

Chapter 4

The Reporting of Islam and Other Religious Traditions

‘I don’t mind talking about [religion], because I am a Muslim’, replied one Birmingham pedestrian when interviewed by Anita Rani for *The One Show*.¹ The findings of her street survey suggested that it was ‘not minorities, but the white middle classes’ who were too embarrassed to talk about religion. Their unwillingness was juxtaposed with the open religiosity of Britain’s minority groups. That they had something positive to teach the wider population was a view held by guest experts. Biologist Robert Winston, for example, advocated both the value of spirituality and the healthiness of open discussion about religion. The programme reinforced the idea of Christianity as the dominant but declining religion, in conjunction with a British identity that is multicultural. In such a representation, although minorities were ‘othered’, they were simultaneously held up as a model of self-confident religiosity for the nation.

The One Show was one of only two programmes examining a range of faiths in our television week. It reflected the close link between coverage of religious diversity and Britain’s minorities. Vox pop in style, it also included academic and religious voices and opinions. Does such coverage provide a counter to the largely negative newspaper coverage which so often reinforces a sense of ‘us’ (white British, Christian) versus ‘them’ (immigrants, Muslims)? Here we examine both newspaper and television coverage in order to answer this question and to establish the dominant frameworks of reporting on religious diversity in the late 2000s.

Increasing Diversity in Media Coverage

By 2008–2009, there had been a significant rise in the reporting of Islam by both newspapers and television from the time of our first study in the 1980s (Table 4.1), making it second only to Christianity. There were more references to Islam than either Roman Catholicism or Protestantism taken separately (Appendix 2; Appendix 3). Militancy and extremism were the principal topics in its media coverage.

¹ *The One Show*, BBC1, 3 February 2009.

Table 4.1 Media references to religions other than Christianity (1982, 2008–2009)

Religious tradition	References on television	Percentage of total references	References in newspapers	Percentage of total references	Total references 2008 (1 month)	Total references 1982 (1 month)
Islam	51	3.1	255	9.5	306	33
Judaism	10	0.6	81	3.0	91	54
Buddhism	15	0.9	28	1.0	43	2
Hinduism	6	0.4	29	1.1	35	4
Sikhism	3	0.2	10	0.4	13	6
Other religious traditions	14	0.8	6	0.2	20	6

Reporting of other religions also rose significantly, though less for Judaism which had received reasonable coverage in the early 1980s. Whilst the rise in references to other religions appears small by comparison with Islam, were we to remove those references to Islam in the newspapers that focused on extremism and terrorism (Table 4.2), the amount of coverage would be commensurate with that of other minority religions.² We would be left with just 73 references to Islam, fewer in fact than for Judaism (with 81), though this was less apparent in television coverage of Islam, which was more balanced. This illustrates an important point. Whilst the media acknowledged Britain to be a multi-faith society, coverage of religions other than Christianity was marginal except in cases where religion had a political significance.

The fact that more than a third of references to Islam on television occurred in news and current affairs programmes reinforces this. Although extremism was also a feature of the television coverage, its references to Islam were chiefly concerned with Muslims in Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey rather than those living in the UK (despite most programmes being domestic productions). This was in contrast to newspaper coverage which concentrated on the national scene, although *The Times* maintained some international focus (Table 4.2).

² In Table 4.1 'Other religious traditions' included Shinto, Confucianism, Taoism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism. Kabbalah, popular among celebrities, was a feature of newspaper coverage.

Table 4.2 References to Islam in the newspapers in 2008: Sub-categories

Islam: Sub-categories	<i>The Times</i>	<i>The Sun</i>	<i>Yorkshire Evening Post</i>	Total number of references
Islam general	12	2	0	14
Muslims in Britain	3	1	3	7
Muslims outside Britain	18	2	0	20
Militant action	92	37	12	141
Satanic Verses Affair	2	0	1	3
Extremism	17	23	1	41
Adjustment to culture	8	2	3	13
Gender and sexuality	5	3	0	8
Art	3	0	1	3
Mecca	0	0	1	1
Sufism	2	0	0	2
Mosques	0	2	0	2
Total	162	72	21	255

On television, references to Islam and other religious traditions occurred mainly in BBC programmes, in part due to the series *Around the World in 80 Faiths*. Only 10 per cent of the coverage of Islam was on ITV compared to nearly 60 per cent on BBC2. Other religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism, appeared less frequently in the news, and more often in religious broadcasting and light entertainment. Turning to the newspapers, whilst *The Times*'s coverage of Islam, Judaism and Hinduism was higher than that of *The Sun* and the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, this was partly a reflection of the greater size of the newspaper. Islamic extremism, however, was more likely to be covered in *The Sun* (with its stories of 'Preachers of Hate' for example). The *Yorkshire Evening Post* gave serious attention to religions other than Christianity and Islam, particularly to announcements and listings for Buddhism and Sikhism, thus reflecting local interests.

Newspaper Coverage of Islam

Only once in October 2008 was a story on Islam deemed sufficiently significant to hit the front page.³ Islam featured in news stories, news in brief and commentary, and only infrequently in sport, advertisements, culture, travel, jobs or reviews despite an otherwise high number of religious references in these categories. Already this hints at the type of coverage in which Islam was explicitly identified.

³ Wells 2008.

We analysed in depth three-quarters of all the articles from October 2008 in which Islam was the main focus: 51 articles from *The Times*, 26 from *The Sun* and 10 from the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. Nearly two thirds covered conflictual topics (terrorism, violence and extremism). Seven reported on anti-racism and community relations, and were broadly positive in their approach. The remaining articles showed Muslims in a predominantly negative light as a cultural threat. Whilst these topics could be found in both international and domestic news, some topics were more likely to appear in one rather than the other. The domestic focus of many stories represented a significant shift from the 1980s when Islam in the UK was barely covered. The focus then was on international conflict and Islamic beliefs, law and history, Islam being generally represented and understood within a Christian and ethnocentric perspective.

