**Atheism, Christianity and the British Press:**

**Press coverage of Pope Benedict XVI’s 2010 state visit to the UK**

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**Abstract**

This study analyses the way twenty British newspapers (15th to 20th September 2010) covered Pope Benedict XVI’s 2010 state visit to the UK. We found that one important framing narrative used by the British press was an atheism/Christianity binary. This binary was characterised by mutual antagonism over the role of religion in civil society, and yet this binary also existed alongside a call for calm and a defence of a ‘gentler secularism’ by journalists who, in the main, defended themselves (and ‘the majority of the public’) as having liberal democratic values. The net effect of which was that the British press simultaneously found itself in the position of framing the visit in terms of extreme views and mutual antagonism, whilst at the same time endorsing both a civil space bleached of atheism/Christian contestation, and *ideals* of Christianity and atheism as private and non-threatening, deprived of any problematic Otherness.

**Keywords: Atheism, Christianity, binary, Pope Benedict XVI, British Press**

**1. Introduction**

As part of a larger project on the understanding and construction of ‘religion’ in the British printed press we have been analysing the reporting of the Pope’s visit to the UK in 2010 (Harrison and Crossley 2014). Our initial and ongoing interests and questions concerned what the British press assumed ‘religion’ to be, paralleling scholarly traditions involving both Implicit Religion (e.g. Bailey 1998; 2006) in the sense that there remain a bundle of related ideas typically constructed as ‘religious’, and building on the ideological significance of constructing the term ‘religion’ (e.g. Fitzgerald 2004; McCutcheon 2005). In terms of historical and cultural contexts, our findings are part of the dramatic changes in popular understandings of, and commitments to, Christianity and religion since the 1960s, particularly the decline of the social and political significance of religious institutions (Brown 2003, 2006, 2009; Parsons 2004; McLeod 2007). This shift in denominational loyalties (cf. Davie 1994) has not led to the rise of widespread atheism, but it has led to greater challenges to, and confusion about, the significance and understanding of religion in public life and political discourse (Crossley 2014). To generalize the findings our study against this backdrop: there is a dominant shared assumption in the contemporary UK press that ‘religion’ is a good thing when it conforms to a pre-existing narrative of political liberalism and a bad thing (or a distortion of ‘true religion’) when it does not. There were differences between the various newspapers and these typically reflected a given newspaper’s political stance. So, for instance, the right-leaning *Daily Mail* might report that ‘religion’ supports opposition to multiculturalism and adherence to ‘traditional’ values whereas the left-leaning *Guardian* might report that ‘religion’ is supports multicultural inclusion and the values of ‘tolerance’.

These results will be presented in a forthcoming comprehensive study. What we want to do here is to look at one unexpected consequence of our analysis, namely a recurring binary opposition found throughout the reporting: ‘Christianity’ (or ‘religion’) versus ‘atheism’. Indeed, one-third of the newspaper items framed the visit in terms of this binary discourse, atheism/Christianity, which meant that it was one of the most frequent topics presented in the reporting of the Pope’s visit (only the reporting of the child abuse controversies was more widespread). Perhaps this should not have been so surprising. Over the past decade constructions, descriptions, understandings, and representations of ‘religion’ have been increasingly tied in the West to discourse about the role of atheism, which in turn reflects a particularly polarizing discourse regarding atheistic and religious ‘extremes’ (Crossley 2012: 154-59). Furthermore, the British press has long been (in)famous for presenting news stories in terms of polarities, extremes and extremism. Recognizing that ‘atheism’ requires construction, description and representation as much as ‘religion’, we therefore sought to analyse what this might say about the ideological position(s) of the contemporary British media.

**2. Context: ‘New Atheism’ and religion**

In 1982 when Pope John Paul II visited the UK, the major political issues were the Falklands conflict and, perhaps most pertinently for the leader of the Catholic Church, the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland. However, it is clear that issues relating to religion itself were also deeply embedded in the British Press at the time. Building on a 1982 study by Robert Towler, Kim Knott has noted that, despite talk of the death of God and decline of religion, themes associated with religion remained strong: ‘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’ (Anonymous 2008). In the case of Pope Benedict’s visit, while the specific issues may have been different (notably the child abuse scandal), and the dominant discourses of religious violence post-September 11 were focused more on Islam and much less on Northern Ireland, nevertheless the background discourses associated with religion and criticisms of religion were equally strong, albeit with a slightly different narrative, and in 2010 typically involving perceptions of a challenge to the very notion of ‘religion’ being permitted relevance in public and political life.

As Nagel (2010: 20) remarks, the ‘taboo of open atheistic scorn’ is more public today than before. While Williams (2006: 267) notes that the term atheist ‘is taken to imply, as it is often today, “dogmatic atheist”, one who is prepared to assert with certainty that no sort of God or religious principle exists,’ Clarke (2009: 5) makes the following distinction ‘Casual atheists are merely those who have lost interest in the thought of gods. Militant atheists wish to eradicate such thought, whether by making speeches or, if they have the power, outlawing everything they think religious’. Of Clarke’s two types of atheism the British press were mostly interested in focussing on ‘militant atheists’, and ignoring ‘casual atheists’ in their reporting of the Pope’s visit to the UK in September 2010, and there was a ready-made narrative which enabled them to do so in the form of the so-called ‘New Atheism’.

New Atheism is, of course, a term designating a general type of popular post-September 11 discourse which works with a strong religion-atheism binary, even to the extent whereby atheism and secularism are often seen as synonymous (for overviews see e.g. Beattie 2007; Crossley 2012: 133-56; for relevant New Atheist publications see e.g. Harris 2004, 2006; Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006; and Hitchens 2007). A typical part of this discourse is to downplay socio-economic explanations of any violence that has a connection, in order to foreground religion (or a particular type of religion: Islam) as the primary causal factor for explaining the deadly threat that religion poses to a liberal, tolerant, and rational society (e.g. Harris 2004: 109-144; for critique cf. Beattie 2007: 76-97; Crossley 2008: 82-89; Crossley 2012: 154-59). While Islam has been a high-profile target, running through New Atheism writings there have been consistent criticisms of Christianity, of the Pope and Catholicism. Dawkins, for instance, writing about what he labelled ‘childhood abuse’ (including mental abuse), stated:

For all sorts of reasons I dislike the Roman Catholic Church…Once…I was asked what I thought about the widely publicized cases of sexual abuse by Catholic priests in Ireland. I replied that, horrible as sexual abuse no doubt was, the damage was arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by bringing the child up Catholic in the first place (Dawkins 2006: 316-18).

