

The Winterval Myth

Foreword

This is a document drafted in my spare time. Due to time constraints it has been proofread by no-one but me, hence there may be some mistakes. Feel free to contact me to point these out.

The research has been done using an online news database, with the results I have produced an appendix of Winterval references in chronological order. You can use the appendix to find the complete range of Winterval repetitions that have been left out of the essay to keep the length down (somewhat, at least). You may find the appendix useful to check the context in which Winterval was being referred to, I have attempted to not quote journalists out of context, but it is transparent if I allow you to view as much of the source material as possible. I have endeavoured to only include examples where it was clearly being repeated as fact by the author.

This is going to be treated as a 'first edition' which may be updated when I have time. I wanted to draw more out of the research than I have, but I am painfully aware that Christmas is nearly here so I just wanted to get what I have written so far into the public domain. In particular, the end is very rushed and feels tacked on somewhat. Perhaps I will expand upon this via the blog at some point.

I hope you enjoy reading this essay – and if you have then please feel free to donate through the website.

Uponnothing – 12 December 2010.

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Introduction

In 1997 Mike Chubb was working for Birmingham City Council during the ongoing rejuvenation of the city centre. As the council's Head of Events Mike and his events team were tasked with creating a marketing strategy to cover:

41 days and nights of activity that ranged from BBC Children in Need, to the Christmas Lights Switch On, to a Frankfurt Christmas Market, outdoor ice rink, Aston Hall by Candlelight, Diwali, shopping at Christmas, world class theatre and arts plus, of course, New Year's Eve with its massive 100,000 audience.¹

Mike realised that with so many different events marketing them as completely individual events would be expensive, time-consuming and would not be effective at acquiring sponsorship or funding. What the events needed, he decided, was a 'generic banner under which they could all sit'. This generic banner would drive the initiative, but each event would still retain its own marketing plan and characteristics. Crucially, none of the individual events would be changed in any way, they would merely be marketed as part of something much bigger and more exciting than the sum of its parts.

The events were set to run from 20 November to 31 December 1997² the first year and from mid-October 1998 to mid-January 1999 the next; so naturally the overall marketing brand name would have to have relevant seasonal connotations. Eventually the innocuous 'Winterval' name was chosen (a portmanteau of 'winter' and 'festival'). Little did Mike or anyone on the events team realise that this name was to found one of the most persistent urban legends of modern time, and that 11 years later he would be writing an article explaining – again – what the event was and how it was never about renaming or banning Christmas.

As Mike pointed out in 2008, Christmas – a traditional Christmas in every way – was at the heart of the Winterval season of events. The Christmas events included 'an open air ice rink, Frankfurt open air Christmas market and the Christmas seasonal retail offer'. As Mike is at pains to point out (as Birmingham City Council did time and time again when the media first broke the 'story'): 'Christmas, called Christmas! and its celebration lay at the heart of Winterval'³.

Oliver Burkeman writing in the *Guardian* in 2006 made it perfectly clear that Christmas was the same as ever in Birmingham, quoting a press officer for the council as saying:

"there was a banner saying Merry Christmas across the front of the council house, Christmas lights, Christmas trees in the main civil squares, regular carol-singing sessions by school choirs, and the Lord Mayor sent a Christmas card with a traditional Christmas scene wishing everyone a Merry Christmas".⁴

Mike was not the first person to use the term Winterval to cover an annual range of winter events; in fact, he was not even the first Mike to do so. Mike Johnson in 1983 was part of the opening of the 'first trust-run leisure centre in Wales, the Star centre in Cardiff and had soon established Winterval, a large-scale annual event featuring

local musicians, bands and artists'⁵. Somehow, this event has remained a little known obscurity, whilst Birmingham's Winterval festival has achieved global notoriety.

How this happened is a fascinating story of bad journalism, the messages of irresponsible and paranoid church leaders and badly-informed, popularity-seeking politicians looking for a tabloid-friendly soundbite. The bad journalism started with the local newspaper that broke the 'story' of Winterval on the 8th November 1998 and travelled quickly through the national press. What is worrying is that the original story was so clearly completely untrue and contained clear statements from the council that demonstrated this.