We turn now to the portrayal of Islam in the newspapers in the late 2000s. Five themes emerge as significant: terrorism, conflict abroad, extremism at home, the threat to cultural values, and discrimination, immigration and community relations.

Islam: The Terrorist Threat

It will come as no surprise that the dominant topic of newspaper coverage in 2008 was terrorism. What may be more unexpected is that all but two of the articles were about British Muslims. Whilst British Muslims had not been attributed with this label by the media prior to 9/11, it has since become the central framework for covering Muslims in the UK.⁴ In 2008, stories included British Muslims on trial for planning terrorist activities, a Muslim convert's failed toilet bomb attempt, coverage of the trial of the perpetrators of the Glasgow airport attack, and accusations that terrorist groups were transmitting coded messages in child porn. In order to illustrate the common elements in the reporting of this topic, the focus will be on just two of these, the Glasgow airport trial and the 'toilet bomber'.

'Doctor on fire seen punching and kicking police' screams the headline in *The Times* following coverage of the trial of two men who drove a jeep filled with gas canisters into Glasgow Airport in July 2007.⁵ They had been apprehended by police when the vehicle got stuck in the terminal doors. Coverage focused largely on the negative actions of the 'terrorists' in the build up to the attack in opposition to the less frequently featured but nonetheless 'heroic' action of the police and public. Aggression featured highly in the accounts as did the damage and chaos caused. The actors were explicitly categorized as 'bombers' and 'fanatics'. Defining someone in this way affects how their activities are understood and allows for action to be taken against them which does not have to be justified. Yet in the case of terrorism the discourse has been institutionalized and so appears neutral. Rather

⁴ Poole 2006.

⁵ Bird 2008.

than providing any historical or political context, the acts of terrorism were clearly linked to Islamic belief and practice. The defendants were described as ‘strictly observant Muslims’ who ‘adhered to extreme Islamic beliefs’ and yet were ‘intent on murder’.⁶ It was their Muslimness that was emphasized; other motivations, if mentioned, were dismissed. The only political motivation referred to was revenge (for the deaths of Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan) but, with no further elaboration offered, this reference implied irrationality and a blind disregard for innocent victims.

It is important to note here the culturally embedded use of language and its implications for interpretation. With categories routinely established, replicated and exchanged in media discourse, one term is easily replaceable with another – ‘extremist’ with ‘militant’ or ‘radical’, for example. The meaning of one may thus be readily transferred to another. Whether ‘extremist’ or ‘militant’ is used, both may now carry the implication of terrorism. Islam is conflated with Islamism, the former as well as the latter becoming associated with irrational radical violence. ‘Islamism’, originally established in order to disassociate Islam from fundamentalism, is now used to describe myriad political groups and activities without reference to their ‘actual practices’ and ‘discursive strands’ and how these are articulated in particular contexts.⁷ Added to this, the link to terrorism then criminalizes innocent groups and individuals.

Whilst the reporting of terrorism has become fairly homogenized, the main difference in the reporting of the Glasgow airport trial was that the defendants were doctors. Journalists puzzled over the contradiction between their training to save lives and the intent to murder. The answer was in their lineage. The defendants were othered by foregrounding their foreignness with reference to their background and birth. *The Sun*, for example, categorized one perpetrator as ‘an Iraqi-born in Britain’ and his accomplice as a ‘Saudi-born pal’.⁸

A similar process was apparent in the reporting of Nick Reilly, a Muslim convert who made a failed attempt to blow up a bomb in a toilet but instead locked himself in. Since the London bombings of 7/7, when British citizens turned on their compatriots, a new strategy has emerged in press discourse to deal with this.⁹ A process of othering takes place in which the perpetrator is individualized and so divorced from the wider Muslim community (thus countering potential accusations of racism). In this case, Reilly was represented as a criminal (e.g. through mug shots), and then, as with the doctors, linked to radicals outside the UK who had ‘brainwashed’ him with their ‘extreme religious and murderous ideology’.¹⁰ Thus the link was made to Islam, but also othered by being located outside the UK. This process was made explicit in this story where the central character was constructed

⁶ O’Neill and Bird 2008.

⁷ Kundnani 2007, p. 49.

⁸ Hughes 2008.

⁹ Featherstone, Holohan and Poole 2010, pp. 169–86.

¹⁰ O’Neill and Bird 2008.

as a naïve individual susceptible to brainwashing, and suffering from Asperger's syndrome (this vulnerability was offered as the only possible explanation for his conversion). Adopted in articles in both *The Sun* and *The Times*, this strategy was encapsulated in the opening sentence of the latter: 'A vulnerable Muslim convert was persuaded online by shadowy Pakistan-based extremists into trying to carry out a suicide bomb attack on a busy restaurant.'¹¹

Significantly, it was technology which was marked out as central in this process: *The Times* referred to the process as 'Internet jihad'. In a supporting article, the paper's Crime and Security Editor concluded that Reilly had been 'radicalized from afar' and quoted the 'respected Jamestown Foundation' arguing that the Internet had 'become the easiest and safest way ... to reach young militants, who likely lack training, and steer them under al-Qaeda's general command'.¹² This focus on the Internet as a tool for immoral purposes was an example of the way in which new technologies are often blamed for society's ills and have consistently been a target for the conservative press (for example, films and computer games). A further example was evident several days later in *The Times*: 'YouTube left bombers page open despite police concern.'¹³

As Kundnani has noted, this discourse 'reduces widespread sociological trends occurring across a generation of young Muslims to a unilinear process of terrorist radicalization' and fails to acknowledge the multiple political and theological paths – predominantly non-violent – to which a 'new Muslim identity' can lead.¹⁴ This homogenized radicalization discourse also reinforces the idea of collective responsibility, of leaders who should control their communities. Connected to radicals outside the UK, the responsibility nevertheless is seen as lying within.