Indeed, the high profile child abuse controversies in the Catholic Church in 2010 provoked Harris into including ‘Catholicism’ in his criticism of religion and its ‘bad beliefs’: ‘I confess that, as a critic of religion, I have paid too little attention to the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. Frankly, it always felt unsportsmanlike to shoot so large and languorous a fish in so tiny a barrel’ (Harris 2010). In an interview by Bill Maher with Christopher Hitchens for the *Huffington Post,* Maher saw this latest scandal in the Catholic Church as a ‘tipping point’ for how we look at ‘religion in general’, while Hitchens claimed ‘all religious groups need watching.’ The prominence of New Atheism in the bestseller charts has been reflected to some degree in the British media. In the days following September 11 the narrative was crystallised by a controversial article by Richard Dawkins (2001)in the *Guardian*. In addition to Dawkins and Hitchens, various public intellectuals, celebrities and journalists have also become associated with New Atheism in British public discourse, including Stephen Fry, Polly Toynbee, David Aaronovitch, Philip Pullman, A.C Grayling and Martin Amis.

A (New) atheism/Christianity binary opposition is therefore one that is already familiar to the British news media. Indeed, this binary was implicit in, and a development of, the familiar criticisms of ‘political correctness’ in the British press which has run various stories about the threat to Christmas, from the *Sun*’s ‘Kick ‘em in the baubles’ campaign to various (now discredited) stories about local authorities banning Christmas decorations or renaming Christmas ‘Winterval’ or ‘Luminos’ (Burkeman 2006). While much in these reports and opinions is framed in terms of multiculturalism, liberalism and ‘political correctness’, the theme of atheism as some form of threat to Christianity is regularly present. According to ‘a *Daily Mail* survey’ only 1 in 100 high street Christmas cards has a ‘religious theme or message’ (Drury 2006; cf. Merrick 2006). Burkeman (2006a; 2006b) debunked many of the stories in the British press about Christmas cards, Winterval and so on, showing that there was no evidence of a criticism of Christmas in the instances reported. But, despite this, the power of this binary narrative was further demonstrated by an opinion piece in the *Guardian* (Saturday December 9, 2006) by the late Colin Slee, then Dean of Southwark Cathedral, who argued that ‘Faiths teach charity, respect, obedience, morality; virtues that hold society in cohesive purpose’ and that ‘a population that at long last realises the faith it has taken for granted is threatened by a loveless intellectual desert called secularism’ (Slee 2006).[[1]](#footnote-1) Of course, this binary is also reinforced by the ‘other side’. From an overtly atheistic perspective, Stephen Fry, in a letter to his 16 year old younger self which was republished in the *Guardian* (Fry 2009), wrote: ‘For alongside sexual politics the entire achievement of the enlightenment…is under threat like never before. The cruel, hypocritical and loveless hand of religion and absolutism has fallen on the world once more…the most basic tenets of rationalism, openness and freedom that nourish you now and seem so unassailable are about to be harried and besieged by malevolent, mad and medieval minds’.

In short, there was, a pre-existing binary of New Atheism and Christianity, familiar to the media from the previous decade, into which the British press could slot the reporting of the papal visit.

**3. Reporting of the binary ‘atheism/Christianity’ in the British press**

Two particular media events framed the reporting of the 2010 Papal visit to the UK in the British press in terms of the atheism/Christianity**[[2]](#footnote-2)** binary. As it happens, both events occurred on the same day, 15 September 2010, which was the day before the visit was due to begin. In no order of priority, the first media event occurred when the *Guardian* newspaper published a letter signed by 55 public intellectuals who argued that the Pope's tour should not have been accorded the status of a state visit, due to the Vatican’s negative view of human rights and repressive social policies. 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’. Amongst the signatories, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens had publicly and previously supported a call for the Pope's arrest for ‘crimes against humanity’ (Anonymous 2010a),[[3]](#footnote-3) and human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson was reported to have looked at options to charge the Pope over his alleged cover-up of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church (see Robertson 2010).

The second media event occurred when Cardinal Kasper (one of the Pope’s closest aides) was reported to have pulled out of the papal visit to Britain, following criticism of the UK that he made in an interview with the German magazine *Focus* (Kasper 2010). Kasper said that Britain today is ‘a secularized and pluralist country. Sometimes, when you land at Heathrow, you think you have entered a third world country.’ These comments were extensively reported, along with his observation that the UK exhibited ‘a new and aggressive atheism’ (Anonymous 2010b). In particular, the third world comment (which was tied in explicitly with Kasper’s comments on atheism and secularism in Britain) was seen by much of the UK’s national press as an extremely negative and unfair judgement of British culture, and as an unacceptable insult. A spokesman for the Roman Catholic Church in Britain quickly responded by saying that Kasper's remarks were not the views of the Vatican or of the Church, and Kasper withdrew from the visit on the same day. The Cardinal's secretary went on to explain the Third World comment, stating that it was meant as ‘a description of the many different people that live in Britain at the moment’. He also explained that the Cardinal's reference to ‘new and aggressive atheism’ in Britain was his way of describing people such as Richard Dawkins. Kasper’s remarks about aggressive atheism were later picked up in a more tempered way, by the Pope in his speech to the Queen at Holyrood Palace on 16 September 2010, via his reference to ‘aggressive secularism. ’[[4]](#footnote-4)

From the above it can be seen that, on the one hand, the visit represented a ‘convenient fiction to amplify the international influence of the Vatican’, while on the other hand, ‘new and aggressive atheism’ threatened the British way of life. The letter in the *Guardian*, combined with Cardinal Kasper’s comments (reinforced by the Pope’s speech), conveniently re-introduced for the British press the binary of two ‘extremes.’ The first extreme consisted of those, atheists, who judged the Catholic Church in two ways: as a Christian church holding highly contestable beliefs and doctrinal values, and as a specific religious organization with socially and politically repressive views. The second extreme consisted of those Christians, specifically Catholics, who viewed the UK in terms of its ‘new and aggressive atheism.’