To make things worse, it is not a myth copied and perpetuated solely by the tabloids; the broadsheets were equally responsible for repeating it, and perhaps, given their air of respectability, did more to legitimise it than the tabloids. The *Sunday Times*, for example, used the myth as a question and answer in three quizzes, twice in 1998 and once in 2000⁶. The *Times / Sunday Times* has in fact managed to repeat the myth 40 times in total since 1998, an achievement only surpassed by the *Daily Mail* which leads the field with 44 mentions. The *Daily Telegraph* managed to repeat it 22 times, only slightly behind the *Express* (26), and a bit further behind *The Sun* (31). The *Daily Mirror* only seems to have repeated the myth on 4 occasions, which is less than the *Guardian* which has repeated it on 6 occasions – even though they did eventually debunk the myth in several different articles.

The myth was not just repeated, either; it was also gradually distorted to become ever more removed from the original misconception. What started as a myth that one council had rebranded or renamed Christmas became a pluralised, open-ended narrative that 'councils' and 'authorities' were in fact rebranding or renaming Christmas as 'Winterval'.

It then mutated from a simple rebranding to a calculated attack on Christianity by 'atheists', 'Muslims' or the 'PC Brigade' who feared offending 'other faiths' or 'ethnic minorities'. In one extreme example the *South Wales Echo* claimed that Winterval was the result of 'Virulent attacks on religion by atheists' which had led to 'new rules such as Christmas being renamed as "Winterval"'⁷. Who created and enforced this 'rule' and who it applied to was not explained in the article. In all, at least 15 articles directly claim that Christmas was renamed Winterval because of a fear of offending 'other faiths'. At least a further 10 articles directly claim that Winterval was used to avoid offending 'ethnic minorities'.

Naturally the vast majority of coverage has woven Winterval into the narrative of 'political correctness gone mad' - which helps to explain the increasing repetition of the myth in later years as newspapers became more and more obsessed with this particular media narrative. Indeed, the original story was sparked by the Christmas message of the then Bishop of Birmingham, the Rt Rev Mark Santer, who claimed that the decision was madness and an 'attempt not to offend, not to exclude; not really to say anything at all'⁸. The newspaper editorial on the same day blamed political correctness and the misguided belief that 'ethnic minorities' would be offended by Christmas, when they 'don't give a hoot about calling Christmas "Christmas"'. It encouraged its readers to 'back the Bishop and tell our risible PC

councillors to stop going Christmas crackers again'⁹. The following day *The Sun*¹⁰, *Daily Mail*¹¹, *Scotsman*¹², *Daily Mirror*¹³, *Irish Times*¹⁴, *Evening Standard*¹⁵ and *Edinburgh Evening News*¹⁶ all went with the 'political correctness' angle.

Although the story you are about to read focuses ostensibly on the Winterval myth, it is, I think, about much more than that. The origin, longevity and evolution of the myth raises many fundamental concerns about the way modern journalism publishes stories and pursues agendas. As the story unfolds it becomes necessary to question the symbiotic relationships between journalists, columnists, church leaders, politicians and the media consumer.

Perhaps the most important discussion point that arises from the narrative is whether we can any longer believe – as Nick Davies generally argues in his book *Flat Earth News* – that bad journalism is largely a result of incompetent misinformation¹⁷. The alternative argument is that media myths persist because the media creates, legitimises and repeats powerful media narratives that fulfil the prejudices of their owners, editors and readers. The Winterval myth provides the cornerstone for the ongoing media campaign against multi-culturalism, diversity, political correctness and the perceived Islamification of Britain. The Winterval myth has been woven into an invented narrative that posits that Christianity and Christmas is under attack due to the intolerance of other faiths and ethnicities (in reality, Muslims) to create an inverse intolerance of other faiths and ethnicities.

This – at times violent – intolerance is best demonstrated by the recent assertion of the English Defence League [EDL] leader Stephen Lennon in an interview with the *Times*. Lennon claimed that the EDL are in the process of 'sending letters to every council saying that if you change the name of Christmas we are coming in our thousands and shutting your town down'¹⁸.

This is just the latest and most worrying consequence of a myth that has averaged 24 mentions a year in printed newspapers – rising from just 75 mentions between 1998 and 2004, to 207 mentions between 2005 and 2010. It seems a proper analysis of how the myth has evolved - from a 'politically correct' PR disaster for one council, to the basis of an increasingly extreme narrative that argues that the banishment of Christmas forms the beginning of the Islamification of Britain – is both timely and relevant.

