The Case of Geert Wilders: Multiculturalism, Islam, and Identity in the UK

Abstract:

This article aims to show how in the current political climate in the UK debates about multiculturalism, religion, and identity, in relation to Muslims, have played out in the public sphere through an examination of British news media coverage of the Geert Wilders case. Wilders, a far right Dutch MP, was refused entry to the UK in February 2009 for inciting racial hatred. Coverage of this event demonstrates the struggles around identity taking place amongst various social, political groups in the UK. I will show how Islam, in particular, is currently central to these discursive debates and how different groups’ interpretations of the event attempt to assert ideas of ‘Britain’ and ‘Britishness.’

Keywords: Islam; Muslims; multiculturalism; identity; representation.

1. **Introduction**

Representations of British Muslims in the British media are partly a construct of and contribute to the post-modern crisis of identity, which has destabilised the project of multiculturalism in the UK related to wider political processes. However, the media also has a role in the formation of identities by providing a location for the articulation of particular values and priorities in relation to contested issues. Much has been written about the representation of Islam in recent years and whilst the dominant discourses centre on terrorism and conflict, particularly in relation to global Islam, cultural relativism focussing on difference is a common feature in the coverage of British Muslims.[[1]](#footnote-1) This article aims to show how in the political climate in the UK, post 7/7, debates about multiculturalism, religion and identity, in relation to Muslims, have played out in the public sphere through an examination of British news media coverage of the Geert Wilders case. Wilders, a Dutch MP, was refused entry to the UK in February 2009 for inciting racial hatred. This article examines news coverage of this event to demonstrate the struggles around identity taking place amongst various social, political groups in Britain. In particular, it will show how Islam is currently central to these discursive debates and how different groups’ interpretations of the incident attempt to assert ideas of ‘Britain’ and ‘Britishness.’ The representation of this case shows us how conservative groups use such episodes to criticise liberal policy and ‘double standards’ in relation to issues such as freedom of speech whilst reinforcing Christian values and the link between Christianity and the state. The case provided, for them, an opportunity to criticise government, liberalism, multiculturalism, and the values of equality and diversity. For liberal groups, the case allowed for the defence of liberal values, in particular freedom of speech, sometimes resulting in an exclusive liberalism in the critique of religion. The article examines all these issues in their complexity and considers the consequences for Muslims living in the UK whose voices are largely excluded from these debates.

1. **The Geert Wilders Case**

Geert Wilders is a Dutch politician and leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV). He was previously a member of the conservative-liberal party People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) but left to set up his own party in 2004 over differences on Turkey’s accession to Europe. He is well known internationally for his controversial anti-Islamic stance but this has brought him some success in Dutch politics increasing his seats in the Hague, in the Dutch election 2010, from nine to twenty-four, seven fewer than the winning party.[[2]](#footnote-2) In 2008 he produced his short film *Fitna* (variously translated but in the UK’s media as ‘discord’ and ‘strife’), which juxtaposes violent images of extreme Islamism with verses from the Koran and was widely and globally criticized. On 13 February 2009 he was denied entry to Britain on public order grounds. He had been invited to a screening of his film, *Fitna,* in the House of Lords by Lord Pearson of the UKIP party. The Home Office denied him entry under an EU law which allows member states to do so on the grounds that the person constitutes a threat to public policy, security or health. The anti-Islamic film espousing Wilders views, combined with his presence, the Home Secretary said ‘would threaten community harmony and therefore public security.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Despite being aware of this the MP chose to fly into Heathrow knowing he would be forcibly returned thus creating a huge publicity coup. Since then a tribunal has overturned this ruling (October 2009) and Wilders has entered the UK twice in October 2009 and January 2010 giving rise to protests from Islam4UK, an organisation that has now also been banned under the UK’s 2000 Terrorism Act. This analysis focuses on coverage of the period following Wilders’ prohibition from the UK. The event took place against a socio-political backdrop that saw New Labour in crisis. A post-terrorism environment further destabilised by economic uncertainty contributed to support for multiculturalism giving way to a doctrine of community cohesion (assimilation). This context provides the sympathetic setting for assertions of Britishness along ideological lines. The case is one of many that could be used to show how press discourse around Islam represents an attempt by various elite groups to construct a discourse of the nation and in doing so creates insiders and outsiders within a polarised identity politics.

1. **Short Methodological Note**

Analysis of this event was part of a larger two-year study examining media portrayals of religion in the UK.[[4]](#footnote-4) The project was funded by the AHRC/ESRC “Religion and Society” programme and involved a quantitative and qualitative analysis of two months of newspapers’ coverage and a week’s television coverage of religion in a period from 2008 to 2009. The study was also to include an in depth analysis of a religious event incorporating a wider sample of media than that of the central project. Whilst this included all broadcast news and online debate, the themes of which are reflected in this discussion, this article will focus predominantly on newspaper coverage (both print and online). All articles from February 2009 that referred to Geert Wilders were analysed from all national newspapers. Articles were retrieved using a search of the newspapers’ websites and the database Lexis Nexis as well as hard copies. Two local Yorkshire newspapers were included due the specific methodology of the wider project (which sought to replicate an earlier study from 1982). The analytical approach was informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA).[[5]](#footnote-5) Discourse is understood as the production of language that has a will to power.[[6]](#footnote-6) Discourse analysis is used to examine aspects of the text (structure, agency, linguistic features), which may be interpreted as expressions of ideology that attempt to secure meaning.