**4. The study**

**4.1 Units of analysis: newspaper items**

Before we continue, an important qualification needs to be made in relation to British press’ opinion about the place of Christianity and atheism in a civil and liberal Britain. The subject matter of atheism in relationship to Christianity occurred in 190 news items out of a total 624 news items published, and was clearly not the only concern, nor the only framing narrative, of the British press’ coverage of the Pope’s visit. Other issues, including the Pope’s personal idiosyncracies and modes of transport, the last Papal visit to the UK, Cardinal Newman’s Beatification, explanation and coverage of the different public engagements and ceremonies, the Queen’s part in the occasion, formal meetings with other faith/religious leaders, celebrities’ involvement, issues of security, many human interest stories and so on, were equally salient. However, our analysis here confines itself to the atheism/Christianity binary and how it is regarded: it does not wholly depict the way the British press deals with religion. As such our concluding remarks in this paper are both provisional and indicative (as well as requiring further empirical research). Though the results in this paper do complement our more general forthcoming study (Harrison and Crossley 2014) of the construction of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ in the reporting of the papal visit, was where it is found that ‘religion’ or ‘true religion’ was presented positively, but typically deprived of any problematic ‘Otherness’ for liberal political agendas (e.g. transubstantiation, evangelism, animal sacrifice, apostasy, calling outsiders ‘dogs’, smashing shrines etc.). ‘Religion’ was deemed to be (or should be) a private, personal matter, which is (or ideally should be) of no threat to British political discourse and is an important part of British or English heritage and supportive of very general political slogans (e.g. tolerant, inclusive, for or against multiculturalism).

The data for our study was taken from the British national press from 15 to 20 September 2010. Twenty British national weekday and Sunday newspapers were sampled. The newspapers were divided into three customary categories: broadsheet, middle market tabloids, and tabloids. The ‘broadsheet’ category is used generically to include titles classed as high-quality newspapers but which are now produced in three different sizes: broadsheet (*Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Sunday Times*, and *Financial Times*); Berliner (*Guardian* and *Observer*); and compact (*Independent*, *Independent on Sunday* and *The Times*). The ‘middle market tabloid’ category includes the *Daily Mail*, *Mail on Sunday*, *Daily Express*, and *Sunday Express*. The ‘tabloid’ category includes *The Sun*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Star*, *Sunday Mirror*, *The People*, and the *Daily Star Sunday*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Newspaper items were defined according to the way the newspapers themselves distinguish their sections and pieces. Six 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 ‘Editorial’, which clearly indicated that the content therein reflected the newspaper’s own views; the third newspaper item was ‘Opinion Piece’, which comprised pieces written largely by columnists and journalists, but occasionally by public intellectuals and other well-known members of the public or representatives of religious organisations; the fourth newspaper item was Readers’ Letters, the fifth newspaper item was News in Brief (NIBs) and the sixth 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 which had no accompanying text.

The majority of the newspaper items were written by journalists, although experts and public intellectuals contributed 12% of the opinion piece content. News stories (N=79, 41.6%) account for the largest part of the sample, editorials (N= 15, 7.9%), opinion pieces (N=50, 26.3%), letters (N= 26, 18.9%), short news items, or NIBs (news in brief) (N=7, 3.7%), miscellany/other (N=3, 1.5%).

Qualitative content analysis was used to supplement a quantitative description of the newspaper items and coding and sample selection, and analysis was carried out in three stages. The first quantitative stage involved two coders (not the authors) who worked together when coding. The coders identified all newspaper items that mentioned the Pope’s visit to the UK, the type of newspaper item and the different types of subject matter, its word count, position in the paper, and who wrote the byline. In total 624 newspaper items were identified that were concerned with the Pope’s visit and the data were inputted into SPSS to produce a database. Inter-coder reliability was established by comparing re-coding of a selected sample of 10% of the articles by another coder (one of the authors). 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) (Lombard *et al.,* 2000; Landis and Koch, 1977).

The second stage of the coding consisted of identifying what specific variables could be identified in the database of all 624 newspaper items that contained reference to atheism, Christianity or both. Four variable types were identified from the range of subject-matter covered by the news items. First, criticism of atheism by the Pope, the Catholic hierarchy, some other religious spokesperson (either a public or private figure) or opinion leader (journalist or public intellectual), and whether there was mention of Cardinal Kasper; secondly, the protests held during the Pope’s visit and a defence of atheism; thirdly, whether the newspaper item was critical towards Christianity or, more widely, religion in general, asking if Britain was a Christian or secular country, and endorsing the latter by advocating the removal of religion from public life; fourthly whether the newspaper item was positive towards Christianity, by asking if Britain was a Christian or secular country and endorsing the former through admiration of the unique way Britain is a Christian country (the Church-State settlement), the nature of modern British tolerance, through endorsement of Christian values and admiration for its role in providing welfare. From this overall sample of 624 newspaper items concerned with the Pope’s visit, 190 newspaper items mentioned or commented on the confrontation between atheism and Christianity, 30.4% of the original sample.

**4.2 Scope of analysis: newspaper items—slant, tone and news form**

For stage three, we undertook a much more detailed and interpretative textual analysis of the 190 cases selected, which indicated the binary opposition atheism/Christianity, either overtly or embedded within newspaper items where it existed in a story which may have had several other angles. All 190 newspaper items were read in their entirety and these were then interpreted and analysed according to a schema that was built up of the following three components: the slant (normative direction) that the newspaper item took (Christianity, atheism or both), the tone of the newspaper item (positive, negative or neutral), and its news form (descriptive, discursive or tendentious). Using this threefold approach we wished to understand more precisely how each newspaper item covered the binary atheism/Christianity.

First, we analysed each newspaper item in relation to its slant. That is, where the newspaper item was coded in relation to its predominant coverage of either Christianity or atheism, or whether it covered both in the same item. Analysing the ‘slant’ allowed us to establish thematic regularity in the coverage of the visit and to establish the interests of a given newspaper, or newspapers more generally, and leads onto the reasons why Christianity and/or atheism has been of interest or not. Equally ‘slant’ provided us with a way to see how atheism or Christianity is being understood, what type is described and constructed by the newspaper, and what kind of civil space was being advocated for the role of religion in modern Britain. Indeed with regard to the last point the rhetoric of what we might call the ‘British settlement’ of moderate and amicable co-existence, utilised by the press to counter the claims of extremism, was thrown into sharp relief when analysing slant. As one *Guardian* report bluntly had it: ‘The pope is wrong, and unhelpful, to speak of "atheist extremism" in contemporary Britain, according to Christian, Muslim, Jewish and humanist voices’ (Kennedy and Butt 2010).