Part 1: Ground Zero

One of the oddities of the Winterval myth is that the first Winterval festival started in 1997, yet the first complaint was not registered until the 8th November 1998, almost one year later. The local daily newspaper, the *Birmingham Post* – whose sister newspaper the *Sunday Mercury* would go onto break the Winterval myth – had reported the festival's first year as being a success.

An article in April carried the positive headline: 'Next winter festival to be even more wunderbar', and claimed that 'Birmingham's first German-style winter festival was so successful that it will return this year "even bigger and better"'¹⁹. It is interesting that the festival is identified as German in style, and also that the newspaper clearly uses the Winterval branding without any reference to it replacing Christmas:

Winterval '97 ran for six weeks from November 20 to New Year's Day.

Its main features were the Frankfurt Christmas Market and outdoor ice rink, both in Victoria Square, and the funfair rides in New Street.

The city has now begun plans for Winterval '98, which could see the festivities expanded to take in Centenary Square.

The article looks forward to the expansion of the festival as well as pointing out the obvious success of the first one:

A city council spokesman said traders in Frankfurt had signalled their intention to return with more stalls than last year's total of ten.

...the official launch of Winterval '98 may be switched from Victoria Square to avoid last year's congestion when pop group M People were the main guests.

Just days before the infamous *Sunday Mercury* story broke the *Birmingham Post* ran a short piece about who would be switching on the Christmas lights on November 19th. The article made no reference to Winterval because, as Mike made clear in 2008, each event still maintained its own identity and marketing:

Council chiefs say Barney the Purple Dinosaur will lead the "spectacular" line-up for the Christmas lights switch-on in Victoria Square on November 19...

"Traditionally, the switching on of the Christmas lights always attracts a lot of people with children and so we thought Barney would be the perfect celebrity for the occasion."

As far as I can tell the *Birmingham Post* did not publish any article relating to the Winterval myth until December 2007²⁰, perhaps because the *Sunday Mercury* is closely related enough to not need to publish the same stories. Given the positive reporting at the time and the subsequent silence in the following years it is hard to believe that 10 years later in 2008 the *Birmingham Post* would claim that Winterval led to Birmingham becoming the 'subject of national ridicule' because of the council's

decision to 'controversially [rebrand] Christmas as Winterval to avoid offending non-Christians'²¹.

On the 8th November – just 9 days after the *Birmingham Post* reported on who would be switching on the Christmas lights – the *Sunday Mercury* printed the version of Winterval that has now become urban legend. The article introduces the crucial factors that will be used over and over again to keep the myth going for the next 12 years. Firstly, the article was based largely on a woefully ignorant Christmas message issued by a church leader – in this instance the then Bishop of Birmingham, Mark Santer. Secondly, the article includes a short quotation from a Conservative councillor, providing the obligatory 'PC gone mad' quotation. And finally, the article introduces and relies on the idea that Winterval is a direct replacement for Christmas, something that up to this point had not been considered because it was so clearly a completely false interpretation.

It is tempting to pin the blame for the Winterval myth on Mark Santer for his staggeringly ignorant annual Christmas message because it is based on an entirely false understanding of Winterval. However, his message would never have been widely known if it was not for the fact that the press seems willing to unquestioningly repeat the messages of church leaders. The Winterval myth would be reignited time and again by religious leaders whose public proclamations become news – irrespective of whether what they say has any value, or indeed, whether what they are saying is clearly untrue.

The problem, however, is not as innocent as it might at first appear. What becomes apparent when you trace the Winterval myth over the years is that the press is perfectly capable of challenging the proclamations of church leaders if they are off-message. If they are on-message – attacking political correctness for example – then the media are happy to repeat them. Although they pretend that they are merely repeating the words of church leaders they are really pushing their own agenda using the badly-informed voices of others to feign neutrality.