Only two of the articles linking Islam and terrorism could be interpreted as critical and these were politically motivated, aimed at undermining the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, and his proposal to allow terrorist suspects to be held for 42 days without trial. All the articles analysed were hard news stories bar one, and this demonstrated the consensus around this interpretation of terrorism about which it was clearly felt little further discussion or debate was needed. Causes that might implicate the West were ignored, and no attempt was made to create a discursive space in which Muslims might speak back to power without being labelled 'terrorist'.¹⁵

¹¹ France and Coles 2008; Fresco 2008.

¹² O'Neill 2008.

¹³ O'Neill 2008.

¹⁴ Kundnani 2007, pp. 56–60.

¹⁵ Kundnani 2007.

Conflict Abroad

Apart from reports on terrorism, which were largely domestic, stories about conflict tended to be international, and located in war zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Restricting our analysis to articles that made reference to Islam or the Taliban, we identified 22 articles, half of which were about the murder of an aid worker – Gayle Williams – in Afghanistan. Of the remainder, all but one came from *The Times*, reflecting its greater interest in international affairs.

This story was covered by all the papers but generated an extended analysis in *The Times*. The most significant point of debate was whether, as a Serve Afghanistan employee, Williams was a Christian missionary (as accused by the Taliban). This was refuted through a number of strategies: her categorization as an ‘aid worker’ rather than missionary; overuse of the word ‘claim’ (in relation to the Taliban accusation); the presentation of such claims in inverted commas, as in ‘Taliban shoot aid worker for “preaching”’; and the assertion that the charity was, in fact, a secular organization (later refuted by the charity’s Director).¹⁶ This allowed for the construction of the Taliban as misguided and cowardly murderers.

In *The Sun*’s coverage of the story, however, Williams was clearly constructed as Christian (but not a missionary). Its explanation for her death was repeatedly because ‘she was a Christian’ and also British, ‘a Londoner’ (even though she had joint South African and British citizenship), marking her as ‘one of us’.¹⁷ This is part of a process of personalization, with a focus on positive attributes, to encourage empathy with the victim, and contrasts with the representation of civilian deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq caused by UK forces which usually only register statistically. This media focus on the persecution of Christians in Muslim countries was also the central feature of a letter to *The Times* and, since the ‘Arab Spring’, has become a more prominent feature of reporting as coverage seeks to identify the negative effects of the rise of Islamist governments.¹⁸

A further issue raised in relation to this story was the impact of the event on charities working in conflict zones.¹⁹ Articles highlighting this stressed the risk to aid workers, and contrasted the moral benevolence of Western workers with the ideologically irresponsible and immoral actions of the perpetrators. A patriarchal and colonialist residue was discernible in such articles, the message being that the chaos in these countries required intervention from the West, as illustrated in the commentary ‘Rescuing Afghanistan remains a noble ambition’.²⁰ Although, this was the only article that questioned the identity of Williams’ killers, that differentiated between Taliban extremists and moderates,

¹⁶ Coghlan 2008; Mukarji 2008.

¹⁷ O’Shea 2008.

¹⁸ Lyle 2008.

¹⁹ *The Sun* 2008h.

²⁰ Linklater 2008.

and denied an imperial motive for a UK presence, the discourse of civilizing the uncivilized was also implicit.

As with articles on terrorism, there was a lack of contextualization. The Taliban were framed as outlaws (reinforced with repeated references to the drugs trade) whose lack of public support meant there was little need to justify action against them. Afghanistan was represented as a country in a downward spiral requiring intervention to contain terrorism.²¹ Commentators tended to reinforce and justify the presence of Western troops and agencies abroad at a time when plans were being made for their withdrawal.

Extremism at Home: ‘Preachers of Hate’

Other articles that focused on extremist activity were domestic stories featuring ‘preachers of hate’. This term was coined by the British tabloid press to describe Muslim clerics who preached an anti-Western message, though on rare occasions it was applied to a non-Muslim if deemed sufficiently ‘extreme’, such as the leader of the Westboro Baptist Church.²² Despite his propensity to ‘hate speech’, it was not applied by the British papers to the right-wing Dutch MP, Geert Wilders – though it was used of him in sections of the American press.²³ This representation of preachers of hate has parallels with other media coverage of extremism and terrorism which reinforces the sense of a generalized threat and thus increases support for repressive action.

Most of the relevant coverage – there were ten articles in October 2008 – was in *The Sun*, reflecting its populist approach to these topics. The obsessive pursuit of Omar Bakri Muhammad and Abu Hamza (the latter frequently referred to as ‘Evil Hook’), as well as other stories that fit the framework, serves two further tabloid purposes: to reinforce an anti-immigrationist stance and to attack government spending. Abu Hamza’s excessive welfare, legal and prison costs – ‘£3m bill as Evil Hook stays put for 5 years’ – was a story that exploited the perception that immigrants receive unfair benefits.²⁴ This and other articles referred to specific examples of hate speech and associations with terror, and yet also demonstrated the individual’s perfidiousness: e.g. Bakri Muhammad’s divorce and new young wife, his pole dancer daughter and ex-wife’s fraud. They operated as a positive representation of the in-group, in this case, the tolerance of the British compared to ‘their’ intolerance: ‘People in this country do all they can to understand the Muslim way of life’, yet ‘they’ object to the most innocuous things, such as the

²¹ Evans 2008a.