We also coded for the tone of the coverage, which we broke down into whether the report was predominantly positive about either atheism or Christianity, negative about atheism or Christianity, or if it was neutral in tone. Here we analysed grammar, syntax and expressive content in and through the use of adjectives, adjectival phrases, adverbs and adverbial phrases, prepositional phrases, subordinate clauses, and possessive pronouns to compile a lexicon of ‘crucial words’ (Billig 1995: 94). More generally we looked at issues relating to mood, attitude and choice of people and setting. These general understandings of mood might relate to issues including sarcasm, irony, formality, informality, joviality, or tragedy, as well as connections with perceived commonly-held assumptions and ideological motivations (e.g. is religion or atheism a good or a bad thing?). In short, news items were examined syntactically, grammatically and stylistically, to determine whether the content of the news item was positive, negative or neutral. Such features can be explicit in the British press, one obvious case being headlines. For instance, the language of a threat to, or wrecking of, a mainstay of British culture, as well as the well-established tabloid assumptions regarding the ‘PC brigade’, in the headline, ‘Pope: Don’t let the PC brigade wreck Christmas’, probably tells the reader almost all they need to know about the perspective of the rest of the report in terms of what it thinks about perceived atheist and ‘politically correct’ attacks on Christmas.

To analyse the form of news reporting a threefold typology of news, defined by Harrison (2008), was used to break down the newspaper items further. The typology consisted of news understood as: discursive, descriptive, or tendentious. The ‘discursive’ form of news consists of news stories which are serious, well researched or sourced, offer analysis and commentary, use experts and are written by specialists. They are independent of ‘official versions of events’, often indeed seeking to expose the limited character of ‘official accounts.’ It is written for a readership perceived to be capable of understanding and following an argument. The ‘descriptive’ form of news sees complex events expressed in terms of a deliberate reductionism, of complexity to simplicity, achieved by a process of paring down a news event to its core or essential facts. The ‘tendentious’ form of news is based upon the direct advocacy of a specific cause and adopts a campaigning and universalistic style – it is aimed at persuading its readers.

Inter-coder reliability for stage three was established by re-coding of a selected sample of 20% of the articles by another coder. Thirty eight newspaper items were included in the reliability sample and the three variables, tone, slant and form 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 ranged from Kappa = 0.84 to 0.89 (p <.0.001).

Combining tone, slant and news form we produced the following schema (Figure 1) through which we analysed each newspaper item.

**[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]**

**5. Findings**

**[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]**

**5.1 Overview of findings**

Figure 2 shows slant, tone and form of all the newspaper items, which we further disaggregate below. This diagram shows that the majority of newspaper items were about Christianity. As we will see, the question of the significance of Christianity in civil society animates the way the British print media reported the atheism/Christianity binary, particularly referring to each other by using simple binary moral classifications of approval and disapproval. The tendentious form explicitly plays out the atheism/Christianity binary with less interest in reporting the binary in neutral terms. As we go on to show, despite the tendentious reporting of both sides in stark opposition, even the call to a ‘calmer’ relationship between the two was still reported most often in a tendentious form. As we will further show, these more overt judgments can be shown to be an explicit indication of the ideological positions of the reporting (e.g. attacks on ‘extremist’ thinking and the construction of liberal and centrist democratic politics). The tendentious discussion of the binary was predominantly negative about atheism, while both positive and negative about Christianity. There was some descriptive discussion but less discursive discussion of the atheism/Christianity binary. Together the descriptive and discursive forms account for about half of the coverage, but are not the predominant forms, and therefore it is of some significance that the tendentious form is where majority of the debate about the binary takes place and where we can most fruitfully discern the underpinning ideological positions running throughout all of the reporting that adopts the atheist/Christian binary as its framing narrative.

**5.2 The slant of newspaper items**

Evaluation of these findings against other studies is confronted by the fact that there has been little systematic analysis of the way recent newspaper coverage of religion has been slanted or the tone of such coverage, although Knott *et al*. 2013 have conducted research into ‘Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred,’ which in part develops the work of Towler and Knott *Media Portrayals of Religion and their Reception* (1982-1983). Their research aims to examine the media portrayal of key religious events or controversies, to interpret the changing media representations of religion, and to consider the changing relationship between religion and the media, including portrayals of Christianity and secularism.[[6]](#footnote-6) Equally influencing the findings was the fact that British press had to fill pages of the newspaper for several days with a story topic that would normally be consigned to the inner pages, if it was covered at all, which subsequently meant that when journalists who are not religion correspondents were asked to contribute to a major ‘religion story,’ the likelihood of misunderstanding and simplification greatly increased (see Marshall *et al*., 2009). In particular, reporting on Catholicism brings challenges, ‘mostly due to the breadth, historical depth, and complexity of the Catholic world’ (Welborn 2009: 127). Not all newspapers employ specialist religion reporters, and yet non-specialist journalists find it problematic when they have to address complex stories and are more likely to seek to simplify them, or to seek familiar angles such as conflict, controversy, human interest and so on, in order to resort to their default expertise where there are precedents and routines to be employed (Harrison 2000; Harrison 2006). If a political aspect or angle can be found, then it typically will be used, as is confirmed by a comprehensive analysis of the papal visit in relation to the construction of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’. As our forthcoming study will show, in this case Christianity is largely viewed as a good thing when it conforms to a pre-existing narrative of political liberalism, and a bad thing when it does not (Harrison and Crossley, forthcoming).

Similarly it seems as if we can go further and suggest that the reporting resorts to the familiarity of presenting Christianity in this way in order to animate the binary. The dominant slant of the newspapers’ coverage of the binary atheism/Christianity was focussed on Christianity: 73.7% (N=140) of newspaper items, followed by atheism 20% (N=38), and both 6.3% (N=12). In the broadsheets 77.7% (N=108) of newspaper items focussed predominantly on Christianity, with 16.5% (N=23) of its newspaper items focussed on atheism, and only 5.8% (N=8) focussed on both in the same item. The story was slightly different for the middle market tabloids. Their coverage of Christianity was slightly more evenly distributed, with 54.8% (N=17) of newspaper items focussing on Christianity, 32.3% (N=10) on atheism, and 12.9% (N=4) on both.[[7]](#footnote-7) The tabloid newspapers focussed largely on Christianity, 75% (N=15), rather than on atheism, 25% (N=5), and produced no newspaper items that focussed on both Christianity and atheism within the same piece.