In analysing a religious controversy, the Wilders case seemed like an appropriate event to investigate given that it incorporated those elements found to be significant in wider coverage of religion in the early part of the twenty-first century⎯Islam, secularism, religion, and the public sphere. It is recognised that what is being described here is a media story that exhibits some elements of a ‘media event.’[[7]](#footnote-7) To some extent the term ‘event’ is being used in a fairly perfunctory way. It has usefulness in providing constructed borders around an incident in the way the media constructs ‘episodes’ around happenings for the sake of analysis. However, this is not to negate the usefulness in drawing upon the literature to contrast and compare the dynamics of coverage and the role of the media in smaller ‘media events.’ Particularly valuable, in this instance for example, is John Fiske’s comment that “A media event is not a mere representation of what happened, but it has its own reality, which gathers up into itself the reality of the event that may or may not have preceded it.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. **Quantitative Data**

The amount of coverage in the press, one hundred fifty-nine articles in total in *all* British national newspapers, demonstrates some saliency to the news media (See Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

As we can see from Figure 1 the majority of coverage comes from the large national papers with the liberal leaning press having the most coverage, not surprisingly given that the event was framed as a freedom of speech issue. *The Independent*, which contained the most articles in print, was also the paper that held this view (and therefore sought to defend the liberal value) most vigorously. However, many of these were letters that raised the number of articles considerably. This was also the case in *The Sun*.

There was a fairly even split between print newspaper and online coverage. The newspapers with the most articles online also had the most commentary, which shows how the web is being used for this purpose (*The Guardian* and *The Daily Mail*). Demonstrating the importance of the Internet for breaking news, all papers ran the story online at least a day before the coverage began in print on the 13th February. Analysis online then continued, depending on the issue’s importance to the newspaper, for up to nine days (*The Guardian*). Online coverage offers space for opinion and demonstrates the importance of columnists in making sense of the world⎯allowing readers to confirm and identify with particular viewpoints.

The story was largely formulated within a binary ‘culture clash,’ freedom of speech versus censorship framework illustrating the UK’s struggle with Muslim immigration and its identity. Coverage, therefore, largely reinforces Wilders’ opinions. The British press’ reaction to Wilder’s prohibition from Britain was to condemn it on the basis of free speech with a strong double standards discourse (i.e. why should Wilders be banned when extreme Islamists are allowed entry to Britain?).

1. **Categorization of Wilders**

In the construction of a binary polarized relationship of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ Geert Wilders is largely constructed as an outsider. However, the spectrum of this construction varies from an extreme distaste for his ‘racist’ views by the liberal press to a more favorable representation by the more conservative press. An example of one extreme is in *The Guardian’s* opening article online. In “Geert Wilders? He’s not worth it,” Robert Fox discredits Wilders as “virulently anti-Islamic” and his film as “a chaotic rant” and “factually incorrect.”[[9]](#footnote-9) For Fox, he is an opportunist, the situation contrived and the film a construction. The extreme dislike for Wilders and his views (he is described as “hard right,” a term not used elsewhere) means *The Guardian* rarely incorporates his quotes in comparison to other newspapers.

Whilst the conservative press does distance Wilders as ‘Other,’ this is merely as a clown in terms of “kooky,” “idiotic,” and “weirdo.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This is to demonstrate his harmlessness juxtaposed against the real threat to British society: Islamic extremists. In the majority of cases he is largely categorized as a “far right” MP. This label is also questionable given his progressive politics on women’s and gay rights. More favorable coverage constructs him as a “democratically elected Dutch MP,”[[11]](#footnote-11) “anti-Islam campaigner,”[[12]](#footnote-12) or “Dutch film-maker.”[[13]](#footnote-13) This affords Wilders and his views legitimacy and supports the newspapers argumentative strategy involving the movement of elected European representatives. In this conceptualisation, then, he is more likely to be conceived as a victim needing twenty-four-hour protection and receiving death threats.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Despite a largely negative evaluation of Wilders, he is the most quoted source and is quoted excessively which gives credence to his views. This is part of the argumentative strategy to oppose the ban. For example, an article in *The Sunday Express* suggests that the views in *Fitna* are highly questionable but “Wilders is not Abu Hamza. His film doesn’t preach hate, it preaches that tolerance of the intolerant will ultimately lead to the end of tolerance and, with it, our civilization. Wilders may be wrong about a lot of things but he’s not wrong about that.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Accompanying the text, Wilders’ stark visual image is used and reused and has become a visual signifier of what the story represents which adds to the ability to provoke a response. Only *The Guardian* comments on this in a supporting article on the first day of coverage. This ‘recognises’ that his image is part of his projected identity and in particular comments on his hair (peroxide blond) as a racist symbol. Alongside this is a profile of Wilders that, unusually, gives him considerable credence. Whilst clearly presenting him as an attention seeker and making reference to his religious identity as a Catholic (but omitting that this has since been renounced) it does not dismiss him as a mere ‘populist’ but recognises his influence; “in the past two years his new Freedom Party has taken nine out of the 150 seats in the second chamber…he has seen his support soar to up to 15%. A little more than a year ago, Wilders was voted the most effective politician in the Netherlands.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Both *The Guardian* and *The Independent* acknowledge that Wilders is a self-promotionist and publicity seeker, but few other papers go so far as to recognise the act of provocation (in violating the ban).

Wilders, not publicly supported, is just a convenient mechanism for allowing the unsayable to be said in the guise of ‘double standards’ or freedom of speech.

