

*promoting access to White Rose research papers*



**Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York**  
**<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>**

---

This is an author produced version of a paper published in **Political Theology**.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/75857>

---

**Published paper**

Harrison, J. and Crossley, J. (2013) *The mediation of the distinction of “religion” and “politics” by the UK press on the occasion of Pope Benedict XVI’s state visit to the UK*. *Political Theology*, 14. ISSN 1462-317X (In Press)

---

## **The Mediation of the Distinction of “Religion” and “Politics” by the UK Press on the Occasion of Pope Benedict XVI’s State Visit to the UK**

### **Abstract**

One feature of modern political liberalism is its acceptance of the superiority of secular political reasoning over faith-based reasoning where matters of practical politics are concerned. The distinction religion/politics has become a defining feature of modern political liberalism. We examined how this distinction was mediated by the UK national press through a case study of its reporting of Pope Benedict XVI’s state visit to the UK in 2010. The case study evaluates the following four propositions: 1) “religion” is benign and relevant to “politics”; 2) “religion” is malign and relevant to “politics”; 3) “religion” is assumed to be irrelevant to “politics” but is dismissed positively; and 4) “religion” is regarded as irrelevant to “politics” but is dismissed negatively. We conclude there is a dominant shared assumption in the UK press supporting propositions two and three: that religion is a good thing when it conforms to a pre-existing narrative of political liberalism and a bad thing when it does not and that religion was judged in terms of its “political” values rather than in terms of its “religious” values.

### **Key words**

UK press, Benedict XVI, secularism, liberalism, John Rawls

## 1. Introduction

It is difficult to over emphasise the importance that John Rawls has had on our conception of political liberalism, what it should be and how it should be undertaken. One aspect of Rawls' version of political liberalism forms the basis of this paper – the relationship between religion and politics. The modern Rawlsian settlement seems to be that public reasoning with regard to fundamental political arrangements, that is matters of basic justice and constitutional arrangements, are best viewed as decidedly secular with religious reasoning acting as second best to better arguments made according to the basis of “reasons specified by one of a family of reasonable liberal conceptions of justice”.<sup>1</sup> In other words the Rawlsian liberal conception of politics is undertaken through a common conception of agreed contractarian reasons which form the basis for the expression of a liberal political and social unity. To do other for Rawls is to enter the world of “private reasoning” and to reject the legitimacy of political liberalism and its contractarian base in dealing with matters of practical politics.

Following Rawls the prevailing political liberal conception of the relationship of religion to politics is that the religious and the non-religious alike should endorse what he calls a “reasonable constitutional democracy”,<sup>2</sup> even if such endorsement is at variance with religious or moral beliefs, since for Rawls secular political values supersede comprehensive religious or moral values as well as create the conditions for toleration between the “rivalry of doctrines”.<sup>3</sup> As Kelly notes, for Rawls “A commitment to public reason means that in making political choices about matters of basic justice, we should justify our choices with

---

<sup>1</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2005), xlvii-lv.

<sup>2</sup> John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 151.

<sup>3</sup> Rawls, *Law of Peoples*, 152.

reasons that do not suppose the truth or unique value of our broader moral beliefs or religious faith.”<sup>4</sup>

Given the widespread acceptance of this Rawlsian view in the West,<sup>5</sup> we chose to examine the question of to what extent the UK press<sup>6</sup> subscribed to this Rawlsian view of secular political liberalism when confronted with a major religious event, in this case Pope Benedict XVI’s state visit to England and Scotland from 15 to 20 September 2010. We are, of course, aware that this is not the only way to frame the material (as we have shown in work forthcoming on the presentation of an atheism-Christianity binary), whether with reference to questions involving religion generally, the presentation Catholicism in the media specifically, a comparison with the reception of the Pope’s visit in another cultural or national context, or any number of alternative and no doubt worthy questions. The reason why we have approached the material in such a manner was because of our own ongoing investigations into the connections between the role of religion in relation to the state and the press which we believe have been under-investigated. Given that readers of this journal may not be familiar with methods from journalism studies, we would also stress that there is much to be gained by working on the more ‘unconscious’ presentations of ideological positions because, at least in terms of questions concerning religion, the alternative idea of a systematic and deliberate ‘pro-religion’ or ‘anti-religion’ manipulation of the media for whatever reasons (e.g. propaganda, sales) would not be an accurate reflection of the ways in which the contemporary mass media works in liberal democracies. To investigate the assumptions of political liberalism, then, four propositions that reflect the debate surrounding the Rawlsian

---

<sup>4</sup> Erin Kelly, “Public Reason as a Collective Capability,” <http://lawandphil.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/kelly.pdf> (May 4, 2011), 9

<sup>5</sup> There are, of course, a number of ways of understanding the ideological construction of “religion” in relation to political liberalism which complement the analytical framework proposed here. For detailed discussion with bibliography see e.g. Craig Martin, *Masking Hegemony: A Genealogy of Liberalism, Religion and the Private Sphere* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> By the UK press we mean those broadsheets, middle market and tabloid newspapers listed in Table 1. The newspapers chosen were those that covered the whole of the UK thereby enabling us to avoid regional bias.

political liberal distinction religion/politics were tested to see what, if anything, was the dominant view of the UK national press. The four propositions were:

- i) Religion is benign and relevant to liberal politics*
- ii) Religion is malign and relevant to liberal politics*
- iii) Religion is regarded as irrelevant to liberal politics and dismissed positively*
- iv) Religion is regarded as irrelevant to liberal politics and dismissed negatively*

## **2. The Study**

Twenty UK national weekday and Sunday newspapers were sampled during this period and the current analysis is based on those newspapers which have been divided into three traditional categories: broadsheet, middle market tabloids and tabloids (see Table 1).