The Bishop's message – originally only disseminated to all clergy and churches in the diocese – was as follows:

"I wonder what madness is in store for us this Christmas? I confess I laughed out loud when our city council came out with 'Winterval' as a way of not talking about Christmas! No doubt it was a well meaning attempt not to offend, not to exclude; not really to say anything at all. Once it was religious people who were seen as killjoys; think of the 17th century Puritans trying to ban Christmas festivities. Now, it seems, the secular world, which professes respect for all, is actually deeply embarrassed by faith."²²

The Bishop is perhaps something of a visionary, displaying paranoia well ahead of the rush in recent years by church leaders to call Christians to arms against a rise in the 'aggressive secularism' that is intent on banning any form of Christian worship. One of the worst things about the Winterval myth is that it was so obviously false, the hundreds of thousands of people who enjoyed the festival in 1997 understood perfectly that Christmas celebrations took place in the same way in Birmingham as they always had done. They understood the perfectly simple concept of what

Winterval was, which only heightens further the frustration that Mark Santer's untrue claims were so rapidly repeated as truth.

This brings us inevitably to the author of the piece, which was without a byline, and the assumption that they must have been either an extremely incompetent, lazy journalist or that they cynically wanted to publish the story for other reasons. Luckily, the journalist who – in his words – ‘broke the storm’ is so proud of his article that he wrote into the *Birmingham Post* in 2008 to criticise Mike Chubb’s defence of the festival²³.

Step forward Bob Haywood, news editor of the *Sunday Mercury* at the time. His article could be simply an example of 'neutral' journalism gone wrong. However, a closer examination of the article and Haywood's later defence of it reveals that it was an exceptionally poor and biased piece of journalism.

The idea of 'neutral' journalism is that a reporter simply reports both sides of a given argument without taking sides. The reader then weighs up both sides of the argument and decides which argument has the most validity. On the surface, this is the neutrality that Haywood's article tries to create. However, journalistic neutrality is often disingenuous for three main reasons. Firstly, a newspaper is designed first and foremost to sell as many copies as possible, truly neutral journalism is unlikely to maximise sales. It is far more effective to report controversy and conflict, even if none exists.

This creates the second problem, whenever you report an argument as being a controversy it inevitably becomes one, even if the controversy is completely nonsensical. In this instance the 'controversy' being reported is in fact the completely false and unjustifiable complaints of just one man, Bishop Santer. The act of reporting his comments was enough to give them an air of validity to the average reader – in their eyes there must be something in the comments for why else would a newspaper see fit to report them?

This leads to the third problem of supposed neutrality: you have to present and give equal weight to both sides of the argument – even if one side's arguments are completely nonsensical. Giving both sides equal weight implies that each side's arguments are equally weighty. In this case it is clear that Bishop Santer's arguments are utterly ludicrous, but here he is allowed a free platform to express them unquestioned by the reporter.

This, however, still fails to really address the worst aspect of the article: even the normally problematic concept of journalistic neutrality is undermined by a clear bias throughout the article. Haywood sets himself up as the archetypal reporter, recording the argument without getting personally involved. He describes how the Bishop had launched ‘an astonishing attack’ and how he also accused the council of ‘replacing Christmas with “Winterval”’. However, straight away Haywood loses integrity with his choice of language; he notes that the Bishop had described the ‘decision’ as ‘madness’. Already this is problematic because calling it a ‘decision’ implies that it is true and has already taken place. To further this idea, Haywood describes the Bishop’s remarks as ‘hard-hitting’, an adjective with strong connotations of truth and honesty.

Already the reader is being subtly drawn to take the side of the Bishop against a 'decision' that does not even exist. Only then is the reader introduced to the first denial from the council contained in the article:

Last night, the city council said Winterval was not another name for Christmas, and the winter festival would have traditional Christmas at its heart.

What is worse is that Haywood immediately undermines this denial by linking the current 'row' with an incident that took place 5 years earlier when 'the city council insisted on Christmas lights being called festive lights to avoid offending religious and racial minorities'. This clearly implies that the council has a previous record of attempting to rename traditional Christmas decorations and acts as evidence to support the Bishop's claims. This previous incident is reported as fact and is referred to as a 'decision' that was 'condemned as barmy political correctness' and 'was later overturned' with 'Christmas lights returning in later years'.

