ‘tolerance’ ‘reason’ and ‘freedom’ against extremism, regression and aggression. The article suggests this is on the rise and that westerners have been too passive in their response to this ‘challenge’ to their values. This appears next to a column that reinforces another sacred value, that of science: ‘Seal of approval for homeopaths is a quacks’ charter’ discredits homeopathy as ‘nonsense’. Written by the Editor of the *Jewish Chronicle* (the orthodox dismissing unorthodoxy), the mixture here of religion, science and liberalism is a good example of the normative position of the UK’s conservative press on these matters, which endorses their co-existence.

A notable absence in the six pages of coverage of the Scottish referendum (in *The Times,* 2014) are any explicit references to religious or other identities outside nationalism. There is a strong Nationalism vs Unionism narrative (with *The Times* supporting the Union) alongside symbols of nationalism (flags) as well as reference to another sacred value, democracy, but religion is not invoked in this instance.

The secular sacred is also evident in references to human rights. When a prisoner from Manchester’s Strangeways prison stages a 60-hour rooftop protest over jail conditions, the *MEN* reports (2015) only on the cost to the taxpayer. It also features a reader’s letter and eight online comments, all of which argue that the ‘killer’ rescinded any human rights when he took the life of another. The responses are clearly informed by the reporting within a typically populist discourse of law and order; the article reports that the convict was lured down by the promise of junk food which invites sarcastic comments by the readers on his values.

References to reified far-right ideologies are becoming evident at this time ‘Mosque attacked during EDL rally’ (*The Times*, 2014, p. 4) but are not yet receiving the attention paid to this type of extremism after the EU referendum in 2016.

In representing the secular sacred then, (moderate) secularism is often an implicit way of life (co-existing with moderate Christianity and science) in opposition to more extreme ideological positions, whilst atheism is an identity marker, often used to emphasize other favourable British values, such as free speech.[[22]](#footnote-22) Extreme forms of secularism (linked to socialism in coverage of Jeremy Corbyn in this sample) are not approved of in general, although sometimes these competing views find favourable expression in the right circumstances (see *MEN*, 2015).

**Conclusion**

Religion on an ordinary day in these British newspapers functions to makes claims to or reassert aspects of British identity. In times of considerable political uncertainty these newspapers offer us a position that shifts between moderate Christianity and secular liberalism but the norm is always moderate. Extremes, both political and religious, are examples of ‘bad news’, both atheism and Islam. Although diversity is evident in these newspapers, it tends to be represented by Islam and so negativized. Islam is an aggressor, Judaism victimized. Other established religions feature irregularly but tend to be presented positively, alternative religions are Othered. The quality press, represented by *The Times* here, tends to report on conventional religion as a global phenomenon while local, common religion is more likely to feature in the popular press. While entertainment is the focus of the middle market newspaper, which tends to cover ‘religion in general’, the regional newspaper emphasizes a law and order discourse, religious rituals, but also features the work of charities and provides a picture of religion in everyday life – the role of religious schools in the UK through adverts for local faith schools and their fund-raising activities, for example. Religion is often a signifier of traditional ‘British values’ – freedom and tolerance in the face of increasing disruption from external forces. Britain is also presented as inclusive but only of specific moderate forms of Otherness. The lack of coverage of religion in terms of its proportion of overall newspaper copy does demonstrate a tendency for it to be overlooked unless it serves a functional purpose as seen through the reporting of Jeremy Corbyn and atheism here or the desecration of Jewish graves. Similarly, although it is more generally considered that news tends towards negativity, this coverage demonstrates a generally supportive tone, if it fits with specific political, social and cultural agendas. In its totality, this coverage does give the impression that serious religion is going on elsewhere while the British situation is one of banal (implicit) religion with sporadic interjections from established Church leadership in the UK (Hjarvard, 2012). This tells us something about how the newspapers see themselves and their function – *The Times* as a purveyor of serious political issues, the *Metro* to entertain and the *MEN* to serve a community, however it perceives this. Of course, news about religion is also a product of news production processes and we have also seen how it is subject to the same news values (conflict) and news gathering processes (resulting in elitism) as other news items. But there is also a clear news framework here supported by other studies on religion in the news (Knott et al., 2013).[[23]](#footnote-23) Summaries always oversimplify and there is also a good deal of contestation about what Britain is in the 21st century, and who is to be included in Britishness, but it is for this reason why religion will continue to be a feature of news discourse for some time to come.

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2. The Census surveys the ‘resident population’ every ten years which in 2011 was 56.1m people, https://census.gov.uk [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.statista.com/topics/4765/islam-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The BSA uses random probability sampling to find a representative sample of the population, and surveys and the data cited here is based on an average sample of 3256.5 people per year. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Statistics from the Census show there is a close relationship between religious and ethnic identity (Knott et al., 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/bbc-most-trusted-news-source [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/static/about-us/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.theguardian.com/media/table/2014/mar/14/abcs-national-newspapers [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/national-press-print-abcs-january-mirror-losing-ground-against-cut-price-star-ahead-new-launch [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.statista.com/statistics/529060/uk-newspaper-market-by-circulation/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/times-sunday-times-digital-subscriptions-boost/1593504 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/national-newspaper-abcs-mail-titles-see-year-on-year-circulation-lift-as-bulk-sales-distortion-ends/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/feb/15/free-newspaper-metro-success-story [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In claiming to represent the ‘voice of the people’ rather than more recent variants of political populism. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. https://secure.manchester.gov.uk/info/200088/statistics\_and\_intelligence/7583/census\_and\_areas\_in\_the\_city [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. https://www.abc.org.uk/product/9786-manchester-evening-news [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Although the *Metro* does include 15 letters, five of which are sympathetic to Corbyn, one explicitly claiming an atheist identity. Most are negative, however, under the heading ‘Silent Corbyn ‘is an utter disgrace’’ (2015, p.20). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In other stories/on other occasions, the specificity of the religion, here Judaism, might be highly pertinent. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Paul Massey was a Manchester gangster, shot in July 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Gambling is included in the common religion category due to its references to luck and fate that imply supernatural intervention (Knott et al, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Knott et al (2013) have noted how scientific method is the yardstick by which the paranormal is judged. Here science is used to justify the topic as a valid piece of journalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Free speech, which is often held up as a liberal secular value, has more recently been adopted by various right wing, including US Christian, groups to lambast ‘political correctness’ and in particular any attempt to critique Islamophobia (see Titley, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. And is also confirmed by an examination of coverage analysed, whilst completing this article, on 17 September 2019 – there is little deviation from the news framework described above in each newspaper, it is remarkably similar despite the politics of identity becoming more pronounced, the main difference being that religion mostly features as a passing reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)