For the purposes of this study the units of analysis coded were referred to as “newspaper items” and these formed the basic units of measurement. Newspaper items were defined according to the way the newspapers themselves break up their own sections and articles in newspapers. Five categories were used. The first newspaper item was “news stories” which were clearly demarcated as news reports and appeared in the news sections of the newspapers, the second newspaper item was classed as “opinion” which included editorials which clearly indicated that the content therein reflected the newspaper’s own views and other “opinion pieces” which comprised pieces written largely by columnists and journalists, but occasionally included items contributed by public intellectuals and other well-known members of the public or representatives of religious organisations, the third newspaper item was news in briefs (NIBS), a short bulletin written in a few lines, the fourth newspaper item was readers’ letters and the fifth newspaper item encompassed miscellaneous items such as the reprinting of the Pope’s speech in full, diagrams explaining the route he would take on his

visit and picture leads with no accompanying text. In total 624 newspaper items referred to the Pope's visit.

The coding frame was developed into five sections. The first section collected basic information such as newspaper type, the date of publication and who wrote the byline. The second to the fifth sections divided the coding frame into the four propositions to be tested on examination of subjects raised in each newspaper item. In the coding frame we suggested that logical workings of the tensions between the rhetorical distinction of "religion" and "politics" have manifested themselves in the four ways indicated by the propositions which are particularly relevant to the contemporary media with its emphasis on dealing with the rights and wrongs of religion and its relationship to political reasoning.

Coverage of the Pope's visit was undertaken by 17 of the 20 national newspapers sampled, although the number of items varied notably across the newspapers (see Table 2). The broadsheet newspapers had far more news items on the subject and devoted a lot more reporters and correspondents to their coverage (N=469, 75.2%) than the mid-market papers (N=88, 14.1%) and the tabloid press (N=67, 10.7%). Despite a variation in the number of newspaper items in different newspapers, the full sample was retained for analysis as the circulation figures of some of tabloids and middle market tabloid newspapers meant that although fewer items may have been produced they were likely to be read by a larger number people than were the newspaper items in the broadsheets. While this study did not undertake audience analysis it seemed prudent to assume that the increase in reach of smaller and fewer items made the all the different newspapers' approaches to the visit of the Pope in September 2010 of interest when trying to establish the nature of the mediation of the distinction "religion and politics" in the national UK press.

Out of the 624 newspaper items coded the most common type were news stories (N=184) and editorials and opinion pieces (N=184), followed by news in briefs (NIBS) items (N=151) and readers' letters (N=91). "Other" types of coverage such as picture leads, diagrams and reprints of the Pope's speech that could not be classified under the other four headings accounted for only (N=14) of the coverage.

All the questions listed under each proposition invited a yes/no response and more than one variable could be ticked under each proposition and across all four propositions. This meant that if a single newspaper item covered several subjects these could be coded to show the patterns of coverage within newspaper items themselves and within each newspaper type. These figures were then used to establish which proposition was dominant in each newspaper type and which newspaper items were most likely to host each proposition typology (see Table 2). Two coders identified all newspaper items that mentioned the Pope's visit to the UK, the type of newspaper item and its different types of subject matter, its word count, position in the paper, who wrote the byline and ticked the yes/no responses listed in the four propositions. Inter-coder reliability was established by comparing re-coding of a selected sample of 10% of the articles by a third coder. Sixty-six newspaper items were included in the reliability sample and ten variables were selected for checking. An interrater reliability analysis using the Kappa statistic was performed to determine consistency among raters. The interrater reliability for the raters across ten variables selected ranged from Kappa 0.80 to 0.89 ( $p < 0.001$ ).

*i) The Mediation of the Distinction of "Religion" and "Politics". Proposition 1: Religion is benign and relevant to liberal politics*

The questions listed under this proposition asked whether the newspaper item assumed that there was a political and or civil benefit from the visit, whether respect as to the value of the state visit was expressed (even if any form of deference was expressed), if an itinerary of events was provided to help the reader follow the visit, something which indicated its inclusiveness and if the idea of religion as a solution to political and civil ills was intimated or even advocated.

The most positive newspaper items relating to the state visit were found in *The Times*, which also produced a 16 page supplement to support its coverage of the visit and in the *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph* which also produced the highest number of newspaper items.<sup>7</sup>

Although the coverage was less likely to be focused on subjects falling under Proposition 1 (see Table 2), there were nonetheless a significant number of references made to the positive and benign dimension of religion and its possible (or potential) relationship to politics. This was commonly found in the positive reporting of Pope Benedict's attack on totalitarianism, fascism and intolerance. These sorts of political problems were, the Pope argued, in no small part due to atheism and a lack of religion or Christianity and were widely reported (with some occasional challenges – see Propositions 2 and 4 below) and the problem of the language of “militant” and “intolerant” atheists was a common feature. For instance, the *Telegraph* reported approvingly that the Pope had argued that “excluding religion from public life can lead to the ‘atheist extremism’ of the Nazis and Soviet Russia”.<sup>8</sup>

At times this positivity was implicit in the reporting and involved foregrounding a particular political position. For instance, the *Telegraph* ran a front page headline which read,

“Coalition ‘We will restore faith to the heart of Britain’”, under which was a report about

---

<sup>7</sup> These three newspapers' coverage accounted for 52.1% of the overall newspaper items over the visit period.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Beckford, “Pope's stark warning amid warm welcome: challenge facing multicultural Britain,” *Telegraph*, September 17, 2010.