**5.3 The tone of newspaper items**

The overall tone of newspaper coverage was slightly more negative (39.5%, N=75) than positive (34.7%, N=66), with 25.8% (N=49) neutral in tone. Both the ‘broadsheets’ (39.6%, N=55) and the middle market tabloids (48.4%, N=15) had a larger number of negative newspaper items than positive items: 35.3%, (N=49, broadsheets) and 22.6% (N=7, middle market tabloids). The tabloids, by comparison, were more likely to be positive in tone, with 50% (N=10) of their newspaper items coded as positive, compared with 25% (N=5) that were negative. Only 25% of newspaper items were neutral in the broadsheets (N=35), 25% in the tabloid newspapers (N=5), and 29% (N=9) in the middle market newspapers.

Items about atheism were largely negative (N=30) in tone. Most of the negative items were found in broadsheet newspapers (60%, N=18), with middle market newspapers containing 33.3% (N=10), and tabloid newspapers 6.7% (N=2) of the negative items. Negative views about atheism were slightly more likely to be found in Letters (33.3%, N=10), rather than in news stories (23.3% , N=7), opinion pieces (20.2%, N=6), editorials (16.7%, N=5) or other items (6.6%, N=2). Negativity about atheism was expressed in a variety of headlines and lead articles: for example, ‘Twisted values of noisy bigots’ (*Daily Mail*, 18 September 2010), which criticised specific well-known atheists, or the headline ‘Atheism could do without Dawkins as its advocate’ (*Independent*, 18 September 2010). ‘The Pope puts religion back into the spot light’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 September 2010), was written as a lament regarding ‘militant atheists’ and a NIB proclaimed that the ‘Pope's negative comments about atheism strike a cord with Muslims’ (*Guardian*, 18 September 2010). Following one of the Pope’s speeches on 17 September 2010, in which he referred to an increasing marginalisation of religion and the discouragement by some of the celebration of festivals such as Christmas,[[8]](#footnote-8) articles in broadsheet, middle market tabloid and tabloid newspapers returned to the alleged atheist threat to ban Christmas (see above), stating that the ‘Sidelining of religion puts Christmas at risk, warns the pope’ (*Guardian*, 18 September 2010), ‘Pope's impassioned plea to help save Christmas from the PC brigade’ (*Daily Express*, 18 September 2010), and ‘The Pope issues an impassioned plea to the people of Britain yesterday—to save Christmas’ (*The Sun*, 18 September 2010). Some newspaper items also used Cardinal Kasper’s comments and the Pope’s speeches as hooks to be negative about atheism.

Newspaper items that were positive about atheism were extremely rare. They were found in Letters (N=2) supporting ‘aggressive secularism’, and in a long opinion piece (N=1, 1276 words) entitled ‘This atheist knows how you feel Father’ (*Sunday Times*, 19 September 2010), although even this piece bemoaned the fact that the well-known atheist Richard Dawkins was going too far and giving atheists an undeservedly bad name. While the Letters allowed readers to state their own position in support of atheism, the opinion piece was interesting because it elaborated a theme that permeated many of the articles, namely that extremism in atheism (and in religion) was intolerant and had no place in a liberal and moderately secular society like Britain. While the press hosted the ‘debate’ as a simple binary, there was, underpinning the coverage, evidence of a strong dislike of what were perceived to be extremist views on each side of the binary and (as noted above) an appeal to a moderate and amiable ‘British settlement’.

Newspaper items that were negative about Christianity were mainly found in News Stories (36.5%, N=16), Letters (31.1%, N=14) and Opinion Pieces (28.9, N=13). Negativity toward Christianity was expressed in four ways. First, the overt criticism made by both the Pope and Cardinal Kasper about Britain’s marginalising of Christianity and their view that Britain is a strongly secular state and doing little to address it. This criticism was countered, largely in readers’ Letters, that religion should have no part in public life, and with an article ‘Moral absolutes and crumbling empires’ (*Guardian*, 17 September 2010), questioning the role of religion in public debate and arguing that Britain had outgrown this requirement. Second, linked to this, but separate, were queries about the authority of the Catholic Church to question British values, ‘Why all the fuss? He's only the Pope’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 September 2010), ‘Linking godlessness to a lack of values is wrong, say critics’ (*Guardian*, 17 September 2010). Many articles were very critical of Kasper as a representative of the Catholic Church, ‘Aide's slur on 'third World' UK adds to ill feeling on eve of Pope's arrival’ (*Independent*, 16 September 2010) fuelling the idea that Britain did not need a visit from the Pope, nor did it need lessons in morality from church representatives. Third, the introduction of stories about ‘old rivalries’, in the form of the divide between Protestants and Catholics in Scotland: ‘Old enmities at risk of being resurrected in city divided by faith’ (*Independent*, 16 September 2010), were raised as an issue when the Pope visited Glasgow. Fourth, there was much criticism of the Catholic Church and its clergy, particularly in relation to its record on child abuse and human rights abuse, as well as direct criticism of the Pope himself.