²² Widely reported in the press, the Westboro Baptist Church in the US was renowned in the late 2000s for its open intolerance, particularly of homosexuality.

²³ Poole 2012a, pp. 453–68.

²⁴ *The Sun* 2008d.

television show the *X Factor*.²⁵ Each recurring story confirmed the pattern of behaviour (and, in the case of Bakri Muhammad, repeated the previous charges against him), and served as a contrast to coverage of Geert Wilders in which the focus was on freedom of speech (see Chapter 7). This simplistic characterization constructed these Muslim clerics as bogeymen, easy to dismiss, hate and blame without any further contextual information, and often reinforced by establishment figures supportive of the paper's own line. Counter-discourse was noteworthy by its absence.

More generally, the construction of asylum seekers as scroungers, dependent on 'our' goodwill and with nothing to contribute, obscures the causes of their displacement in which Britain might itself be implicated. Instead of being seen as victims, they have become scapegoats for all the anxieties and uncertainties of living in a globalized world.²⁶

Islam Within: Threatening Cultural Values

Prior to 9/11, it was within this framework, of a threat to the nation's cultural values, that British Muslims were most likely to be represented and understood.²⁷ The message was that Muslims, due to rigid beliefs at odds with UK culture and practices, posed a threat to the British way of life. Moore, Mason and Lewis suggested that such stories had moved back to the forefront of coverage on Islam following a decline in terrorist activity since 7/7.²⁸ This discourse positions Islam as a missionary religion and Muslims as those who seek to change British culture and practices, thus leading to a homogenization of 'them' and 'us' presented within an exclusive binary relationship. It naturalizes the censorious aspects of the religion, focusing on what is forbidden, in contrast to the representation of Britain as inherently liberal and tolerant.

As Table 4.2 showed, this played out in a number of articles in the autumn of 2008 (16 in all), including stories about women, relationships, religious practice and art. Eleven were in *The Times*, three in *The Sun*, and two in the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. Two stories were given extensive coverage, one of a couple being prosecuted in Dubai for inappropriate sexual behaviour in public, and a second which featured a Sony video game withdrawn for including a song that sampled verses from the Qur'an.²⁹ Overall, the topics covered were diverse: a couple trying to adopt a second Moroccan child but thwarted by British procedures and bureaucracy; the first female Muslim to lead prayers in the UK; Muslims and cohabitation law; young Muslims challenging traditional cultural norms (all in

²⁵ Letter from Christine Savage, *The Sun*, 24 October 2008; Wells 2008.

²⁶ Kundnani 2007, p. 88.

²⁷ Moore, Mason and Lewis 2008.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *The Times* had two articles on each story and *The Sun* one on each.

The Times). *The Sun* included a double page spread by Julie Burchill (a well-known feminist writer) on her preference for 'Page 3 girls' over women dressed in *burgas*.

Most of these articles made a similar assertion, that Islam is prohibitionist, as the case of the Sony video game demonstrates. The tactic used here was to trivialize whatever offended Muslims and maximize the problems caused to those inconvenienced by their complaint. Both *The Times* and *The Sun* went out of their way to describe the game, *Little Big Planet*, as harmless: it was 'ultra cute' and 'funny' according to *The Sun*, 'cute', 'upbeat' and full of 'charm' in *The Times*.³⁰ For *The Sun*, the offending song was just a 'ditty', recorded in fact by a 'Grammy award winner who is himself a Muslim'.³¹ This made Muslims look irrational in their demands: 'Sony have had to recall and dump millions of copies ... because Muslims have taken offence'.³² The headline 'Video games axed' disguised the fact that the launch of the game had in fact only been postponed. Muslims were conceptualized as 'hardliners' whilst Sony were depicted as apologetic and proactive in responding to complaints. *The Times*'s portrayal, though more measured – the game only 'offending some Muslims' and presented as part of Sony's wider competitive strategy – nevertheless reinforced this view of Islam as censorious and Muslims as demanding.³³

Elsewhere, *The Times* offered a more nuanced image of Muslims in an interview with a moderate Islamic leader.³⁴ However, by focusing on internal controversy within Islam, it nevertheless highlighted the negative repressive response from conservative groups. This is typical of the good Muslim/bad Muslim approach of coverage which delineates an 'acceptable' interpretation of Islam from others that are deemed beyond the pale. In this case, by juxtaposing the leader's pro-feminist views as the antithesis of a general Muslim response, Islam was shown to be misogynistic and backward with respect to women and equality.³⁵ Despite its positive overtones, this article made space for the repetition of negative views about Islam regarding women, headscarves at school, *madrasas*, and freedom of speech whilst averting accusations of racism (by putting them in the mouth of a critical Muslim). The article also served as an attack on the Muslim establishment in Britain for not standing up to extremism and being dominated by 'Saudi theology'.³⁶

Different again, the *Yorkshire Evening Post* demonstrated local news values in its representation of Islam. One commentator, through humour, used a softer approach to tackling discrimination by taking the stereotype of a Muslim woman in

³⁰ Brown 2008; Ahmed 2008.

³¹ Brown 2008.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ahmed 2008.

³⁴ Power 2008.

³⁵ Ibid. See also Burchill 2008.

