

Accusations: Islam and Muslims in the UK media

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POINTING THE FINGER

Islam and Muslims in the British Media



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'There's the one who did it'

1. Accusation – 'there, look, there's the one who did it.' The men's facial expressions are inane, unthinking and mindless, and self-satisfied, gleeful and triumphalist. In the private iconography developed over the years by the cartoonist who created this picture, Andrzej Krauze, people with fixed-grin faces represent the conventions and complacencies amongst which the general public nowadays moves, daily renewed and reconstructed by most of the media.
2. This person the men with the fixed grins have identified as responsible for some crime or offence or other – what do they claim she has done, what's the fault they find in her? What do they see when they look at her, point their fingers at her? What for them does she represent? That is the question explored in *Pointing the Finger: Islam and Muslims in the British media*.
3. Krauze himself doesn't say. He virtually never, nowadays, includes any sort of verbal explanation with his cartoons. There is usually a clue to their meaning, however, in the news item and headline by which they are accompanied.
4. This particular cartoon accompanied a headline over a column in *The Guardian* on 9 October 2006: 'Jack Straw has unleashed a storm of prejudice and intensified division'. The columnist was Madeleine Bunting and she was writing about Jack Straw's mention a few days earlier that he feels uncomfortable when in the

presence of a woman wearing the niqab. The column began: 'It's been quite extraordinary: one man's emotional response to the niqab – the Muslim veil that covers all but the eyes – has snowballed into a perceived titanic clash of cultures in which commentators pompously pronounce on how Muslims are "rejecting the values of liberal democracy".'

5. A diarist on *The Independent on Sunday* (Francis Wheen) once described how Krauze operates. Krauze, he explained, reads through an item due for publication and then treats it 'as if it were a fable by Aesop or La Fontaine, seeking out the essential moral or the universal theme', thus giving it additional resonance and depth. Something similar probably happened in the case of Madeleine Bunting's column. Krauze read the copy she had filed, seeking out the essential moral, the universal theme, in her reflections on the media coverage of a remark by Jack Straw.

Three headlines

6. Krauze's cartoon, then, was adding resonance to a newspaper headline. Now, on the cover of *Pointing the Finger*, three newspaper headlines add resonance to Krauze's cartoon. The woman in a burka represents Islam, as seen by the fixed-grin complacencies and conventions of most of the UK media, particularly the national and Sunday press. Islam is physically threatening since it carries hidden time bombs ('Bombing suspect fled in a burka'.) It is culturally threatening, since it foretells the abolition of myths, traditions and rituals associated with Christmas, and therefore with Christianity and Christendom ('Christmas is banned: it offends Muslims'.)
7. The third headline ('Has the archbishop gone bonkers?') is similarly, to an extent, about the threat Islam poses to Christendom. But mainly it expresses the feeling that figures of moral authority in English society, epitomised by the Archbishop of Canterbury, can no longer be trusted – a formidable fifth column or enemy within, even more formidable than Islam itself, consists of figures of moral authority and tradition who are failing to do their job of reassuring everyone that all's well, and that all manner of thing shall be well.
8. And, perhaps most fearfully of all, Krauze is suggesting that Islam is seen by inane men as an unsettling challenge to normality in Western notions of gender and sex.
9. This essential point that anxiety and fear around Muslims and Islam are tangled up with other, unrelated fears and anxieties, has been brought home to us over the last four weeks by events in Norway. Anders Behring Breivik hates Islam and Muslims. But even more he hates, as it were, the Archbishop of Canterbury! That is to say, he hates what he calls political correctness, multiculturalism and cultural marxism, a kind of *trahison des clercs*, a betrayal by liberal intellectuals.

Sources

10. What is the source, what are the sources, of such anxieties, fantasies? What helps to feed and fuel them? These are the questions explored in various ways in *Pointing the Finger*:
11. The answers include, but are not limited to:
 - the sense of decline and diminishment ('declinism') that flows from globalisation in its various dimensions – financial, cultural, political, ecological – and leads to Muslims, and to non-Muslim authority figures such as the Archbishop, being seen as convenient scapegoats to explain anxieties and insecurities for which they are not in fact the source

- the desire to sell newspapers, and therefore to excite and orchestrate *frissons* of fear, and spread and respond to moral panic, reassuring readers that threats to identity, status and normality are understood and can be dealt with
- the desire for legitimacy of western national governments, particularly in relation to their core supporters, and in relation to their desire to control and contain dissidents of any and every kind
- the desire to maintain and defend oil supplies in the Middle East, and to justify the military invasions of Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, and to motivate Western troops and security services to mistreat, torture and kill
- the desire to stand by and support the state of Israel, particularly its current leadership
- electoral politics – throughout western countries, anti-Muslim prejudice plays well with the supporters of certain political parties and movements
- widespread scepticism, as articulated by for example 'Hitchkins' (Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens) and the *Platitude of the Day* website, towards religious beliefs and institutions – all religion, not just Islam – mixed with resentment and perhaps even envy towards those who claim religious certainty.

Responsible journalism

12. Madeleine Bunting ended her column by summing up the job of a political leader such as Jack Straw. Her words were also a summary of the job of a responsible journalist (or, for that matter, of a responsible archbishop). Slightly modified, accordingly, her closing words were these:

The job of a responsible journalist at this historical juncture is to prod our complacencies and prejudices, to open our eyes to recognising how much we have in common; how much of Islam we non-Muslims can appreciate and admire; [and] how much Islam can contribute to the far greater problems we all face.

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