1. **Political Row/Anti-government Discourse**

As we have seen part of the argumentative strategy was to construct Wilders as a “Dutch politician”[[17]](#footnote-17) in order to delegitimize the government’s decision to deny him entry to the country. To add weight to this argument the objection by the Dutch foreign office is highlighted. The potential ensuing diplomatic row (which does not materialize) is given much emphasis by *The Times* demonstrating the importance of Britain’s political activities and international relations to *The Times* and its readers. This feeds into the strong anti-government discourse that is present in all papers. At the end of their third term and subsequently ousted at the General Election (May 2010), the Labour government was highly unpopular on all sides of the political spectrum. They are variously described negatively as “cowardly,” “hopeless,” “politically correct,” “idiotic,” “inconsistent”, “weasely” and “hapless.” The most cited quote from Wilders across the press is that British government officials are “the biggest bunch of cowards in Europe.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

1. **Freedom of Speech vs. Censorious Islam**

The case against government policy is made on the basis of freedom of speech. As an example of the ‘secular sacred,’ this is regularly used by the press to reject any positive policies to protect Muslims and goes back to the height of the Rushdie Affair, which was definitive in framing relations with Muslims in public discourse. This event occurs just a week after the twentieth anniversary of Rushdie and, similarly, becomes a conduit for the repetition of familiar themes. But the Rushdie Affair is used here to demonstrate the stark difference in reaction by the government of the day (and thus adds weight to the erosion of British values argument):

In retrospect, that was a turning point in the country’s history of free speech, an event that appeared to demonstrate indomitability, yet turned out to be a defeat. An unambiguous stand was taken on Rushdie’s behalf by the government of the day, which denounced the threat to his life and broke off diplomatic relations with Iran. Sir Geoffrey Howe, then foreign secretary, told the Commons: “This action is taken in plain defence of the right within the law of freedom of speech and the right within the law of freedom of protest.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

That the story is formulated as such is a triumph for Wilders, as is the amount of coverage he receives (for example, the event could have been framed as an example of the demonization of Muslims or the curtailment of Muslim rights and this defended but this kind of reporting was absent from press discourse).[[20]](#footnote-20) In this way the blame for social problems is shifted from antagonists like Wilders to Muslims. Other omissions include coverage of the film and its offensive content (it is simply referred to as ‘controversial’) or what Wilders is arguing for in the wider context. The event is turned into a debate about whether he should be banned rather than examining the wider issues.

Craft and Waisbord’s[[21]](#footnote-21) analysis of the Danish cartoons controversy (which has obvious parallels with this story) found that there were two ways in which the story was framed: “A freedom of speech frame pitted absolutist and social responsibility positions on free speech against each other.[[22]](#footnote-22) Elaborations of this frame often equated socially responsible speech with religious tolerance, on one side, or with submission or ‘appeasement’ on the other. A ‘clash of civilizations’ frame pitted ‘the West’ against ‘the Muslim world’ […]”

In coverage of the Geert Wilders case the press were united in rejecting the ban on Wilders on the basis of free speech but there were varying degrees of commitment to this position from the very nearly absolutist position (freedom of speech as unconditional) of the liberal press to the loose allegiance of the right-wing press where the commitment appeared to be largely expedient (and a double standard given their position on censorship relating to other issues, violent films for example). This position, if we compare it to coverage of ‘preachers of hate,’ suggests it is used as a convenient mechanism for defending ‘British values’ against attack from outside. At one end of the scale is *The Guardian* whose poll encapsulates its coverage by formulating the question within the framework through which the event is interpreted. It asks, “On the grounds of free speech should he be let in?” Of *The Guardian* (online) users 84.4% vote “Yes: It goes against the principles of free speech to ban him.”[[23]](#footnote-23) *The Guardian’s* commentary runs for nine days online following the final article in the print edition. *The Guardian’s* website sets an industry standard in online news providing extensive debate on a range of issues, however it is the unevenness of this commentary which is of interest here. *The Guardian’s* position is categorically that freedom of speech should be an absolute, with no exceptions, “we cannot pick and choose what expression we defend.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Its two editorials, one in its sister Sunday paper, makes this explicit: “opinions, however odious, cannot in themselves be criminal […] Britain’s political establishment has in an unwitting, collaborative effort of stupidity and democratic illiteracy presented itself as an accomplice to extremisms and enemy of free speech.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

The importance of the issue to *The Independent* is also evident in the number of articles in its print copy, the position of the story when it broke (pages one to three) and the attention afforded to it (double page spread). However, even in *The Independent* freedom of speech comes with limitations. Whilst its editorial clearly states “Was the Home Office right to ban Mr. Wilders from entering Britain? The answer is no. Freedom of speech and freedom of movement are principles that we tamper with at our peril.” It goes on to say, “There are, it must be accepted, limitations on those freedoms. The government has a responsibility to preserve the safety of minority groups in Britain.”[[26]](#footnote-26) However, it is argued, that in this case, the line has not been crossed. Whilst elsewhere the paper criticises Lord Ahmed for his selective approach to freedom of speech, it appears to be practising the same line with its attitude to radical Muslim clerics; “The radicalisation in recent years of young British Muslims by extreme Islamist preachers has complicated such judgements […] The government’s decision to refuse to allow Omar Bakri Mohammed, the former head of the extremist group al-Muhajaroun, back into Britain from Lebanon was probably right.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Is it the case that the liberal press only make such an unconditional stance on freedom of speech when the values espoused are closer to their own? For example, we see no such appeals for freedom of speech in response to the Phelps church, a virulently homophobic US Christian sect, which threatens to picket a play about the murder of a gay man in the UK. In this case all papers contain an extended quote from the Home Office on how it opposes extremism of all kinds in contrast to the smaller response included in the coverage of Wilders. The Church members are also referred to as ‘preachers of hate’ unlike Wilders. Rather this story is included (in all papers) as an issue of consistency⎯will the government also prohibit these people from entering Britain?