³⁶ Power 2008.

hijab and turning it on its head, thus challenging possible prejudices. Its empathetic perspective reflected local diversity and this was evident in its coverage.³⁷

In general, in coverage of cultural differences, Islam was problematized, homogenized, essentialized and deemed obstructive. Whilst some of the coverage highlighted discrimination and diversity issues, overall, ‘difference’ was the central thread. Why this emphasis on difference? Important in maintaining power and superiority, differences that were once encouraged and preserved within multiculturalism are now to be feared as the need for integration and cultural protectionism is stressed. As we saw in the previous chapter, British values have been constructed and defined from the top down, often using minority cultures as a foil, thus further excluding Muslims. Emphasizing ‘their’ difference in opposition to ‘our’ tolerance places the onus on minority groups rather than wider society to change. Anyone failing to adopt these ‘shared values’ can be labelled ‘extreme’ and ‘a threat to society’. As critics have argued, reifying the cultural masks the root causes of social problems – sociological, economic and political – as well as the inequalities in Western societies.³⁸

Discrimination, Immigration and Community Relations

What about coverage that may be more sympathetic towards Islam? Articles varied in their openness towards Muslims with some appearing positive whilst nevertheless having an underlying agenda. One example was a double-page spread featuring an interview with the new Minister for Immigration, Phil Woolas.³⁹ Starting with a positive message – being tough on racism but also tough on immigration – the article then rehearsed various anxieties using Woolas’s statements to support concerns about migrants’ use of English, the *hijab*, ‘health tourism’ and arranged marriages (with Muslims implicated in several of these). *The Times* in general located the domestic integration problem within the Muslim community due to its lack of assimilation.⁴⁰ A more sympathetic approach was adopted, however, when the action was located outside the national context: for example, in one article the Danish authorities were criticized for failing to protect Iraqi interpreters.⁴¹

Articles with positive discourses could be found in the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. Two examples, featuring a charity football match between the police and a multi-faith team, focused on unity and working together through everyday activities like sport.⁴² They emphasized positive community representations for the sake of

³⁷ McPhee 2008.

³⁸ Kundnani 2007.

³⁹ Thomson and Sylvester 2008.

⁴⁰ For example, Kerbaj and Gledhill 2008.

⁴¹ Kerbaj 2008.

⁴² Edwards 2008; Rosser 2008.

social cohesion. But in only one of four articles on anti-racism – also on football – did *The Times* acknowledge that Muslims do indeed suffer from racism (as opposed to always benefitting from positive discrimination).⁴³ Sport is one subject on which Muslims at times receive a positive press: high achieving individuals are celebrated, but often their ‘Muslimness’ remains unnoticed, as in the case of Mo Farah, rarely called Mohamed, who won double gold at the London Olympics in 2012.

Other Religious Traditions in the Newspapers: Victimhood, Aggression, Exoticism and the Invisible

The paucity of academic study of religious representations in the British media is particularly marked in the case of other major religious traditions, especially Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism. Although all these religions received some coverage in the autumn of 2008 (we analysed 50 articles), little attention was given to their internal diversity. As we will show, their treatment tended to be reductive and stereotypical.

Judaism

There have been more studies on media portrayals of Judaism than other minority religions, often focusing on anti-Semitism.⁴⁴ It has received more attention in the British media than religions associated with communities that have their origins outside Europe. As another Abrahamic religion, it is often denoted as closer to Christianity, whilst Asian religions are generally collectivized. Although, there has been an increase in the coverage of all religious traditions, the small rise in references to Judaism is probably explained by the increase in newspaper size, and does not necessarily relate directly to Britain’s increasing diversity.

References to Judaism in autumn 2008 focused on the Holocaust, seven articles being commemorative, two historical and two on Holocaust denial. Four focused on politics in Israel. There were only two solely domestic articles, one examining Jewish schools in Britain, the other, in the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, reporting on an historic Jewish graveyard succumbing to subsidence. As well as being commemorative, these articles used current and historical events as a means of social commentary. For example, in a similar vein to its coverage of Geert Wilders (see Chapter 7), *The Times* distanced itself from the Holocaust denier, Fredrick Toben, and yet used the event to support an argument about British sovereignty (questioning the practice of extraditing people for activities, such as ‘thought crime’ that are illegal abroad but not in the UK).⁴⁵ Articles about

⁴³ Barnes 2008b.

⁴⁴ Cohen 2012; Finkelstein 2008; Gertel 2003; Harrison 2006.

⁴⁵ Gibb 2008.

Israel represented the situation as a struggle between two ‘opposing forces’ (the secularists and Orthodox Jews). They were sympathetic to the secularist position and critical of ‘ultra Orthodox parties’ and their aggressive policies towards Palestinians. However, they were not labelled ‘extremist’, and more context and history was provided than in articles on conflict involving Islam.⁴⁶

The only solely domestic issue in *The Times* covered a ruling that Jewish schools must open their doors to other faiths. It adopted an anti-segregationist position as with the reporting on Muslim schools, but was given comparatively little attention (featured in *News In Brief*).⁴⁷ ‘Separatism’ in the Jewish community is evidently not seen as problematic to the same degree as it is in Muslim communities.

Opposing anti-Semitism was a key narrative that runs through these articles. In terms of its treatment, anti-Semitism was largely located in the past and exclusively outside the UK (with more emphasis on what UK citizens and authorities did to save victims).⁴⁸ However, the parallel between this and the discrimination currently experienced by other minorities was made in four articles, including an editorial. The treatment of the histories of those who suffered in the Holocaust (personal narratives, witness reports) contrasted with the utilitarian coverage of the numerous civilian casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the basis of our sample, Jews were cast either as victims (Holocaust) or aggressors (in Israel), the only exception being a case of inter-faith relations (between Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Sir Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, on a joint visit to Auschwitz).⁴⁹

Buddhism

Buddhism appeared in several contexts: in terms of its cultural influence (here as part of the practice of liberal-minded celebrities), in travel news and advertisements, reporting on the Dalai Lama and the struggle for Tibetan independence, and local events. It tended to be positively represented as a peaceful, spiritual non-materialistic religion with an ‘ancient’ and ‘majestical’ history. Its adherents were depicted engaging in peaceful protest but also as victims of Chinese aggression.