how Baroness Warsi argued that the Coalition government saw religion as underpinning their efforts to “improve society”, that faith has a “positive power”, and that the Coalition government is “on the side of religion”. Indeed, that the report notes that the Coalition “does God” (Warsi) is significant because it is a direct critique of the infamous statement made by Tony Blair’s spin doctor, Alistair Campbell, that the then Labour government “doesn’t do God”. Warsi is further reported as claiming that religious groups could play a part in the provision of public services in the UK and help reduce knife crime and increase safety for women at night. In other words the issues recorded and presented in the Telegraph are deemed part of religion’s “positive power” and are equally recognisable in the reporting as standard “political” issues for the UK press. As we will see, what is particularly significant about this sort of positive religious/political thinking is that it shares some important ideological features with some of the more rhetorically negative reporting on the issue of the construction of religion and its role in relationship to political discourse. Namely that there is no inclusion of alien “religious” behaviour and ideas present in the public arena; everything is recognisable from otherwise standard political discourse in the UK press.

In the broadsheet newspapers, newspaper items focussing on issues relating to Proposition 1 were written by journalists in news stories, opinion pieces, editorials, and in NIBS items. Readers’ letters also expressed some positive views about the state visit, but in the broadsheets, readers’ letters were most likely to be critical of the state visit and the content of these letters was more likely to fall under Proposition 4. Overt approval of the state visit was in evidence in 31.8% of the newspaper items coded. This is the most discussed issue from all the questions we posed on the coding sheet within Proposition 1 and what is noteworthy is that it stresses the idea of the Pope as *head of state* rather than as head of a major religious organisation, emphasising the idea that “politics” were a significant aspect of the coverage.

The Leading Article (“Let’s hear it for tolerance”) in the *Independent on Sunday* put it typically: “Nor should it mean that the non-Catholic majority should be offended by the state visit of Benedict XVI...”<sup>9</sup> In the same newspaper, via a vox-pop, Michael Evans, Bishop of East Anglia, indicated the value and relevance of religion to wider political matters : “The Pope has been invited by the state and has opinions on climate change, justice, the state’ though he also lamented, ‘but people just want to talk about that child abuse thing” (September 19, 2010).

*ii) The Mediation of the Distinction of “Religion” and “Politics”. Proposition 2: Religion is malign and relevant to liberal politics*

The questions listed under this proposition asked whether the newspaper item associated the visit with religious fundamentalism, terrorism and terrorism plots, threats of violence or assassination of the Pope, public protests, or criticism about child abuse and restrictions on human rights, in short issues that were seen to be threatening to political, economic, or social stability.

Across all the newspaper types the perception of religion as a threat to political and civil society was evident. In the broadsheets, newspaper items focussing on this aspect were mainly written by journalists in news stories, opinion pieces, editorials and in NIBS items, although readers’ letters accounted for almost 10% of the coverage, whereas in the middle market tabloids and the tabloids it was the opinion pieces that were most likely to focus on Proposition 2 (see Table 2).

---

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous, “Leading Article: Let’s hear it for tolerance,” *Independent on Sunday*, September 19, 2010.

A high profile example of Proposition 2 was a letter published by the *Guardian* newspaper and signed by 55 public intellectuals who argued that the Pope's tour should not have been accorded the status of a state visit. The letter stated: "we reject the masquerading of the Holy See as a state and the pope as a head of state as merely a convenient fiction to amplify the international influence of the Vatican" (.<sup>10</sup> They argued that, "as well as a religious leader, the pope is a head of state, and the state and organisation of which he has been responsible for": contributing to the spread of Aids; promoting segregated education; denying abortion even to vulnerable women, opposing equal rights; failing to address the child abuse scandal; and resisting human rights treaties. Social issues of this kind served as a criterion by which the press regarded religion as potentially disqualifying itself from political reasoning, either through the accusations of immorality, or by advocating non-liberal social policies. In such cases religion was regarded and judged as having not yet "earned" (or could never "earn") its place at the table of political liberal reasoning, or to have relevance with regard to the conduct of transparent or enlightened liberal democratic politics.

Here the coverage was more negative than Proposition 1, focussing on *reporting* criticisms of the visit, the Catholic Church and the behaviour of the clergy. These issues were seen to be part of the public domain and of public concern, and included both peaceful and non-peaceful protest. In particular, 4.3% of newspaper items both reported and hosted criticisms about the perceived sexual promiscuity of the clergy; of HIV/AIDS controversies and the Catholic Church (8.2%); of abuse of human rights (11.5%); of homosexuality (10.7%); and of abortion (8.3%). One issue stands out among all others and is one which was both a high profile scandal relating to the Catholic Church which could hardly be ignored and a historic concern for the British press: child abuse. The issue of child abuse was of most interest to the tabloids

---

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Fry et al, 'Letter', *Guardian* September 15, 2010.

with 41.8% of their newspaper items referring to child abuse in some way, the highest figure in our study, compared to the Broadsheets: 21.5% and the Midmarket 31.8%. The activity of a number of protestors, despite there being fewer than anticipated and far fewer in number than those gathered to celebrate the Pope's visit, received a significant amount of interest in all the newspapers, especially in the middle market tabloids where 23.9% of their newspaper items referred to the protestors, followed by the 16.8% of newspaper items in broadsheets and 13.4% of newspaper items in the tabloids.