An issue raised in all papers, only *The Guardian’s* approach could be described as ‘liberal fundamentalist’ referring to the model of Kunelius and Alhassan.[[28]](#footnote-28) In this case the liberal *Guardian* outflanked *The Daily Mail* in its lack of tolerance.

There is more emphasis on free speech here, in the conservative press, than has been evident in the past, for example in relation to coverage of Rushdie in the UK, and we have discussed a possible motivation for this. For *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail*, some of the articles raise the issue of freedom of speech to attack liberal ideology as in John Laughland’s “Why Liberals don’t believe in tolerance” whilst the main thrust of the coverage is around ‘double standards.’[[29]](#footnote-29) This framework is used without any distinction being made between the right to free speech and the right to publish; any discussions of the imbalance of power in this respect are bracketed out of the discussion. As a politician Wilders has more power to speak and is given excess space by publications (whether they agree with his position or not) and is abusing this position to attack a marginalised community. Equally, where is the strong position on freedom of speech when Muslims protest? The freedom to practice ones religion is also absent from discussion.

According to Kunelius and Alhassan, “the dominance of the frame is also a symptom of the ideological field in which it appeared: it is a hegemonic fact that testifies to the central place that the term ‘freedom’ holds in the modern self-imagination of the West. It also shows how importantly ‘freedom’ serves as a cornerstone for the legitimacy discourse of the modern, liberal news media.”[[30]](#footnote-30) But it is also limited by its historical construction and does not offer an appropriate solution for this situation in the current context.

That Muslims are easily offended and quick to react ties into this discourse. All papers feature only the violent protests (to *Fitna*) across the Muslim world and several bans on YouTube on the part of Pakistan so *Fitna* cannot be accessed. The world is subject to Muslim aggression, including Wilders, and the problem emanates from within Islam: “You may think he (Wilders) is wrong to say this; you may agree with him; you might, like the lords who invited him to Britain, think it is something worthy of discussion, given the obvious problems caused around the world by radical Islamism and the violence perpetrated in the name of the religion. It is hard, in a free country, to understand why it is a view that must be suppressed.”[[31]](#footnote-31) The impression given is that this type of behaviour from ‘Orientals’ is only to be expected if they are provoked. And yet, as we have seen, there is little discussion of why Muslims may be upset in terms of the content of the film.

British citizens are represented through a positive ‘Us’ presentation as those who can tolerate difference and in the ‘Othering’ binary framework Muslims cannot⎯or will not.[[32]](#footnote-32) A discourse of modernity, rationality, and history is invoked⎯the West is progressive⎯it can accommodate ‘Others.’ Freedom of speech within an ‘operation of democracy’ discourse is hard to oppose.

That Muslims are demanding and receiving preferential treatment leads to accusations of appeasement. Wilders is used as an example of the “insidious development” of “creeping censorship” in the UK.[[33]](#footnote-33) But the belief that Muslims are making “politically exceptional, culturally unreasonable (...) alien demands” according to Modood is mistaken.[[34]](#footnote-34) He believes that these “demands” are examples of Muslim activism and have to be understood as “appropriations and modulations of contemporary discourses, and initiatives whose provenance lies in anti-racism and feminism.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

1. **Appeasement**

In this framework, tolerance for Muslims becomes submission and cannot be tolerated. This is interpreted as appeasement. An example of this is columnist Minette Marrin’s article for *The Times* “Labour bares its appeaser’s teeth to unbending Muslims” the title alone suggesting that Muslims are rigid in their beliefs.[[36]](#footnote-36) What the Wilders affair demonstrates for Marrin is the appeasement of a “threatening minority” rather than consideration of the majority. ‘We’ cannot criticise Islam, however reasonable the critics are, due to Labour laws put in place, under pressure from Muslims but, hypocritically, Muslims can speak out. In its argumentative strategy the event is turned about-face so that an incitement to hatred against/intolerance towards Muslims becomes, Muslims and, in particular the Koran, incite hatred/are intolerant. For Marrin this is the reason the government should stand up to Muslims and allow Wilders entry. This closed discourse is repeated in *The Sun*’s strongest outward expression of this position: Trevor Kavanagh’s commentary “Fanatics on the rise and Labour has let it happen.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Here, Wilders actions are downplayed whilst capitulation to Muslims is emphasised. This article is an example of scaremongering with its images of ‘swamping,’ its attention to extremist violent activities and unfavourable evaluation of Islam. Here we have a negative ‘Them,’ positive ‘Us’ dichotomization. As ‘They’ are seen to represent the other view so it becomes a debate about cultures rather than ideas.[[38]](#footnote-38)

1. **Double Standards**

The conservative press (in particular *The Sun, The Telegraph, The Daily Express, The Daily Mail*,and *The Star*) used this event to accuse the government of double standards in refusing entry to Geert Wilders whilst ‘preachers of hate’ are allowed to live and teach their views openly in the UK. The term ‘preachers of hate’ has become a convenient label to homogenise a group of disparate dissidents. However, as those featured are almost always radical Muslim clerics, the term has become associated with Islamic extremism. *The Sun*, as with other conservative papers, selectively, provides examples of these ‘radicals’ living in the UK whilst failing to mention those that have been banned: “Tolerance? That’s just double Dutch” begins “Let’s get this right then: Labour have allowed every Tom, Dick and Abdul into Britain in the past 11 years.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