The beliefs and practices of Buddhism, like those of other ‘Eastern’ religions, were subject to exoticization. The depiction of ‘Buddha boy’, who was thought to be a reincarnation of the Buddha, was a case in point.⁵⁰ His followers were portrayed as unquestioning, blindly following their faith. *The Times* took a rationalist sceptical position in relation to such stories.

The Times’s coverage targeted international contexts whilst *The Sun*’s articles were domestic. The *Yorkshire Evening Post* coverage was local and event-focused.

⁴⁶ Hilder 2008.

⁴⁷ *The Times* 2008e.

⁴⁸ For example, Jackson 2008.

⁴⁹ Klein 2008.

⁵⁰ Blakely 2008.

Hinduism

Coverage of Hinduism – which by comparison with references to Buddhism was very negative – comprised largely of *The Times*' reporting of religious violence in India. Five of its eight articles focused on 'brutal' Hindu violence towards local Christians in Orissa, India. The articles emphasized the persecution of Christians (through rape, burnings, forced conversions) in a similar way to the reporting of Islam by concentrating on the negative actions of the aggressors. The Hindu Nationalist movement (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, RSS) was referred to as a 'fundamentalist group' and 'extremist'. The aggressors (the RSS and opposing groups) were variously described as 'marauding mobs' and 'armed thugs', and were illustrated with images of worshippers with guns.⁵¹ This was compared to the compassion shown by a local Christian humanitarian organization.⁵² Other articles focused on similarly conflict-ridden events, intra- and inter-religious and ethnic violence, and the economic and social chaos arising from the mix of religion and politics. Only one article had a positive angle – the opening of a trade route through Kashmir – but equally made reference to its aim to 'help quell religious violence from separatists'.⁵³ All coverage of Hinduism was international, located outside the UK, as hard news. In this coverage, Indian society was depicted as hierarchical, conflict-ridden, corrupt and uncivilized. It reflected a wider pattern of coverage of the developing world which has become familiar in the reporting of the struggle between secular and religious forces following the Middle Eastern and North African uprisings. Underlying this coverage is suspicion towards religious movements that challenge or curtail secular attempts to create more progressive states.

Sikhism and Other Religions

Coverage of Hinduism was in sharp contrast to coverage of Sikhism, which was comprised only of domestic news stories. Sikhs were mentioned in passing as a feature of multiculturalism. Treatment was fairly benign with only the occasional reference to moments of tension in the history of their integration in the UK. Generally, they were held up as a model of assimilation, thus gaining little attention from the media. Accepting Sikhs within a notion of British identity has been deemed less problematic than is the case with Muslims. Most of the articles about Sikhs focused on arts and culture – entertainment, religious festivals, theatre productions, and a feature on the centenary of the first Sikh temple in the UK. Reporters used positive predicates, including 'wealthy', 'learned', 'faithful', and 'pride'; reference was made to Sikhs as 'soldiers' who had fought on the side of

⁵¹ Page and Blakely 2008.

⁵² Nazir-Ali 2008b.

⁵³ Page 2008.

the British.⁵⁴ Coverage was located in *The Times* with some reference to local festivals in the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. This does not, of course, preclude negative coverage, as we have seen with Hinduism. One negative comment for example, occurred in a letter criticizing 'separatist' police organizations.

The two articles on other religions featured Shinto and Taoism, the latter exoticizing Taoist sex, but in the context of a rational interpretation of religious scripture.⁵⁵ Shinto was discussed, though incidentally, with reference to the Emperor of Japan who it was thought should 'atone personally for war atrocities' to the South Koreans in order to restore political relations in the region.⁵⁶

To summarize, about two thirds of the coverage of religions other than Christianity and Islam was international with much of this located in *The Times*. Coverage in *The Sun* and the *Yorkshire Evening Post* had a more domestic focus and featured either local issues or popular culture and history. *The Times* shifted between a secularist rationalist position, when faced with extreme religious expression, and identification with Christianity, particularly when under attack. The articles covering inter-faith activity in the UK had a more positive tone but were few and far between in this particular sample.⁵⁷

This analysis demonstrates that, as with any other topic, common news values apply to coverage of religious groups. The topics that dominated coverage of Islam equally informed the coverage of other religions, international news stories emphasizing conflict and domestic stories focusing on cultural values and multiculturalism. The media do not appear to be interested in religious diversity *per se*. Rather, the coverage of religion is limited unless it resonates strongly with these news values.

Television Coverage: A Wider Perspective

The exoticization of Eastern religions was also highlighted in television coverage. In the first week of February 2009, on BBC1, BBC2 and ITV1, there were just two programmes that featured minority faiths (other than Islam): *The One Show* (ITV) and *Around the World in 80 Faiths* (BBC2), both of which provided a microcosm of wider television coverage.

Religion abroad was typified by *Around the World in 80 Faiths*.⁵⁸ This popular series, part of the BBC's religious broadcasting provision, was presented by Peter Owen-Jones, a Bohemian Anglican vicar. In eight episodes Owen-Jones travelled the continents, reporting on and participating in the practices of a variety of religious groups and sects. Each hour-long episode featured ten religions and as

⁵⁴ Binyon 2008b.

⁵⁵ Godson and Stuttford 2008.

⁵⁶ Parry 2008.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Binyon 2008a.

⁵⁸ *Around the World in 80 Faiths*, BBC2, 6 February 2009.

such required careful selection and editing. As might be expected in a popular television format, it was the exotic and unusual that was featured: sword stabbing rituals in Indonesia, voodoo in Africa and whirling dervishes in Syria. The first episode in February focused on India and included items on Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, the Bishnoi of Rajasthan, Nath Firewalkers, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism and Jainism. With the religions presented not as collective, but as individual quests for enlightenment, the themes were devotion, dedication, hardship, sacrifice and tradition, all of which were appreciated by Owen-Jones. The spectacle of him participating in rituals and the direct address to camera invited viewers to share the experience, and to feel its emotional and spiritual intensity, the symbols of travel signifying his journey both literally and metaphorically.