What is remarkable, given the UK Press' historic hostility towards anyone or any institution associated with child abuse, is that there was a common distancing by the press of the Pope and the Catholic Church and/or "religion" from the child abuse scandal. For instance, it was regularly reported that the Pope apologised for the child abuse scandal without any judgment made or implied and it was further reported that this apology might signal an appreciation that "the Church had suffered from its attempts to handle the issue"<sup>11</sup> and that there was a "shift in the Vatican" and the "hope that it might co-operate more with police inquiries",<sup>12</sup> while the headline, "English clergy praised for handling of abuse" speaks for itself.<sup>13</sup>

But there is also a crucial distinction to be made in the negative and malign understanding of religion: a common theme was the idea of a *distortion* of "true" Catholicism or religion. For instance, Mary Dejevsky argued that "child abuse by priests has been so readily identified with the Church, rather than being treated as the heinous deviation from all its teachings".<sup>14</sup>

The malign nature of religion is typically played out under Proposition 2 by particular criticisms levelled at the Catholic Church and the behaviour of *some* of its clergy, which

---

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Wynne-Jones, "Dispelled, myth of Rottweiler," *Sunday Telegraph*, September 19, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Pepinster, "Could the Pontiff's values have a lasting impact on society?" *Independent*, September 20, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Beckford, "English clergy praised for handling of abuse," *Telegraph*, September 20, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Dejevsky, "In defence of Benedict and his faith," *Independent*, September 17, 2010.

provided a hook for discussions about the nature of religion generally and acted as a warning about the dangers of institutionalised religion and its inclusion in the political domain.

Perhaps the most striking attempt to deal with the issue of child abuse in relation to the logic of a “deviant” form of religion, or stray Catholics, being problematic for the political domain came from Dominic Lawson in the *Independent*. His argument was quite simply that where the Catholic Church had established political power, the priesthood became “so sure of special political protection that the child-abusers in their number felt able to act with such impunity.”<sup>15</sup>

Where “religion” was even more unambiguously deemed a threat to political liberalism during the Pope’s visit came in an unsurprising form and associated with a particular religion: Islam. Despite this being the visit of a mainstream religious leader, “fundamentalism” was (mentioned in 4.2% of newspaper items) and “terrorism” (6.3%) as well as the threat of assassination, (6.9%) do turn up as a notable minority of topics for reporting or discussion. The reporting articulates the dangers from pre-existing and predictable narratives associating Islam, Arabs and “terror”.<sup>16</sup> For instance, during the visit there were initially five, then a further individual, arrested as terror suspects (who were, it turned out, not guilty). Identification of the suspects along specific religion and ethnic lines of “all believed to be Muslims of North African origin”<sup>17</sup> was not confined to the political leanings of the given newspaper. The liberal-left *Guardian* was explicit: “Sources say the men are believed to be Muslim and that some of them are Algerian... An assessment of the intelligence judged it to be so severe that police needed to disrupt the alleged plot immediately” citing claims that: “Senior officers said last week that there was no information ahead of the visit to suggest any

---

<sup>15</sup> Dominic Lawson, “Pope Benedict ... an apology,” *Independent*, September 21, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> See James Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror: Scholarly Projects for a New American Century* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2008), 59-142, for discussion with bibliography

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Wright, “Police question six street cleaners held over plot to attack the Pope,” *Daily Mail*, September 18, 2010.

specific group wanted to attack the pope”. But they warned people “not to underestimate the ‘passion and the fervour’ the visit would evoke”. Those with “passion and the fervour” are in distinction from what comes next: “Police *also* interviewed mentally unstable people who they feared could pose a threat to the pope” (our italics).<sup>18</sup> Hughes and Sullivan writing in the *Sun* were more explicit, mentioning that “Many of its workers are Algerian. North Africa is a hot-bed of Islamic fundamentalism and al-Qaeda has cells throughout the region.”<sup>19</sup> What is significant here is once again how the UK press specifies a “deviant” (“fundamentalist”) form of a specific religion as a threat and a corruption of ‘pure religion’.

*iii) The Mediation of the Distinction of “Religion” and “Politics”. Proposition 3: Religion is regarded as irrelevant to liberal politics and dismissed positively*

The questions listed under this proposition asked whether the newspaper item associated the visit with a claim to the political irrelevance of the Pope’s visit, combined with the view that individual faith/belief/religion is a private matter even when attached to expression of organised collective spirituality. Human interest stories about personal devotion, travel/pilgrimage were also looked for, as was whether or not there was any positive (good natured) humour used to dismiss religion and show its “quirkiness”<sup>20</sup> and ultimately its irrelevance to political reasoning.

In the broadsheets, newspaper items focussing on this proposition were written by journalists in news stories, opinion pieces, editorials and in NIBS items with readers’ letters accounting for only a small amount of the coverage, whereas in the middle market tabloids and the

---

<sup>18</sup> Vikram Dodd and Sam Jones, “Pope’s visit: Five arrested in alleged terror plot,” *Guardian*, September 17, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Hughes and Mike Sullivan, “Six in ‘kill Pope’ plot,” *Sun*, 18 September 18, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Further questions asked whether or not particular personal foibles or attributes of the Pope were found in the newspaper item, for example his red shoes, drinking Fanta Orange, his eating habits, the “popemobile” and any other personal idiosyncrasies.

tabloids it was the opinion pieces that were most likely to focus on Proposition 3 (see Table 2).