It is not simply a case of undermining the council statement that makes this such poor journalism, it is the idea that the journalist is so happy to simply rely on the council statement to form that side of the argument. Even a tiny amount of research would have revealed that Winterval had already taken place successfully the year before and that Christmas was celebrated without controversy as normal. Haywood does not need to take the council's word that Christmas had not been renamed or shunned, he could simply look at the previous festival.

However, Haywood is busy running with the narrative that the council has form for meddling with Christmas celebrations by weaving in some of the direct comments from Mark Santer to make it sound as if this is just the latest in a long run of politically correct attacks mounted by Birmingham city council:

'I wonder what madness is in store for us this Christmas? I confess I laughed out loud when our city council came out with "Winterval" as a way of not talking about Christmas!'

Again, the reason why this is such bad journalism from Haywood is that he never stops to question the comments of the Bishop. For example, here the Bishop is suggesting that he has only recently heard of Winterval, and stating that it is a new event to replace 'this Christmas'. As Haywood, the Bishop and any resident of Birmingham should have known: Winterval was celebrated successfully less than 12 months before this article. Haywood in particular has no excuses, given that not only is he a journalist – news editor of the paper at the time - but his paper's sister paper the *Birmingham Post* had previously covered the success of Winterval.

Haywood's article makes absolutely no reference to the fact that Winterval has already existed for a year and that the first event was a success - and not one person appears to have thought that Christmas had disappeared. Haywood had either not had time to investigate further (if it is even credible to believe that he was unaware of the first Winterval) or simply did not want to discredit the story by revealing that Winterval was not a new concept.

Haywood did have time to get some suitably outraged comments from then Tory deputy leader on the city council, Coun John Alden, who provided a blunt, tabloid-friendly soundbite:

'The sad Socialists are caught in a time warp because, while they may be worried about calling Christmas "Christmas", ethnic minorities don't worry about it at all.'

It is staggering to think that the deputy leader of the city council did not know that the first Winterval – complete with a traditional celebration of Christmas – had already taken place successfully the year before. Perhaps his comments were motivated by the fact that the council was at that time run by Labour.

The article ends with a detailed rebuttal from a council spokeswoman:

'It is sad the Bishop feels this way, particularly as we have invested money this year into drawing attention to the Cathedral as part of the Christmas celebrations by placing tasteful white lighting throughout the tree area. Far from not talking about Christmas, the events within Winterval and the publicity material for it are covered in Christmas greetings and traditional images, including angels and carol singers.'

One suspects that if we had a more robust, honest press that this categorical denial would have been an end of Winterval as a story, but sadly little weight seems to be given to nameless spokeswomen. Indeed, it was not enough to get Haywood to investigate the story further. It is difficult to imagine a journalist constructing this article and not wanting to investigate the concept or history of Winterval a little further, given the huge disparity between the claims of Bishop Santer and the council.

Haywood could have easily acquired publicity material for the forthcoming events to verify whether Christmas really was being airbrushed from the seasonal calendar. If he had performed any kind of basic journalism he would have had no choice but to dismiss the comments of Bishop Santerⁱ. Conversely, he could have actually done some real journalism and investigated why the Bishop might have felt compelled to make such comments.

We will see repeated occasions when the words of church leaders are given prominent newspaper coverage irrespective of how ludicrous the sentiments are. The Bishop's comments in this case warranted not just an article from Bob Haywood, but also an editorial on the same day. The editorial ironically and unintentionally

ⁱ This is reminiscent of why Kelvin MacKenzie's experiment - during his early days as editor of *The Sun* - to hire only Oxford and Cambridge graduates failed. As MacKenzie concluded years later:

'Satisfied that my bold move would take The Sun to a higher plain I waited for the results. They were not forthcoming. In fact, very little emerged from my new hirelings. Most disappointing. I had to get to the bottom of this. It became clear that with their keen and analytical minds they had made a fatal mistake - they had continued investigating every story to the point where they had satisfied themselves that there was no story at all. This would not do. I called in one of the super-brains and explained a philosophy that had served me well over the years. The reporter leant forward with an earnest look as I told him the secret: if a story sounded true it probably was true and should therefore appear in the paper or there would be lots of white, unexplained spaces.'¹¹

touches on why Winterval was created in the first place, starting as it does with some musings on the commercialism of Christmas:

RELIGIOUS leaders have long lamented that Christmas is becoming too commercialised. And who can say they're wrong? When Teletubbies and too much food and drink become more important than celebrating the story of Jesus being born in a humble stable in Bethlehem, something has gone seriously wrong.²⁴

Part of the commercialisation of Christmas involves Christmas starting earlier and earlier each year as shops and city centres try to increase the length of time that they can generate extra revenue for. It was for precisely this reason that Winterval was created, it was an overarching framework to keep a city centre busy without needed to stretch Christmas too far. Winterval was an attempt to shy away from the criticism of over-commercialising Christmas. If any criticism could be aimed at the concept it would be that it was a cynical attempt to stretch the Christmas spirit by commercialising many different religious festivals under one banner.

No doubt if they had run Christmas for the length of time that Winterval covered then they would be accused of cynically exploiting and destroying the religious message of Christmas. The term Winterval allowed the council to commercially exploit other events whilst still maintaining the relevant Christmas connotations and spirit. Christmas was always going to remain the commercial and religious centre-point of the event because it was always going to generate the most revenue.

One suspects that the lead writer would have preferred Christmas to have been stretched and exploited under the label 'Christmas', given that they suggest that 'worse is in store: Christmas is now in danger of becoming politically-correct.'²⁵ The editorial continues:

The Bishop of Birmingham, the Rt Rev Mark Santer, is worried about the city council's decision to celebrate "Winterval" rather than Christmas. He calls it "madness". When the normally mild-mannered Bishop uses such a word, there is major cause for concern.

Already we can see the problems of elevating the opinions of a church leader above basic scrutiny. Furthermore, the lead writer more directly uses the fallacious logic used by Haywood that it must be true simply because the same council renamed Christmas lights 5 years ago:

The city council claims it has not re-named Christmas; that "Winterval" is just the name for the winter festival being held in the run-up to Christmas and the New Year. Which might be convincing - except for those with long memories. In 1993, the same city council ordered that "Christmas lights" should be called "festive lights" to avoid offending ethnic minorities.

As any journalist should realise: the truth or otherwise of past events has no bearing on the truth or otherwise of the current event being discussed. It is again interesting that the lead writer can recall an incident that happened 5 years ago, but cannot recall the Winterval event that happened barely 12 months previously.

Both articles rely on recalling an incident that may or may not have happened 5 years ago as evidence that the council are definitely renaming Christmas, yet neither writer acknowledges - or is aware - that the Bishop's outrage is already one year late. The editorial ends with a call to arms:

In the face of public scorn and ridicule, the city council backed down over the Christmas lights. So, let's back the Bishop and tell our risible PC councillors to stop going Christmas crackers again.

Once more, such a call to arms might be more convincing had the first Winterval event not successfully celebrated Christmas with the whole city just 12 months previously - without any complaints or even the merest whisper of negative coverage from the press. At no point for a whole year after Winterval did anyone suggest that the event had somehow tried to replace or rebrand Christmas.

Instead of being dismissed as nonsense the Bishop's comments actually resulted in one badly biased, poorly researched supporting article and an editorial that urged readers to 'back' him in his entirely spurious crusade against something that had never happened.

The fact that Winterval was created in 1997, the clear denials from the council and the hazy reliance on something that happened 5 years ago to support the Bishop's comments should have set alarm bells ringing for the national press.

But it didn't. The next day the national press repeated the story without a word of questioning.

The *Times*' Peter Foster reported that 'Christmas is coming but not as we know it' and told readers that:

BIRMINGHAM will celebrate the festive season as usual this year with carol singing, fairy lights and street entertainment - but don't call it Christmas. Council officials have renamed it "Winterval" in the hope of creating a more multi-cultural atmosphere in keeping with the city's mix of ethnic groups.²⁶

John Innes in the *Scotsman* went with 'Clergy hit out as Christmas season renamed "Winterval"':

CHURCH leaders clashed with council chiefs over a "politically correct" decision to call Christmas festivities "Winterval". Birmingham City Council has introduced the word to describe its 42-day programme of festive family events over Christmas and the new year.²⁷

The *Mirror* went with 'Shh..don't call it Christmas':

CHURCH leaders yesterday condemned a council's "politically correct" decision to call Christmas festivities Winterval. Birmingham City Council is using the name to describe its 42-day programme of festive events.²⁸

The *Mirror* also managed to get the views of the then Archdeacon of Aston, John Barton, who described the renaming as 'totally unnecessary'.