Newspaper items which were most positive about Christianity (32.6%, N=62) were found mainly in editorials and opinion pieces (46.8%, N=29), and in news stories (40.3%, N=25). These items tended to focus on the welcome that the Pope got when he arrived in Britain: ‘A heartfelt welcome to Britain for the Pope’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 16 September 2010), and, ‘Thousands welcome Papa Ratzi on first UK visit’ (*The Sun*, 17 September 2010), and the necessity and timeliness of his visit, given that ‘Britain is yearning for Christianity’ (*Daily Mail*, 17 September 2010). The celebratory angle and the benefit of the Pope’s visit was juxtaposed against criticism of the atheistic tendencies in UK society, with the hope that ‘We will restore faith to heart of Britain’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 16 September 2010). Christianity (especially its more British-sounding values of charity and good neighbourliness) was celebrated in these newspaper items. Similarly, where newspaper items were positive about Christianity (or were defending Christianity against atheism) there was often embedded within them a self-congratulatory note with regard to the nature of the ‘British settlement’ (where church and state are separate but related), to British tolerance and the right to practice one’s religious beliefs privately, combined with an endorsement of what is deemed to be essentially British—a secular politics that is respectful of religion. In these articles, surprise at the Pope’s approach and gentle personality was also expressed: ‘We need this modest voice of conscience’ (*Independent on Sunday* 19 September 2010), ‘Dispelled, myth of Rottweiler’ (*Sunday Telegraph*, 19 September 2010), and ‘Rottweiler? No, he's a holy grandad’ (*Sunday Times*, 19 September 2010), and recognition of a Pope who ‘seemed to be making his way rather gently’. These findings echoed similar observations about the press coverage of Cardinal Ratzinger in the USA in 2006 (see Marshall *et al*., 2009: 124). The tabloid newspapers proclaimed their growing affection for the Pope on the last day of his visit; their judgement was that ‘He's Popetastic’ (*The Sun*, 20 September 2010). Indeed there was some surprise articulated in newspapers towards the end of the Pope’s visit about its success, particularly given what was seen to be a problematic start and predictions of failure before he even arrived. We did not, however, find any significant shift in the binary rhetoric during the period analysed.

Only one newspaper item, a letter (*Guardian*, 18 September 2010), was positive about both Christianity and atheism. The letter was strongly supportive of Christianity and criticized the lambasting of the Pope by the news media, but also claimed that there was a religious vacuum that could be filled by other beliefs and views, of which atheism was one. No newspaper items were negative about both Christianity and atheism in the same piece.

The most common form of neutral newspaper item (N=49) was the news story, (63.3%, N=31) which, in order to achieve neutrality, constructed a balanced binary. This was typically achieved through the journalistic technique of ‘objective reporting.’ Namely, by quoting both sides of the story, thereby constructing the appearance of a neutral space within which disparate views were located and so creating the semblance of a ‘balanced binary.’ Some opinion pieces (16.3%, N=8) were also neutral in tone, as were a few letters, (6.1%, N=3) and editorials (6.1%, N=3) as was a verbatim reprint of the Pope’s speeches without any commentary (2%, N=1). Only 2.6% (N=5) of newspaper items were neutral when slanted towards atheism: two in broadsheet newspapers and three in the tabloid, *Daily Mirror*. The *Daily Mirror* item took the form of a YES/NO debate focusing on the question of ‘Are we a nation of atheists?’ The debate was between the Reverend Richard Coles and the atheist, Peter Tatchell, and was set up using rather old findings from a 2001 census. However, although the article was coded as neutral, because both sides were heard in the discussion, it was still framed as a simple binary discussion which focused on a particularly confrontational approach where each side stated their position, but neither view was further interpreted or engaged with in further debate or dialogue. In short, both sides were framed in a way whereby they appeared to ignore the reasoning of the other.

Neutral newspaper items about Christianity comprised 17.4% (N=33) of the sample. These newspaper items were predominantly found in the broadsheet newspapers, 78.8% (N=26), followed by the middle market tabloids, 15.2% (N=5) and hardly at all in the tabloid press, 6.1% (N=2). Unsurprisingly, 75.8% (N=25) of newspaper items were news stories where the conventional approach to telling a story, using quotations from both sides, was utilized. For example, ‘Pope inspires hope and anger as protestors take to street’ (*Sunday Telegraph*, 19 September 2010), and the lead article in the *Daily Telegraph* exploring the ‘Challenge facing multi-cultural Britain’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 17 September 2010), which was followed up with an article the next day exploring the claim that ‘There are worrying signs of a failure to appreciate religion’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 September 2010). Three opinion pieces (9.1%) and 3 letters (9.1%) were neutral about Christianity, as was an editorial and the reprint of the Pope’s speech.

Newspaper items that dealt with both atheism and Christianity in a neutral way in the same item comprised 22.4% (N=11) of the neutral sample. These newspaper items were dispersed relatively evenly across News Stories (N=3), Opinion Pieces (N=3), Editorials (N=2) and Letters (N=4). For example a longish news story (883 words) headlined ‘A Historic day, a stunning appeal, but can the Pope escape the abuse scandal?’ (*Independent*, 17 September 2010), analysed the Pope’s speech to the Queen on 16September, alongside a description of the protests about his visit in Scotland on the same day. Here the Pope’s warning to us to ‘never forget how the exclusion of God, religion and virtue from public life leads ultimately to a truncated vision of man and of society and thus to a ‘reductive vision of the person and his destiny’ (Pope Benedict XVI 2009: 29) was juxtaposed with discussion about those who were protesting strongly over his state visit to the UK.

**5.4 The News Form of newspaper items**

The discursive form of news accounted for 25.8% (N=49) of all newspaper items. It was predominantly found in the broadsheet newspapers (29.5%, N=41) and was less evident in the middle market tabloid newspapers (9.7%, N=3) and marginally less in the tabloids (25%, N=5). The descriptive form of news accounted for 24.2% (N=46) of all newspaper items, with 23% (N=32) in the broadsheet newspapers and 35.5% (N=11) of newspaper items in the middle market tabloid newspapers, but only 15% (N=3) of tabloid newspaper items. The tendentious form of news accounted for 50% (N=95) of all newspaper items: 47.5% (N=66) in the broadsheet newspapers, 54.8% (N=17) of the newspaper items in the middle market tabloids, and 60% (N=12) of the newspaper items in the tabloid newspapers (see also Appendix 1, which shows that positive tone and negative tone were more common than a neutral tone across newspaper items).

**[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]**

As Figure 3 shows, the most common type of discursive newspaper item were the news story and the opinion piece; the descriptive form of news was also mainly composed of news stories. The tendentious form of news consisted mainly of opinion pieces, editorials and letters; although tendentious coverage was also found in items one might expect to be rather more descriptive or discursive such as news stories.

The discursive form of news mostly focussed on Christianity (69.9%, N=34), or both Christianity and atheism (20.4%, N=10), with few newspaper items in this form focussing on atheism (10.2%, N=5). The tone in the discursive form was predominantly neutral (46.9%, N=23), or positive (40.8%) and 83.7% (N=41) of all discursive newspaper items were found in the broadsheet newspapers. Similarly the descriptive forms of news tended to be mostly neutral in tone and focussed predominantly on Christianity, with 84.8% (N=39) of news items falling into this category. This was the form most commonly used by the broadsheet newspapers. However, a surprising finding was the predominance of the tendentious form of news across all the newspaper items and it is to this that we now turn.