Part of the strategy is to highlight their crimes and play down the possible outcomes of Wilders’ activities, for example, holding the (emphasis on short) film in the House of Lords is seen to be inconsequential “Only five peers⎯and no MP’s⎯were among the 30 people who attended last night’s screening.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

This discourse also has a strong presence in *The Telegraph, The Daily Express*,and *The Daily Mail*. Renowned columnist Melanie Philips, for *The Daily Mail*, goes as far as defending Wilders for taking “an uncompromising stand against the Koranic sources of Islamist extremism and violence” and telling “unpalatable truths.”[[41]](#footnote-41) The event is twisted to accuse Lord Ahmed of attacks on community relations whilst the (House of) Lords and Wilders are principled, they “stand firm”; “Lord Ahmed previously threatened the House of Lords authorities that he would bring a force of 10,000 Muslims to lay siege to the Lords if Wilders was allowed to speak.” Wilders is applauded for standing up for “life and liberty” whilst ‘They’ would “destroy them.”

This issue is barely apparent in the liberal press.

1. **How are Muslims Constructed in this Framework of Coverage?**

Initial coverage appears to be fairly even handed. The first print article in most papers uses the same balance of sources; Wilders, Lord Pearson on the one hand and Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary, and the Muslim Council of Britain on the other with other prominent sources being the National Secular Society (opposing the ban) and Chris Huhne, the Liberal Democrats Home Affairs Spokesman (supporting the ban). The first print newspaper article in *The Guardian* is written by a Muslim and this makes for some subtle differences. Wilders is categorised as an “‘Islamophobic’ Dutch MP” and the “threat to public safety” is highlighted and fore-fronted.

*The Sun* also includes a sympathetic article in its initial coverage “Attacks on Muslims are poison” by Muslim correspondent Anita Baig.[[42]](#footnote-42) However, this would appear to be purely strategic in light of later coverage, allowing *The Sun* to avoid accusations of discrimination. Subsequent coverage, in its totality, is dominated by the theme of double standards.

Baig, as with most other Muslim voices, are shown to be supporting the restriction on Wilders in opposition to the newspapers’ position reinforcing ideas about censorious Islam (*The Sun, The Times, The Telegraph*). Conflictual views (of Muslims) are more likely to make copy.

Whilst there are some acknowledgements to the possibility of moderate Muslims in the conservative press (two references each in *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail*), Muslims are mainly conceptualised in their extreme form as ‘preachers of hate.’ For example, the villains in *The Sun’s* narrative are the government and ‘preachers of hate’ whilst the general public are the victims. Lord Ahmed (Muslim peer) is named as the instigator alerting the Home Office to the screening (and so suggesting that Muslims are troublemakers) and yet is also seen to have double standards in “inviting an al-Qaeda fundraiser into Westminster.”[[43]](#footnote-43) The wider British public are conceptualised as ‘tolerant’ and the government acting outside the ‘British way,’ acting ‘as *they* would.’

No Muslim voices feature at all in *The Times* or *The Daily Mail*. However, there is more distinction in *The Times* between ordinary Muslims and Islamists. This occurs in commentary; “There is a world of difference between Islam the great religion and Islamism the ideology of submission.”[[44]](#footnote-44) *The Telegraph* makes a similar distinction in an article by Charles Moore but the rest of this piece is then used to attack the negative features of Islam:

The unpleasant power of *Fitna* is that the atrocities it depicts and the preaching it shows are real and recent, and they were all carried out or uttered by Muslims acting, explicitly, in the name of their faith. You could not, in our age, compile any comparable clips of Jews or Christians. As a matter of plain fact, Islamic terrorism exists. Another plain fact about current Muslim culture is the use of the angry demonstration, the constant agitation to ban a book or insist on the veil, the bristling search for offence. So it would be silly to pretend that there is no problem about Muslim attitudes to a plural, free, democratic society. We see bits of that problem every day. [[45]](#footnote-45)

The reference to the *fact* of Islamist extremism is a strategy also used by *The Times*.

Whilst there is only one Muslim voice in *The Telegraph* (in the form of a letter which supports *The Telegraph’s* position),[[46]](#footnote-46) it includes a whole page entry from Jewish commentator Janet Daley.[[47]](#footnote-47) Daley recommends inter-faith relations as a route to tolerance but also constructs her Muslim cab driver as naive, childlike, brainwashed by the ideology of the ‘mosque.’ The article endorses freedom of speech and is mainly used to highlight the persecution of Christians.

*The Guardian* and *The Independent* provide more space for Muslim voices with five each, for *The Guardian* as writers, and *The Independent* as three writers and two sources. Yet, despite the quantity of coverage in *The Guardian* little reference is made to Muslims at all. Is this its way of dealing with promoting freedom of speech without offending Muslims⎯to cancel them out of the discussion? Muslim quotes are significant by their absence but there are few quotes in general with commentary being the main type of coverage. Critical coverage comes from their liberal rights position, which advocates equal values for example in relation to women’s freedoms. Some articles do refer to “Islamophobia” and Wilders as “a preacher of hate.”[[48]](#footnote-48) This is the only paper to conceptualise Wilders in this way. A Muslim is also used to support *The Guardian*’s position: Inayat Bunglawala reflects on the fatwa and the Rushdie Affair in relation to the case arguing that he himself was wrong to call for *The* *Satanic Verses* to be banned. However, this article also raises a number of issues that are not covered elsewhere offering an alternative way of interpreting the event. For example, Bunglawala notes Wilders hypocrisy as well as that of other right-wing commentators who have also used his approach (on freedom of speech).[[49]](#footnote-49)