In addition to 8.1% of newspaper items referring to religion as something “private”, 18.1% reported the view that religion is “spiritual”. A positive demoting of religion was also found in one dominant tone of the newspaper reports: comedy. Where humour occurs it was mostly positive. Under Proposition 3, 19.6% of the reports were humorous and in 17.3% of the newspaper items the humour was clearly positive, mainly involving various personal idiosyncrasies such as the Pope’s fondness for the Fanta orange drink, his red shoes, his eating habits, and especially the “Popemobile”. Unsurprisingly it was the tabloids which were most concerned with the trivial humour, 38.8% tabloid newspaper items involved humour. The interest in typical tabloid trivia was clear: 6% of the newspaper items concerned the red shoes; 7.5% referred to the Fanta orange drink; 6% to his eating habits; 17.9% to the “Popemobile”; and 17.9% to his general idiosyncrasies. In the midmarket newspapers 21.6% of the humour under Proposition 3 in the newspaper items was positive and friendly with the following concern for trivia: his 1.1% referred to his red shoes, 1.1% referred to the Fanta orange drink, 1.1% (1 report) referred to his eating habits, 15.9% referred to the “Popemobile” and 12.5% to his general idiosyncrasies. In the broadsheets there was the perhaps expected lower percentage of humour than in the tabloids and midmarket newspapers: a mention of the red shoes, appeared in 1.7% of newspaper items; the Fanta orange drink in 0.2%; his eating habits in 0.9%; the “Popemobile” in 10%; and his general idiosyncrasies in 14.9%.

However, even the interest in humour among the broadsheets is relatively high compared to other subjects covered, whilst the tabloid result is second only to their interest in the child

abuse angle. This high level of (positive) humour involving something deemed acceptable, but ultimately irrelevant to “politics”, complements the idea of deference towards the visit as a state visit in that it deflects attention away from what might commonly be perceived as the “religious” aspect of the visit (which involved, after all, the beatification of Cardinal Newman). While the implicit assumption of a famous religious man doing “quirky” things may be part of the comedic effect, this sort of humour is precisely what we might find with the treatment of the Royal Family in the press. Perhaps this is best summarised in the headline of the *Sun* when the Pope met the Queen: “Her Maj has tea as Pope sticks to pop” . This article opens as follows with a typical note of positivity struck towards the state visit of a man acknowledged as “religious”:

His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, head of the Catholic Church and one of the most revered leaders in the world, gently sipped the fizzy pop as he chatted with Her Majesty and Prince Philip at Edinburgh’s Holyroodhouse palace ... The 83-year-old Pontiff also wore traditional bright red shoes below a sheer white cassock — which seemed to echo a determination to make his State visit to Britain as bright and colourful as possible.<sup>21</sup>

We can also see a subtle “secularizing” of stories which might be thought to be of “religious” content. Typically for the printed press, a human interest angle to the stories is frequent (found in 20.2% of newspaper items) and no more so than in the reporting of pilgrimages. While the “religious” angle is certainly present, there was a clear tendency to portray the large gatherings as something akin to a festival and repackage the language in something which downplays any problematic Otherness “religion” might bring for the UK press. The construction of pilgrimage-as-festival was done with reference to a traditional British “day

---

<sup>21</sup> James Clench and Martin Philips, “Her Maj has tea as Pope sticks to pop,” *Sun*, September 17, 2010.



out”, by evoking the more genteel concerns associated with royal jubilees, or by making mention of the performance of Susan Boyle, made famous through her performances on *Britain’s Got Talent*, including in the *Independent* a critic’s 4/5 star review of the “superbly choreographed” event in Glasgow.<sup>22</sup> In the same newspaper and elsewhere, there were reports about coach trips and people bringing hats, folding chairs, scarves, flasks, picnics, rugs and so on, all accompanied by clapping, cheering and waving flags.<sup>23</sup>

Some reporting evoked the language of more youthful music festivals. The scene had already been set by the *Daily Record* in Scotland which reported: “Firm behind music festival T in the Park to stage Pope’s visit to Glasgow”.<sup>24</sup> Reporting during the visit, Catherine Pepinster writing in the *Daily Mail* went for a different festival: “Glastonbury with God: Banners, Pilgrim Picnics and singing and dancing...as 80,000 flock to Hyde Park.”<sup>25</sup> The accompanying photographs were clearly reminiscent of the UK’s annual Glastonbury festival and the report emphasised the fact. What we have in this instance is again a kind of taming or repackaging of religion, where it is recast in much more recognisably “secularized” terms from a newspaper sympathetic to the papal visit and the expression of a form of “religion” that is deemed to be thoroughly unthreatening to political liberalism.

*iv) The Mediation of the Distinction of “Religion” and “Politics”. Proposition 4: Religion is regarded as irrelevant to liberal politics and is dismissed negatively*

---

<sup>22</sup> Andy Smith, “Beautifully choreographed, and not too much SuBo,” *Independent*, September 17, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> See also Paul Vallely, “We couldn’t see very much. But we saw him,” *Independent*, September 17, 2010; Neil Tweedie, “65,000 Catholics enjoy a day in the sun,” *Telegraph*, September 17, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/2010/07/05/firm-behind-music-festival-t-in-the-park-to-stage-pope-s-visit-to-glasgow-86908-22383036/>. See also the BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-11361507>.

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Pepinster, “Glastonbury with God: Banners, Pilgrim Picnics and singing and dancing...as 80,000 flock to Hyde Park,” *Independent*, September 19, 2010.

The questions listed under this proposition asked whether the newspaper item associated the visit with the question of whether or not Britain is a Christian country, the role and place of atheism, whether it advocated or promoted atheism, whether there was antagonism towards the Catholic Church, whether there was antagonism to religion generally, a defence of secularism and whether any negative or unpleasant humour was used to dismiss religion.