Whilst the series constituted a positive portrayal of religious diversity and its complexity and depth that was unusual in media coverage of religion, it also emphasized the irrational, weird, strange and even extreme practices, and therefore inevitably contributed to othering them. Some religious stereotypes were challenged – by teenage Tibetan monks with familiar-looking bedrooms, for example – but Owen-Jones nevertheless depicted Indian spirituality as ‘beautiful’, ‘incredible’, as ‘seep[ing] into everything’. The series also provided a form of visual tourism. Owen-Jones’s own religiosity provided a reference point for viewers, but the incessant focus on diversity made it hard to differentiate between the religions, with exotic practices becoming indistinguishable from one another. In its positive approach these religions were represented as non-violent and self-sacrificing; Islam on the other hand was presented as the aggressor in relation to two of the groups featured.

How was Islam represented in the wider TV coverage? Six programmes mentioned Islam, including *The One Show* on BBC1 followed by a news item on Iran.⁵⁹ On BBC2, two documentaries, *Explore: From Istanbul to Anatolia*, on Turkey, and an episode of the series *Iran and the West*, marking the 30th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, were aired.⁶⁰ On ITV1, coverage included a documentary on Afghanistan, *Doctors and Nurses at War*, and a feature on Ross Kemp’s experience of filming in Afghanistan on *The Titchmarsh Show* (a teatime chat show) in which Muslims were portrayed either as either aggressors or victims. More interesting overall was the greater range and complexity of television reporting on Islam.

Iran and the West explored the history of political relations with the West, particularly the US, in three episodes. Despite its in-depth coverage, it nevertheless reproduced well-established discourses about Iran.⁶¹ This first episode, ‘The Man who Changed the World’, presented the history of the Islamic Revolution in Iran from a largely American perspective (including the seizure of the US embassy

⁵⁹ BBC1, 3 February 2009.

⁶⁰ BBC2, 8 February and 7 February 2009.

⁶¹ Said 1981.

in Iran and the hostage crisis, followed by the start of the Iran-Iraq war).⁶² Here, the US was represented as the victim of political manipulation by a devious and clever mastermind, Ayatollah Khomeini. The revolution was constructed as the political ambition of one man who manipulated his people and took advantage of an unsuspecting and ill-prepared American government. By supporting the siege, 'Khomeini had breached the basic rule that allows diplomats to work in a crisis. In doing so he had reversed the decision he had given to his Foreign Minister who had been at his side since his exile'.⁶³

Employing the category 'the West' suggested an alliance against Iran, masking the differences between different countries' relations with Iran, and reinforcing the idea of a clash of civilizations. The construction of 'Iran' in the UK and America was shaped and fixed with reference to the Iranian revolution and there has been little deviation ever since, as was further illustrated by a BBC evening news item which reported on the launch of an Iranian communications satellite through a lens of suspicion about Iran's nuclear weapons programme. In this, as in other coverage, Iran was portrayed as menacing, an irrational, untrustworthy aggressor in the face of attempts by the West to make peace.⁶⁴ A later episode of the series did, however, offer an alternative construction by featuring Iran's offer to help the US and its allies in the war against Saddam Hussein. Such counter-discourse rarely occurs in mainstream television news (with the exception of Channel 4, renowned for its more oppositional perspective). Whilst to some extent this series represented an attempt to provide a more nuanced assessment of relations with Iran, it could not help but reinforce the perception that Iran is primarily of interest because of its relationship with 'the West'.

As a result of the variety of television channels and genres, there is considerable diversity of representations as well as some counter discourse. This was evident in the BBC2 travel documentary, *Explore*, which offered a more complex portrayal challenging both stereotypes and the homogenization of Islam, and providing a rare glimpse into the lives of a diversity of ordinary Muslims.⁶⁵ In the same week this was also demonstrated in the BBC4 documentary, *Rageh Inside Iran*, and in Omid Djalili's alternative comedy.⁶⁶

This diversity provides a contrast to television programming from the early 1980s when coverage of minority religions was scarce. Religious broadcasting focused generally on Christian 'ecumenism, values and pastoral care', the exception being *Everyman*, a long-running BBC religious affairs programme

⁶² *Iran and the West*, BBC2, 7 February 2009.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ BBC News, BBC1, 3 February 2009.

⁶⁵ *Explore: From Istanbul to Anatolia*, BBC2, 8 February 2009. For further discussion, see Chapter 5.

⁶⁶ *Rageh Inside Iran*, BBC4, 7 February 2009; *No Age 14*, More4, 4 February 2009.

(1977–2005), and London Weekend Television's *Credo* (1978–1986), which occasionally featured other religious traditions.⁶⁷

The Reception of Media Coverage of Religions

In order to understand what people thought of mainstream media coverage of religions, we commissioned five focus groups in multicultural urban centres.⁶⁸ They included adults from diverse social backgrounds some of whom were religious and others not. The participants were too few in number for the results to be generalized, but it is nevertheless noteworthy that there were no major differences between the religious and non-religious groups. Some general patterns were observed:

- Participants were generally liberal-minded and anti-racist.
- People felt that Muslims were poorly represented but within a wider negative representation and marginalization of religion, including Christianity. The news in general was thought to focus on the negative, controversial and sensational. One Muslim felt the media was responsible for 'tainting Muslims'.
- Although views across and within the groups were very mixed, the religious groups engaged in more passionate debate, even argument, about the specifics of their faith and beliefs that they felt had been misunderstood.
- People were aware of media bias and its role in influencing people's ideas, but tried to resist it.