Whilst these liberal newspapers are clearly not anti-Islamic, in their human rights stance (anti-religious freedom at the cost of other freedom) Muslims are problematised. This ‘exclusive liberalism’ is more evident in *The Independent* and is demonstrated in a very strongly anti-religious belief, pro-secularism, pro-freedom of speech piece written by regular commentator Johann Hari. The purpose of the article is to defend an item he had written for *The New Statesman* in India on a similar topic, which provoked “four thousand Islamic fundamentalists to riot outside their office.”[[50]](#footnote-50) The author does state that he disagrees with the beliefs of all religions and makes reference to “ordinary Muslims” who support human rights yet the only examples of religious ‘fundamentalism’ he provides are from Islam. This article clearly sets up a binary between the secular and rational who protect human rights and the religious and fanatical who abuse them “if we leave the basic human values of free speech, feminism and gay rights undefended in the face of violent religious mobs⎯many, many more people will be hurt.” Whilst it cannot be said that this piece represents the stance of *The Independent*, it is an example of the kind of voices it provides space for.

In the reporting of this case British values are clearly defined and Muslims are constructed in opposition to these. The press polarises the debate, choosing to ignore evidence that minorities may seek to be part of it. The lack of integration of Muslim minorities is represented as being caused by incommensurable cultural and religious differences. For the press then the Wilders case represents ‘the problem’ of Muslims in British society as a ‘clash of cultures.’[[51]](#footnote-51) “In this process of inclusion within and exclusion from the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983), an ‘Us’ emerges, represented as rational, modern, democratic, peace seeking and enlightened⎯in a radical opposition to an Arab or Muslim ‘Other,’ depicted as irrational, traditional, despotic and violent.”[[52]](#footnote-52) All resistance or criticism then becomes a sign of lack of integration or belonging. The struggle to define who ‘We’ are, in opposition to ‘Our’ minorities, was here largely undertaken by existing elites. Minorities were marginalised in the debate⎯cancelled out of it or the object of debate.

It is ironic that in a debate about freedom of speech those under attack are not given opportunity to speak. Philips and Nossek, in their analysis of the Danish cartoons affair, show how the ‘subaltern’ (the immigrant who does not get to speak) is largely heard through street demonstrations.[[53]](#footnote-53) It is more likely then that they are misheard.

1. **The Alternative Viewpoint**

What counter discourse, if any, exists within the frameworks of reporting? Disruptive discourse in the conservative press is few and far between but appears mainly in the form of letters. Letters to *The Daily Express* are more balanced, as it uses a for-or-against approach to a general question. For example, a Muslim’s response to the question “is expelling Koran row MP a source of pride?” is that he is proud to be British as we do not tolerate discrimination.[[54]](#footnote-54) This also occurs in *The Times* on its ‘Message Board,’ which includes four texts: two opposing the ban and two supporting it. One of those favouring the ban applauds this as an act of support towards minorities in the UK; the other argues that the Wilders case is not about freedom of speech but the further restriction of the rights of Muslims (neither of these are from UK nationals). The only other disruptive discourse in *The Times* (apart from a further letter) is an article that is highly critical of Wilders.[[55]](#footnote-55) This focuses on his publicity campaign, calls the film provocative and claims the images of him being deported portray him as a “victim of the heavy handed state.” It also, however, stresses the importance of freedom of movement within the EU (but not for ordinary Muslims?).

Most of the counter discourse comes from the liberal press (including the tabloid *The Daily Mirror*). There are four articles both in *The Independent* and in *The Guardian* that could be described as being supportive towards Muslims or where the discourse runs against their central argument that Wilders should not have been banned. In *The Guardian* this includes an item by Lord (Nazir) Ahmed, “Wilders ban is in Britain’s best interests” which defends his position, points out the largely ignored information (particularly in the right-wing press) that Muslims too have been banned, and tries to demonstrate inclusivity by making reference to “our country.” A further article by Liberal Democrat MP Chris Huhne, “Geert Wilders: Good riddance,” adopts a ‘liberal pragmatist’ approach (i.e. freedom with responsibility).[[56]](#footnote-56) The article, also published in *The Independent,* argues that freedom of speech is precious but that in “a civilised society there has to be a dividing line between freedom of speech and an incitement to hatred and violence.”[[57]](#footnote-57) This is the only evidence of support for the government in drawing a line and making this kind of racism officially illegitimate.

Although these papers give some space to alternative views then, their unequivocal position on freedom of speech eclipses any alternative perspectives. In *The Guardian* these perspectives were only expressed online. In *The Independent* two are letters. Although Muslims are not explicitly criticised, their lack of presence does not advance any alternative reading of the event and places them in opposition to the newspaper’s liberal perspective in supporting the ban.

Whilst the media appears to be based on democratic principles and sees itself as an “idealised public sphere,” what is demonstrated by the absence of Muslim voices here is that it is the “means by which the interest groups of the elite jockey for power.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Who gets to speak “in representing only those interests that are already deemed ‘significant’ it further confirms and re-establishes their significance.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Those furthest away from power, meanwhile, are least able to define themselves.

1. **Multiculturalism and Identity**

According to Philips and Nossek in representing such an event, the press is engaged in an internal struggle to define the identity of their nation, or their ‘imagined community,’ (Anderson, 1983), in light of the majority’s relation to its minorities.[[60]](#footnote-60) Through these definitions people can be excluded or included from the national framework.

In the right-wing press England or Britain is constructed as a Christian country. The dichotomisation of the relationship whereby Muslim illiberalism is seen at odd with liberal democracy, the core of British identity, positions Muslims as outsiders. What is represented here is an anti-multiculturalism aligned with an anti-immigration discourse.