In all the newspapers it was notable that, unlike newspaper items falling within the other three propositions, a large number of newspaper items focussing on this aspect were opinion (opinion pieces and editorials) and readers' letters in the broadsheets, with significantly fewer references made in news stories (see Table 2). It was under this proposition that some of the more extreme views were played out about the value of religion and the relevance of religion to politics was at its most disparaging.

In one opinion piece, for instance, Joan Smith writing in the *Independent* claimed that she was not interested in religion and it would be easier to ignore "if their leaders didn't keep telling me that their ethics are better than mine". She added, significantly, a question and answer: "Has religion been relegated to the private sphere in the UK? I hope so".<sup>26</sup> More explicit still was Polly Toynbee writing in the *Guardian* who argued that belief in God deflects from, or "trivialize[s]" major issues of our time, especially the redistribution of wealth. Toynbee argued that the Pope himself was guilty of doing so through "obsessions with people's private sexual behaviour". The element of suspicion was clear in Toynbee's article in that the Pope *could* have argued about the meek inheriting the earth and the impossibility of rich men entering heaven but she ends by suggesting that it is not "as if belief

---

<sup>26</sup> Joan Smith, "I'll take no lectures on ethics from Ratzinger," *Independent on Sunday*, September 19, 2010.

in God were any protection against monstrous human tyrannies”.<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that writers such as Smith and Toynbee can provide presentations which, as might be expected, move fluidly between Proposition 2 and Proposition 4: Smith was one of the signatories to the *Guardian* letter noted above opposing the Pope’s visit and Toynbee provoked controversy in the letters pages with her article: “Sex and death lie at the poisoned heart of religion”.<sup>28</sup>

The treatment of religion in the press as something negative or irrelevant provides some notable results under Proposition 4 in that the criticisms are not particularly widespread. Negative humour is only found in 4.8% newspaper items (compared with 17.3% newspaper items containing clearly positive humour under Proposition 3). The most sensitive area for the negativity under Proposition 4 is clearly the question of whether Britain is a Christian country (19.7%), compared with antagonism towards the Catholic Church (10.4%), antagonism towards religion (2.1%) and a defence of secularism per se (5.3%). In spite of this data, it is clear that the evidence for widespread anti-religious backlash is not strong even among the letters.<sup>29</sup>

### **3. The UK Press: Political Liberalism and what Religion is or should be**

In light of these assessments, it is now explicable why certain representations of “religion” can also present it as something positive in relation to politics, because this discourse is largely just a way of re-inscribing conventional political disputes across the political spectrum of the UK press, but now with reference to the language of the religious. For instance, the idea of Britain as a declining Christian country was raised by the Pope in his visit and the press clearly deemed this an issue worth following up. But what is significant is

---

<sup>27</sup> Polly Toynbee, “Pope’s visit: The wrong prescription for Britain’s moral ills,” *Guardian*, September 17, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Polly Toynbee, “Sex and death lie at the poisoned heart of religion,” *Guardian*, September 14, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> There are also degrees of clear support among the letters for Proposition 1 with 12.1% of them seeing religion as beneficial for civil society, 24.2% showing deference towards the visit, and 6.6% seeing religion as having the potential to cure societal ills.

the ways in which this is constructed. In some sections of the more conservative press, “secularism” becomes equated with something like multiculturalism, permissive liberalism and political correctness, whereas the Christian heritage of Britain is associated with tolerance and free speech with the absence of religion leading to totalitarianism. The *Sun* was happy with constructing the role of religion in “the public square” in terms of its attack on political correctness, a classic tabloid concern. Under the headline “Pope: Don’t let the PC brigade wreck Christmas”, the *Sun* also claimed that “The Pope issued an impassioned plea to the people of Britain yesterday – to save CHRISTMAS” and “let rip at the politically correct knuckleheads who deem it offensive to other faiths”. In this report, the Pope was assumed to be the representative of rights and freedom. When faced with a potential challenge to its assumptions of tolerance in the form of the Catholic Church and women priests, the reporter James Clench stressed that, “*Benedict – whose church is steadfastly opposed to women priests – even shook hands with a clergywoman for the first time*” [italics original].<sup>30</sup>

But opinion pieces, such as editorials which were strongly pro-Pope and/or supportive of what he represents, are particularly notable because of what they do with the religious: they give it a subtle “secularizing” touch – or recast the positivity in recognisable political language – whilst simultaneously making claims of hostility towards secularism. This tendency towards a double-edged positivity towards religion becomes more notable in the reporting by the *Daily Mail*: while it typically sided with the Pope and his attack on Britain as a secular nation at the expense the religious, it frames this in nothing more than general concerns for “religion”. This is because the specifics are actually its usual interests in conservative morality and hostility to liberalism and multiculturalism. For instance, prior to the Pope’s visit the *Daily Mail* had written more explicitly still how: “The Pope yesterday hit

---

<sup>30</sup> James Clench, “Pope: Don’t let the PC Brigade wreck Christmas,” *Sun*, September 18, 2010.

out at Britain's equality legislation, claiming Harriet Harman's attempts to bring in new laws enforced sinful behaviour".<sup>31</sup>

What these further examples confirm is that there is a clear a tendency to rephrase traditional political battles in the UK Press in terms of "religion". In the case of some of the conservative press this is done by making "secular" or "secular extremism" a codeword for "liberal", "multiculturalism" or the like. On the traditional centre-left of the political spectrum, the issues were certainly framed differently, but even so the broad assumptions about the positive role of religion in relation to politics were shared. The question of Britain as a secular or religious country, led the *Mirror* to invite Peter Tatchell and Rev. Richard Coles of St Paul's in Knightsbridge to answer their formulation of the question: "So have we become a nation of atheists?" Coles' answer is particularly significant as he is the "religious" representative. He claims the following:

Look in any church, mosque or synagogue during a service and you will see the sheer numbers of people for whom faith is central to their lives. People who are fully engaged in the national life of this country and with their place of worship.<sup>32</sup>

Here, "religion" may be a private matter, but it is a private matter that shapes the external political world, is safe for national political discourse and is compatible with the national life as we now know it, with no oppositional feature mentioned in Cole's response. The introduction noted that "In the past, church and state were as one"; it was telling that Cole is not reported as wanting to bring them back together in the sense of a theocracy.