The tendentious forms of news focussed predominantly on Christianity (70%, N=67) although a significant number of items focussing on atheism were also found in this particular news form (29.5%, N=28). Overall, the tone taken in the tendentious news form was more notably negative (62.1%, N=59) than positive (37.9%, N=36). As Figure 4 shows, it is in this news form that atheism is addressed most stridently and negatively within newspaper items.

**[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]**

Tendentious newspaper items were predominantly opinion pieces, editorials and readers’ letters (Figure 5 below), but a surprisingly large number were also found in news stories. News stories that took a tendentious news form concentrated either on atheism or Christianity: none referred to both within the same item. The tendentious form of news is more strident, supporting one side or the other, and aiming to be more persuasive or eye catching than the descriptive and discursive forms of news. Some items in this category were very enthusiastic about the Pope and the visit: ‘We couldn't see very much. But we saw him’ (*Independent*, 17 September 2010), was the headline of an article in which the reporter travelled with ‘the faithful’. The *Daily Mail* took the opportunity to support Prime Minister Cameron and criticise the Leader of the Opposition, Labour leader, Ed Miliband, for being too politically correct and supporting atheist values: ‘You've made us think, Cameron tells Pope’ (*Daily Mail*, 20 September 2010). The *News of the World* accorded the Pope rock star status in a photograph showing him with a group of adoring children, under the caption, ‘Bene's from Heaven’ (*News of the World*, 19 September 2010).

The tendentious news form was also used to reinvigorate the discussion about the atheists’ perceived desire to ban Christmas: ‘Pope's Battle to Save Christmas: Don't let atheists crush your traditions, Benedict tells Britain’ (*Daily Mail*, 18 September 2010), and the ‘Pope's impassioned plea to help save Christmas from the PC brigade’ (*Daily Express*, 18 September 2010), was accompanied by a picture of politicians deemed to be too politically correct and part of the conspiracy to reduce the Christmas festival to ‘winterval’. *The Sun* put its full weight behind the Pope’s comments, using the opportunity to criticise what it referred to as those ‘PC knuckle heads’ who want to ban Christmas in its newspaper item headlined, ‘The Pope issues an impassioned plea to the people of Britain yesterday - to save Christmas’ (*The Sun*, 18 September 2010).

An important part of the tendentious news form was letters from readers and public intellectuals. Whilst readers’ letters only accounted for 18.9% of all newspaper items they provided a forum which newspapers used to allow strident criticism and praise of both Christianity and atheism. Letters were far more likely to take a negative tone than any other newspaper items coded.

**[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]**

As Figure 5 indicates, the majority of letters were found in broadsheet newspapers (86.1%, N=31), with only four examples found in middle market newspapers and one in the tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*. These letters were predominantly written by the general public (94.4%, N=34), with two written by public intellectuals. The most common subject matter for the letters was criticism of the Catholic Church (including the Pope), criticism of atheism, and approval of Britain as a secular state and approval of the state visit. In summary, letters were one of the places in which the positive and negative tone of the atheism/Christianity binary could most easily be played out in a campaigning form.

**6. Conclusion**

Overall the British press chose to cover atheism and Christianity with a ready-made and familiar narrative of accusation and counter accusation, of militant atheism versus dogmatic Christianity, via a binary best suited to the tendentious form of news items. Supporting this tendentious approach were descriptive and discursive forms of news items which were reduced to a mechanical application of the journalistic formulae for objectivity. Here two voices were reported side by side, merely stating their own position without regard for any genuine sense of engaged debate. The above findings depict a remarkable unanimity in the way the binary atheism/Christianity was used, in terms of both the slant of coverage (Christianity, 73.7%, N=140), and the use of a certain news form (the tendentious form of news accounting for 50%, N=95) of all newspaper items). As for tone, this ran the complete emotional gamut rather more evenly: negative, 39.5% (N=75), positive, 34.7% (N=66), and neutral 25.8% (N=49).

Despite the stark presentation of the binary, there was alongside this a call for a ‘calmer’ relationship between the two sides: interestingly this call for calm was also most often reported in a tendentious form. As *The Times* newspaper typically put it on 18 September (2010: 2), ‘The Pope's visit has inspired many, but violent language on both sides of the argument has polarised debate. It needs to be calmed.’ Those voices that were given space to offer accusation and counter-accusation were themselves criticised by the press for holding extreme views. When it came to matters of dispute about religious doctrine the British press latched on to the flamboyant representatives of New Atheism (associated with Richard Dawkins and Stephen Fry *et al*.), which was deemed to be seeking the eradication of religion from public life, and on to ‘militant’ Catholicism (associated with Cardinal Kasper) which (it might reasonably be thought) seeks to eradicate militant atheism from public life. These views were not seen to be helpful, attracting comments such as ‘Atheism could do without Dawkins as its advocate’ (*Independent*, 18 September 2010). The *Guardian* used its front page, under the headline, ‘A hand of friendship, the pope turns fire on atheist extremists’ (*Guardian*, 17 September 2010), to criticise what it saw as a ‘blistering attack’ from the ‘pope’ (using a lower case ‘p’) which, it was said, was unnecessarily negative and which upset humanists. Implicit in the *Guardian*’s story is that such extreme views have no place in British culture. Such a strident defence of the middle ground, alongside the reporting of atheism/Christianity as a simple binary, provide us with important evidence of the political and ideological positions driving the binary and its mediation.