This is evident most strongly in *The Express, The Telegraph*,and *The Daily Mail* (also in *The Sun*, but less explicitly so in coverage of this case). *The Times, Financial Times, Yorkshire Evening Post*,and *Yorkshire Post* (although it is more difficult to ascertain from those papers with little coverage) construct Britain as firstly secular, then Christian.

For *The Telegraph* the main objective of its reporting on Wilders is to focus attention on the diminishing role of Christianity and increasingly secondary treatment of Christians within the UK (whilst Muslims are appeased). This is the theme of six articles. Its position is summed up in the editorial “The priorities of a Christian country”:

Although many state officials seem determined to forget it, Britain still has a state religion [...] That is why the stories that we publish today are so surprising, for they suggest that there is a concerted attempt by some officials to marginalise and to diminish the Christian faith […] for many state officials, the most important goal is to avoid offending any religious sensibility except Christianity […] Christianity is and should be in a privileged position in Britain.[[61]](#footnote-61)

A primary example of this position in *The Daily Express* is evident in Leo McKinstry’s commentary “Why Christianity is on the ropes in Labour’s Britain.”[[62]](#footnote-62) This provides instances of discrimination towards Christians followed by examples of submission to Islam (repeated in a subsequent article on immigration by McKinstry on 19 February 2009; “What is so sickening are the double standards. While agents of the state discriminate against Christianity, they show craven submission towards the demands of militant Islam.” This and other articles in the conservative press often use references to communism to attack government authoritarianism (in *The Sun, The Times, The Daily Express*,and *The Telegraph*). This encourages people to see the action (from a left-of-centre government) as contrived, ideological, and an example of the centralised, heavy-handed state. Both *The Daily Express* and *The Telegraph* describe the government as Orwellian: “Filled with authoritarian zeal, Labour now openly talks about creating ‘a new social order.’ In this Orwellian world, our history is forgotten, our identity traduced and our liberties destroyed.”[[63]](#footnote-63) It is a common practice to mix anti-Muslim sentiment with attacks on communism and socialism combining the two arch-enemies of Western capitalism and contaminating both with ideas of the other in people’s minds.

For the conservative press liberal thought is responsible for the ‘Islamicisation of society.’ Ironically then the curtailment of free speech is seen to have been brought about by liberal authoritarianism (in the form of political correctness). In *The Mail on Sunday*, John Laughland is incredulous towards liberal policy including multiculturalism: the “idea of tolerance has been abused and turned into a pretext for an intrusive threat to people’s livelihoods.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Multiculturalism is interpreted as ‘demanding’: “Britain (to) renounce all traditions in favour of those of newcomers.” In this way liberalism has “similar […] totalitarianism tendencies […] Multiculturalists may say you cannot impose your views on others but they are frighteningly good at imposing theirs on all of us.” Liberals are therefore the “bigots” and the “thought police.” In this way the conservative press hijacks liberal ideals of tolerance and liberty “in the spirit of Western Enlightenment” to attack liberals for being authoritarian! [[65]](#footnote-65)

Whilst not so explicitly, this can also be seen in *The Times* which uses a discourse of democracy to debunk liberal ideology: “It is a common notion that the right to free speech must be held in balance with the requirement to avoid needless offence […] The right to oppose, mock, deride and even insult people’s beliefs is essential to a society where bad ideas are superseded by better ones.”[[66]](#footnote-66) Its last article (online) argues that Britain is “divided,” fragmentary, and this is due to the failure of multiculturalism.[[67]](#footnote-67) *The Financial Times*, on the other hand, attacks immigration and multicultural policy as responsible for the “retreat” from “liberal beliefs” which “provided the core of British identity”: “What has become of British liberalism? It has lost its nerve. It has been weakened by class conflict, immigration and the muddled thinking associated with multiculturalism.”[[68]](#footnote-68) This provides an example of how liberalism is invoked to defend a conservative position in excluding Muslims from participation in public life. For the conservative press immigration has only brought problems and cultural conflict ignoring the fact that most Muslims in western countries have successfully integrated.[[69]](#footnote-69) Evidence of supposed Muslim self-segregation is used as an example of the failure of multiculturalism whilst any positive outcomes are disregarded.

For the liberal press, Britain is secular although this is not an explicitly declared identity. There are a few references to secularism in the columns of well-known secularists as in “Because generations of British people fought to create a secular space,” but mostly it is implicit in the text.[[70]](#footnote-70) In past critiques of *The Guardian* I have accused the newspaper of an ‘exclusive liberalism’ whereby religion is excluded from its positive approach to minorities due to a secular worldview which finds religious (conservative) values at odds with its own. Islam, in particular, has been negatively connoted by this framework due to a human rights approach that takes issue with specific cultural practices (in relation to women, gay rights etc). I thought this may have changed in more recent times as *The Guardian* has sought to take on board some of these criticisms and make its reporting more inclusive. However, the staunch, almost singular position, it takes on this event demonstrates how little has actually changed. *The Independent*, even more so, regularly includes strongly anti-religious discourse.

These are confirmed identity positions where each one is convinced of their own superiority.[[71]](#footnote-71) Whilst they appear to be competing, Davie and Casanova have found that “‘secular’ and ‘Christian’ cultural identities are intertwined in complex and rarely verbalised modes among most Europeans.”[[72]](#footnote-72) Is this a struggle over Christian heritage and secular values or a fusion of both? Rather than having been truly secular, Casanova argues that European societies have been “shaped by the hegemonic knowledge regime of secularism.”[[73]](#footnote-73) Within this liberal tradition, there are various “common positions that we oscillate within,” how we articulate them changes according to the subject matter.[[74]](#footnote-74) In this case, it seems that secular and Christian interests are in alliance against Muslims rather than Muslims and Christians standing together to fight against the further erosion of religion in the public sphere.