---

<sup>31</sup> Simon Caldwell, "Campaigners to launch protest over Pope's UK visit after he condemns Harman equality drive as 'violation of natural law'," *Daily Mail*, February 2, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> A. Palmer, "So have we become a nation of atheists?" *Mirror*, September 17, 2010.

A *Guardian* editorial took a different line by arguing back with the Pope and implicitly defending the separation of Church and state and examining the logic of theocracy:

But the pope is not in any sense a modern man. He believes that there is only one Christian church – his – which represents the word of God...he believes that there is only one spiritual source – again his – from which all our values derive. He is attacking not only the Reformation, the separation of church and state, but also the very basis on which a secular society is built.<sup>33</sup>

But despite the sharply different language and different spin on what it might mean to be tolerant, this sentiment is not far removed from the *Guardian's* rivals. Clearly, this editorial explicitly expresses a sentiment that religion is something which should be tamed in the face of politics. In one sense this is simply a rhetorically different way of addressing the common feature of the UK press in its attitude towards religion and politics, that is, to present a rhetorically positive view of religion but one dressed up in the language of tolerance, democracy and heritage. Indeed, this editorial suggests that the very problem with the Pope's take on religion is that it is too exclusive and intolerant and it is precisely when religion is perceived to be a threat against broadly accepted political values across the UK press that it is critiqued. In this sense, the *Guardian* is in line with the notion that any problematic religious Otherness should not have an impact on politics.

However, if we look at the positive role of religion elsewhere in the *Guardian* we find both a classic piece of liberal multiculturalism and a thoroughly non-threatening form of religion, even while still being implicitly critical of the Pope. The *Guardian* reports that “[t]he pope is wrong, and unhelpful, to speak of ‘atheist extremism’ in contemporary Britain, according to

---

<sup>33</sup> Editorial, “Pope’s visit: A turbulent priest”, September 18 2010.

Christian, Muslim, Jewish and humanist voices”.<sup>34</sup> In this article Kennedy and Butt report the comments of Paul Handley, managing editor of the *Church Times*, who argued that the Pope’s speech “overlooks the concept of ‘common good’ which the Catholic Church in the UK has quietly been pursuing in recent years – and the C of E has always majored on – Christians and non-Christians working together in mutual respect.” Suleman Nagdi of the Federation of Muslim Organisations reportedly said that he “hoped the pope would turn, in later speeches, to ‘the values of honesty, decency and compassion for one another’, which represented ‘a truer picture of British society’.” Allan Hayes, president of the Leicester Secular Society, and the first humanist chaplain to the city’s lord mayor, is also represented: “I don't think there is extremism, there is a discussion about how we can live together. In a city like Leicester the issue of faith practices and faith schools is a very important one, but it must be dealt with through the democratic process, and I believe it can be.” The tension between religion and political discourse is therefore eased by succumbing to an ideal of a certain kind of liberal democracy with “religious” Otherness pushed firmly into the personal sphere. They thus further report that Giles Fraser, then canon chancellor at St Paul's Cathedral, believes that: “Most people arrive at the great truths of life by quietly thinking about things”. To ask how practices of animal sacrifice, killing in the name of God, dealing with apostates, calling outsiders dogs, smashing shrines, and so on might fit into this vision of religious harmony would in one sense miss the point. What we again have here instead is a different kind of example in the UK press of a political position being mediated through the presentation of religion.

#### **4. Conclusion**

---

<sup>34</sup> Maev Kennedy and Riazat Butt, “Papal visit: Linking the godless to a lack of values is wrong, say critics,” *Guardian*, September 16, 2010.

The evaluation of our findings against more contemporaneous studies is confronted by the fact that there has been little systemic analysis of recent UK newspaper coverage of religion.<sup>35</sup> Consequently our findings remain provisional. However taking our point of departure from what we referred to as “the modern Rawlsian settlement” whereby political values supersede comprehensive religious or moral values when it comes to matters of basic political arrangements and secular contractarian reasoning is regarded as superior to faith based reasoning we examined the question of to what extent the UK press subscribed to this view. The answer we found was that the mediation of the distinction of “religion” and “politics” by the UK press was mostly shaped by the seemingly conflicting focus and priorities of Proposition 2 and Proposition 3. Despite seemingly contradictory narratives in the UK press sampled it is clear that there are crucial shared assumptions which do not want a place for any religious Otherness which might challenge contemporary political liberal discourses in the press. Indeed where quasi-biblical themes were raised they are so general that they blend into broader acceptable cultural language (e.g. Good versus Evil, Order versus Chaos, Neighbourliness et al). There is a dominant shared assumption that religion is a good thing when it conforms to a pre-existing narrative of political liberalism: tolerance, democracy, free speech and so on, and a bad thing when it does not. Across the board, “religion” (or a “deviant” form of religion) was regularly deemed problematic (or assumed to be far removed from “true” religion), when it was associated with violence, intolerance and a lack of