The essentially binary nature of the coverage allowed the British press to resort to a default reporting position of reporting complex stories in a simple and oppositional manner, neatly side-stepping more complicated analyses of doctrine, or the necessity of allowing members of different groups to more persuasively describe their own ideas and beliefs, beyond a very basic and strident defence of their position. Indeed the utilisation of this binary enabled the use of labels to be assigned to Christians (such as ‘moral absolutes’, ‘human rights abuse’, ‘illusion of empire’, ‘wrong prescription for Britain’s moral ills’) and to atheists (such as ‘aggressive’, ‘extremist’, ‘militant’, ‘politically correct’). Animating this binary was the question of the role of Christianity and its place in modern liberal British civil society. The question was played out in the type of language that the British press reported that the ‘two sides’ used against each other. This was a language of simple ‘binary moral classifications’ (see Alexander 2011), ultimately of moral approval and disapproval. This way of reporting was itself uniformly chosen by the British press to be the most appropriate way to frame and contextualise the Pope’s visit to the UK. And yet there was also an unembarrassed editorial choice to simultaneously call for calm and for ‘calming things down.’ Here the sanctimonious tone of the British press is palpable. Having covered the Pope’s visit and the matter of the relationship it occasioned between atheism and Christianity, through the use of a ready-made narrative of conflict, the call for calm strikes one as at best opportunistic and at worst duplicitous. Thus, whilst slant, tone and news form emphasised and utilised an oppositional binary to effectively frame the Pope’s visit, what was actually endorsed within this framing was not the resolution of the binary, one way or the other, nor the attempt to create a civil space, within which people holding very different beliefs and related interests had their own views of reality reported carefully. The relatively rare opportunity to put religious matters on the front page for several days, and to ‘describe[d] people in terms that they themselves recognise and that make sense to them’ (Marshall *et al.* 2009: 169) was not taken up. Rather there was an attempt to dissolve the binary atheism/Christianity in terms the ‘British settlement’ of a calm, moderate and amicable co-existence. A recommendation which, it needs to be pointed out, was not made )in the spirit of this particular settlement) via a more discursive approach to covering this matter of atheism and Christianity, but tendentiously and in the form of an automatic and unreflexive default position.

In other words, the coverage of the Pope’s visit and the playing out of the binary Christianity/atheism existed alongside a defence of a ‘gentler secularism’ by journalists who, in the main, defended themselves (and ‘the majority of the public’) as having liberal democratic values, and as respecting human rights, which the Roman Catholic Church did not display in terms of its record on child abuse, homosexuality, Aids/HIV and women’s rights.

What we have here is the presentation of a centrist politics and a ‘moderate’ civil society in a ‘modern’ liberal democratic society, distancing itself from extremism (Crossley 2012: 10-14) and a civil space bleached of genuine contestation: simply reporting strident voices of people talking past each other hardly qualifies as a discursive civil space. We are also reminded of Žižek’s analysis of dominant trends in contemporary tolerant multicultural capitalist societies, and applied to western understandings of religion more generally (McCutcheon 2005; cf. also Martin 2010), where a series of products and cultural trends are deprived of their malignant property (‘coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol… multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness…’) (Žižek 2003: 96). To this we might add that there appears to be the assumption of an *ideal* of religion as private and non-threatening and deprived of any problematic ‘Otherness’, removing such often associated concepts as sacrifice, transubstantiation, heretics, or hell-fire. Likewise, in at least some parts of the British press, we have an assumption of an *ideal* of atheism without the threatening likes of Richard Dawkins. At some level, both religion and atheism must, it seems, conform to a liberal democratic ideal, even if certain newspapers might shun the term ‘liberal’*.* In this sense, we can see how this construction of religion parallels the idea of Implicit Religion mentioned in the introduction in that there is a need to rethink pre-existing media debates in the language of secularism and religion. But the underlying assumption is that there is a pre-existing thing called ‘religion’ which is operative in society and needs to be defined, no matter how dimly, in relation to political ideals.

Indeed, despite broadsheet newspapers such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent* taking a more positive approach to atheism, a more ‘liberal’ construction or understanding of religion can still be found in both of these centre-left papers. For instance, the *Guardian* reported that ‘[t]he pope is wrong, and unhelpful, to speak of “atheist extremism" in contemporary Britain, according to Christian, Muslim, Jewish and humanist voices’, before highlighting the different ways in which religion goes hand-in-hand with a tolerant society. In other words what we are seeing throughout these different representations is religion and/or atheism brought into the service of a particular civil vision based on moderate and amicable co-existence. While this might sound commendable there is, as Eagleton (2009: 148) notes, a health warning to be heeded, which is that ‘Societies in which any kind of abrasive criticism constitutes “abuse” clearly have a problem’.

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**[APPENDIX 1 ABOUT HERE]**

Appendix 1 shows that the overall tone of newspaper items was overall more negative (N=75) than positive (N=66) or neutral (N=49). News stories were equally positive and neutral about Christianity and less negative, but news stories about atheism were more negative than either positive or neutral. Opinion pieces and editorials were most likely to be positive about Christianity, but negative about atheism, NIBs were negative and positive about atheism and Christianity in equal measure, but (despite their very short length) were sometimes the place where the binary atheism/Christianity was mostly simply expressed, resulting in a conventionally neutral newspaper item. Letters were the place where most negative views about both Christianity and atheism were expressed.

1. Slee was writing the day after Burkeman’s debunking in the same newspaper (Burkeman 2006a). Whether Slee saw Burkeman’s article or not he still followed the reports discredited by Burkeman. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As well as largely treating atheism and secularism as synonymous, the British press in our study also treated Roman Catholicism and Christianity as synonymous. We dropped the use of the qualifying adjective ‘new’ in the study when speaking of atheism but it was apparent that the newspapers we looked at typically had ideas associated with New Atheism in mind; hence we use the phrase ‘atheism/Christianity’ to depict the binary opposition the press utilised. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An attempt to make a citizen's arrest on the Pope was subsequently abandoned by the gay rights activist Peter Tatchell. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This speech was part of the Pope’s encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate* (Pope Benedict XVI 2009) and was the only time during the visit that the Pope referred to ‘aggressive secularism’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish newspapers were not included in the sample due to their regional orientation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. At the time of writing the results of this research were forthcoming and unavailable to us but their reading of the Pope’s visit appears to broadly complement ours. Other recent studies have tended to concentrate on the reporting of religion by what has been labelled ‘a secular press’ which tends to emphasise how news journalism consistently misunderstands religion *per se*, describes the place of religion in public life and politics, or else examines the use by religious groups of their own channels of communication. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Despite the low number of newspaper items in the tabloid and middle market press, the higher circulation figures meant that these newspaper items will have been read by a larger number people than were the newspaper items in the broadsheets. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Pope’s speech to Diplomatic Corps, Politicians, Academics and Business Leaders at Westminster Hall, City of Westminster, London, 17 September 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)