In an analysis of the Danish cartoons crisis, Kunelius and Alhassan argue that the case demonstrates liberal ideology in action.[[75]](#footnote-75) Press reaction shows how public figures and journalists have used the resources of liberalism to make sense of what happened: “The conflict challenged journalists in different political and cultural contexts by forcing them to take positions in this debate, by defining themselves, making distinctions between themselves and others and elaborating their respective values.” Here we can also see how the media situate themselves inside the discourse of liberalism. Liberal values are perceived to be at the core of British identity and invoked in opposition to Islamic belief even where newspapers would situate the UK as predominantly Christian.

1. **Conclusions**

It can be concluded, from the representation of this case, that it is a further demonstration of the failure of an exclusionary multiculturalism, which represents a wider crisis in liberalism itself. As Savage says: “The increasing Muslim presence in Europe has reopened debates on several issues: the place of religion in public life, social tolerance in Europe, secularism as the only path to modernity, and Europe’s very identity.”[[76]](#footnote-76)

The story shows that immigration is still a problem in the UK. ‘Difference’ is equated to ‘lack of integration’ and thus the minorities⎯who are carriers of this difference⎯become the reason for numerous social problems. According to this frame of interpretation of social reality, “to ‘integrate’ is a goal that has not yet been reached, and may never be reached⎯because minorities stubbornly hold on to their difference.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Yet, according to Modood, Muslim assertiveness only “mirrors existing anti-discrimination policy provision in the UK.”[[78]](#footnote-78) It is derived not from Islam, but from “contemporary western ideas about equality and multiculturalism.” To deny Muslims the same equality then is to be open to charge of double standards.

Muslim political agency has resulted in a strengthening of exclusive nationalism demonstrated by the news story, the strong agreement on its newsworthiness, and the consensual reaction to it. The Liberal response to Islam reveals a level of intolerance not found in relation to other minority groups according to Casanova and Modood and is an example of “illiberal secularism.”[[79]](#footnote-79) A liberal hegemony amongst the “secular intelligentsia”[[80]](#footnote-80) has created a situation whereby conservative religious groups have to accept behaviour they disagree with but secular liberals will not tolerate beliefs at odds with their liberal values (a real case of double standards). This is justified by the liberal majority on the basis that “the secularists teleological assumption built into theories of modernisation that one set of norms is reactionary, fundamentalists and anti-modern, whilst the other set is progressive, liberal and modern.”[[81]](#footnote-81) This is clearly at play in the case of Geert Wilders. In the hostility towards Islam from the press, Muslims clearly demonstrate a non-Christian ‘Other’ that are a threat to the values of a secular elite. The case demonstrates, then, the challenge to “the modern boundaries within which the liberal tradition had been formulated and within which it has been used to govern action and behaviour.”[[82]](#footnote-82) The previous limited religious diversity (of Europe, it is argued, although the UK has historically been better at adapting to this) has meant that increasing religious pluralism is a challenge to what many of the ‘secular intelligentsia’ thought was a progressively secular society.[[83]](#footnote-83) Religion was accommodated (even respected and protected) mainly in the private sphere on the basis of human rights. It is the public and collective nature of Islam as an ‘immigrant’ (and non-European) religion which is proving difficult to accept.[[84]](#footnote-84) Islam, Casanova argues, “reveals the limits and prejudices of modern, secularist’s toleration.”[[85]](#footnote-85) The challenge to Liberalism through globalisation, resacralisation, and the transformation of media and communication means having to answer questions previously thought settled, such as the place of religion in society.[[86]](#footnote-86) Political secularism “can no longer take for granted [its hegemony] but is having to answer its critics.”[[87]](#footnote-87) However, this also offers an opportunity for revisions.[[88]](#footnote-88) How to deal with the issues raised has had two results according to Modood: “to throw advocates of multiculturalism (with its secular biases) into political disarray, another is to stimulate accusations of cultural separatism and revive a discourse of integration.”[[89]](#footnote-89)

Although presented as a debate, coverage hardly constituted this at all but became merely an “opportunity to reinforce existing beliefs in a highly politically segmented readership,”[[90]](#footnote-90) these being the hegemonic socio-political forces of secular liberalism and liberal Christianity.[[91]](#footnote-91) As Modood suggests it is ironic that this reassertion of ideological secularism is occurring precisely because Muslims are seeking full membership of society.[[92]](#footnote-92)

Modood argues that the situation requires a “pragmatic case by case, negotiated approach to dealing with controversy and conflict: not an ideological ‘drawing a line in the sand’ mentality.”[[93]](#footnote-93) By seriously engaging with issues faced in Europe, the press could open up a constructive debate about developing appropriately dynamic and pluralistic integration in the current context, how different societies could “widen and adapt the national culture and the public symbols of national membership” to incorporate minorities; a “difference affirming equality” or “political multiculturalism” rather than a rejection of the right to assimilate.[[94]](#footnote-94) Such a “moderate secularism” based on “pluralistic institutional integration” is necessary for the operation of a “dynamic civil society.”[[95]](#footnote-95) A mutual adjustment is required for this to be a success, a “dialogic multiculturalism” that looks for consensus, compromise, or moments of learning in its encounters with others[[96]](#footnote-96) with a media that “represents all significant interests in society.”[[97]](#footnote-97)

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