When asked to think about religious representations the participants remembered from television, Islam did not feature that often. Some mentioned wars in the Middle East (particularly with Israel), the soap opera *Eastenders*, the documentary series *Dispatches* (which has been responsible for several negative programmes about British Islam), the film *East is East* (which was enjoyed whilst still being found to be stereotypical), the documentary *Around the World in 80 Faiths* (which was praised) and the British comedian, Omid Djalili (born to Iranian parents). Whilst humour and the ability to mock oneself was seen by most as a positive approach, one Muslim participant felt that this was inappropriate and demonstrated a 'lack of respect'. He argued that this was due to different 'cultural contexts', the lack of understanding of which led to tension between Muslims and non-Muslims.

⁶⁷ Knott 1984a, p. 65; Knott and Mitchell 2012, pp. 252–4.

⁶⁸ Five focus groups (one in Stoke-on-Trent, two in Birmingham and two in London), with 44 participants in total. McCloskey 2010. In the 1980s project, data on the reception of religious broadcasting and religion on British television was gathered by means of a survey carried out in the city of Leeds. Knott 1984a, pp. 25–34.

Homogenising Effect

The most significant finding was that, across the board, the participants clearly delineated between extremism and religion and were keen to emphasize the variation within religions. They were aware of how the media homogenize Muslims without explicitly saying so:

The media do get things wrong, they always portray it as a religious group, but in actual fact it isn't, it's an extremist group. (Birmingham, non-religious)

Something I've noticed, that is almost unique to Islam, in the sense that if you look at the media they always refer to it or brand it as the Nation of Islam ... when really there are Islamic people everywhere, just like the Christian people. (Birmingham, Jewish)

Dominant Discourses

Some dominant discourses about Islam were repeated (by three people, two non-religious and one Christian). One second generation, non-religious Asian participant argued (with reference to Muslims) that people should 'abide by British rules': 'Our parents had to fit in and we'd have to do the same in their countries'. One Christian talked about the marginalization of Christianity and some people felt that this had led to political correctness (see Chapter 3).

Why did they think Muslims were represented negatively? The predominant reason given was economic – the commercial imperative to make sales which leads to a focus on the controversial and sensational.

The media is always going to show the bad side of religion because that's what in the end gets the ratings, that's what sells the papers ... they get more publicity if they show the shock stories. (Stoke, non-religious)

This reason extended from news about religion to news in general, and foreign news was mentioned as being particularly negative.

However, a number of people were also aware of the political context. Most non-Muslims talked about Islam being topical whilst a few Muslims explicitly linked ongoing coverage of Islam to the war on terror:

If this guy came into the country and said stuff about the Bible, he would not have got no publicity, no nothing, that's the issue, there is a war on terror, so much media hype. (London, Muslim)

However, one non-religious participant went further:

The war on terror is a war between Christianity and Islam, extremist, but that's essentially what it is. (Stoke, non-religious)

A couple of participants in this group also touched on the idea that negativity towards religion in the media could be due to the decline of religion in society.

Muslims were also critical of the sources used by the media. They had the knowledge to reject them as being non-representative, whilst the inclusion of Muslim sources to the non-Muslim participants was an indication of balance.

Other Religions

Although coverage of all religions was thought to be mainly negative, on reflection a number of people talked of the 'peaceful nature' of some religions (in particular Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism) that did not attract negative publicity (as well as being less connected to 'the West').

There is no violence or nothing, like the controversial issues going on, in the Hindu people, that's why it is not in the media, unless someone ridicules a temple like an Eastern temple, then it comes into the picture. (London, Hindu)

When you talk about religion the same three names keep cropping up, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, but I've read about other religions, like Rastafarianism, Buddhism, which is probably more of the spirituality kind of thing than the actual religion, and Hinduism, and I've seen those religions portrayed in a more positive way, probably because they are less idolising than, you know less do this, do that, less dictatorial. (London, non-religious)

It was suggested that the inclusion of positive stories may counteract the current negative press, and that local papers could be a possible medium for this. Other suggestions for positive change included avoiding stereotypes and emphasizing commonalities, engaging in socially responsible journalism including 'balance' and 'facts'. The media should also do more to show the human face of religion and real life situations, lives and beliefs of people.⁶⁹

There is no doubt that coverage of minority religions, especially Islam, has grown considerably since the early 1980s. In the propositions posited in Chapter 1, we suggested that media professionals may be animated by religious values that relate to national culture, how religion is of major public concern and can be important in providing both subject matter and language for media narratives. In the media's current focus on topics of militancy, terrorism and cultural threat in relation to other religions we can see how coverage has its roots in the current political and economic context. Anxieties about cohesion, integration and national identity have led to a focus on extremism and cultural difference,

⁶⁹ For similar suggestions, see articles by Hussain 2012 and Singh 2012.

especially in relation to Islam. Any behaviour that seems to contradict 'British' values is deemed extreme, and an integrationist discourse prevails. Despite the relatively small number of terrorist activities since 7/7, the media is saturated by images of Islamism, thus demonstrating a particularly intransigent journalistic approach. However, the research also shows, through an analysis of television, how representations can diversify in different media formats. The focus groups, although small-scale, indicate how far these interpretations are challenged by ordinary people. At a time of heightened economic and political sensitivity, these representations, nevertheless, establish an ethical challenge to journalists to produce more measured and responsible journalism.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ This challenge was reflected in Lord Justice Leveson's report, *An Inquiry into the Culture, Practice and Ethics of the Press* (Leveson 2012), which was being publicly debated in late 2012. On the difficulties of harmonious reporting, see Gledhill 2012, pp. 89–98.