---

<sup>35</sup> Although Knott et al are currently conducting research into “Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred,” [www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/download/831/media\\_portrayals\\_of\\_religion](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/download/831/media_portrayals_of_religion). Their research aims to examine the media portrayal of key religious events or controversy, interpret the changing media representations of religion and to consider the changing relationship between religion and the media. At the time of writing the results of this research are forthcoming. Interestingly their research seeks to compare their findings with those of an earlier study “Media Portrayals of Religion and their Reception” (1982-1983) by Towler and Knott which found that despite talk of the death of God and decline of religion, themes associated with religion remains strong in the UK press: “The 1982 study, which coincided with Pope John Paul II’s tour of Britain, recorded nearly 3,500 references to conventional religion (75%) and unofficial supernatural beliefs and practices (25%) over a two-month period”. See Anonymous.. “The Age of Enlightenment: God, sacred cows and the media”, *Reporter*, July 28 (2008), <http://reporter.leeds.ac.uk/535/s5.htm>. Other recent studies have tended to concentrate on three areas: the reporting of religion by what has been labelled ‘a secular press’ which tends to emphasise how news journalism consistently misunderstand religion per se; the place of religion in public life and politics and the use by religious groups of their own channels of communication.



democracy.<sup>36</sup> Aside from violence, the emphasis on “good religion” depends on the political tendencies, found within the context of the pre-existing narrative of political liberalism underpinning the political position of a given newspaper, reporter, or opinion-maker. So, for instance, “good religion” might reflect multicultural liberal tolerance for a centre-left newspaper like the *Guardian*, whilst for a centre-right newspaper like the *Daily Mail* it might reflect the British democratic and tolerant heritage, but one hostile to political correctness and multiculturalism. In either case the differences reflect the fact that religion was judged by the UK press in terms of its liberal political values rather than in terms of its religious/spiritual or ethical “comprehensive values” and in so doing, knowingly or not, they endorse the ‘Rawlsian settlement.’

#### APPENDIX: TABLES 1 AND 2

Table 1: Newspaper Coverage of the Pope’s Visit 15 to 20 September 2010

Newspaper	Circulation Figures for September 2010*	Publication Days	Number of Newspaper Items	Percentage of Newspaper Items
<b>BROADSHEET</b>				
Independent on Sunday	133,108	Sunday	39	6.3
Independent	155,174	Mon to Fri	46	7.4
Sunday Telegraph	507,860	Sunday	32	5.1
Daily Telegraph	659,445	Mon to Fri	106	17.0
Guardian	278,129	Mon to Fri	81	13.0
Observer	325,502	Sunday	5	.8
The Times	486,868	Mon to Friday	138	22.1
Sunday Times	1,091,869	Sunday	17	2.7
Financial Times	390,228	Mon to Sat	5	0.8
<b>MIDMARKET TABLOIDS</b>				

<sup>36</sup> For discussion of the relationship between “religious violence” and secularism, see W.T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Daily Mail	2,144,229	Mon to Fri	34	5.4
Mail on Sunday	1,969,990	Sunday	11	1.8
Daily Express	659,650	Mon to Fri	33	5.3
Sunday Express	560,273	Sunday	10	1.6
<b>TABLOIDS</b>				
Daily Mirror	1,213,323	Mon to Fri	24	3.8
Sunday Mirror	1,126,053	Sunday	0	0
The Sun	2,974,405	Mon to Fri	30	4.8
Daily Star	864,315	Mon to Fri	0	0
Daily Star Sunday	371,457	Sunday	0	0
News of the World	2,948,328	Sunday**	8	1.3
The People	532,420	Sunday	5	0.8
Total			624	100.0

\*Source: ABC

\*\* Last edition 10 July 2011

Table 2: Table showing which Propositions were dominant in Newspaper Items covering the state visit in Broadsheet, Middle Market Tabloid and Tabloid newspapers.

	References to Proposition 1 in Newspaper Items		References to Proposition 2 in Newspaper Items		References to Proposition 3 in Newspaper Items		References to Proposition 4 in Newspaper Items	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>BROADSHEETS</b>								
News Stories	105	31.7	203	39.7	204	38.5	63	25.3
Opinion	159	47.9	195	38.2	179	33.8	103	41.4
News in Brief (NIBS)	28	8.4	58	11.4	100	18.8	9	3.6
Readers' Letters	37	11.1	51	9.9	46	8.7	71	28.5
Other	3	0.9	4	0.8	1	0.2	3	1.2
TOTAL Number and Percentage of References in BROADSHEETS	332	100	511	100	530	100	249	100
<b>MIDDLE MARKET TABLOIDS</b>	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%

News Stories	33	17.1	81	30.0	45	17.4	20	15.7
Opinion	154	79.8	177	65.6	194	74.9	94	74.0
News in Brief (NIBS)	1	0.5	3	1.1	12	4.6	1	0.8
Readers' Letters	0	0	2	0.7	3	1.2	9	7.1
Other	5	2.6	7	2.6	5	1.9	3	2.4
TOTAL Number and Percentage of References in MID MARKET TABLOIDS	193	100	270	100	259	100	127	100
TABLOIDS								
News Stories	20	11.8	44	19.0	76	25.2	11	10.1
Opinion	145	85.2	171	74.1	198	65.6	92	84.3
News in Brief (NIBS)	0	0	6	2.6	9	2.9	0	0
Readers' Letters	2	1.2	4	1.7	5	1.7	3	2.8
Other	3	1.8	6	2.6	14	4.6	3	2.8
TOTAL Number and Percentage of References in TABLOIDS	170	100	231	100	302	100	109	100