The *Guardian's* Martin Wainwright went with 'Bishops go crackers as council wishes everyone a merry Winterval':

CHRISTMAS may have dubious origins - with no certain date for Christ's birth and December the usual time for pagan festivals - but you meddle with it at your peril in Birmingham. A municipal brainwave called Winterval, renaming the annual holiday and linking it to shopping rather than shepherds, has drawn the fire of local bishops.²⁹

The *Irish Times* went with 'And merry Winterval to you too':

Birmingham - Church leaders have clashed with council chiefs over a "politically correct" decision to call Christmas festivities "Winterval". Birmingham City Council has introduced the phrase to describe its 42-day programme of festive family events over Christmas and the New Year.³⁰

The *Evening Standard* chose 'Christmas or "Winterval"' (an article, incidentally, that is virtually identical to that in the *Irish Times*):

CHURCH LEADERS clashed with council chiefs today over a "politically correct" decision to call Christmas festivities "Winterval". Birmingham City Council has introduced the phrase to describe its 42-day programme of festive events over Christmas and the New Year.³¹

The *Daily Mail* chose 'I'm dreaming of a white Winterval':

A BISHOP has accused a council of political correctness for its decision to call Christmas festivities 'Winterval'. Birmingham City Council introduced the title to describe its 42- day programme of festive family events over Christmas and the New Year.³²

The Sun went with 'Cancel Christmas call it Winterval':

CRAZY council chiefs provoked outrage last night after naming Christmas festivities "Winterval." Church leaders branded the move by Labour-run Birmingham Council "a joke." And furious Tories called it "political correctness gone mad." The council is sending out 100,000 copies of a 40-page booklet advertising Winterval - a series of events in ending on New Year's Eve. Five years ago Birmingham Council tried to call Christmas lights "festive lights," but was forced to back down after protests. Churchmen believe the Winterval name is intended to avoid offending Muslims and other minorities... A church council member added: "Christmas will survive Birmingham City Council, thanks be to God. But if we do not object now, who knows how far they will go. "The word Winterval has a nasty echo of communists who banned any Christian connotation in East Germany."³³

And finally, the *Edinburgh Evening News* covered it briefly in their 'Britain Today' feature:

BIRMINGHAM: Church leaders have clashed with council chiefs over a "politically correct" decision to call Christmas festivities "Winterval". The phrase was coined by Birmingham City Council to describe its 42-day programme of festive family events over Christmas and the New Year.³⁴

In one day the myth had been perpetuated by 8 other newspapers. Interestingly, the *Daily Express* and *Daily Telegraph* appear to have missed the myth at the time, although they would both go on to be its cheerleaders in the following years. Each of the 8 newspapers appeared to have made no effort to verify the story, and given that the majority of them did end their articles with a shortened comment from the council they must have noticed a large discrepancy between the Bishop's comments and the council's rebuttal.

Sadly, none of the newspapers that repeated the story seemed aware that the Winterval brand was created a year before they published their stories. This made the story topical, and as such it soon found its way into other newspapers. It was a popular quiz question and made it into the *Sunday Times* – twice³⁵ – and the *Guardian*³⁶ before the end of the year. It made its way into a colourful sports intro in *The Independent*:

AS THE qualifiers begin to emerge from the Champions' League in Europe, a would-be champions' league is ready to sort the contenders from the pretenders on the domestic front. Between this weekend and Winterval, as the politically correct council on Aston Villa's home patch have renamed the festive season, the six-pointers come thick and fast in the race for the Premiership title.³⁷

The *Guardian*, not content with just including it as a quiz question, managed to repeat the myth before the year was out in December, claiming: 'last month Birmingham council, claiming it was anxious not to offend those in other faiths, renamed Christmas "Winterval"'³⁸. The last – and most fitting mention – of Winterval came in the *Irish Times* on the 28th December when Ruth Dudley Edwards labelled Birmingham council as "The city council that abolished Christmas".

Ironically, she awarded the council a 'Clown Of The Year award', because 'for the second year running, [it had] refused to celebrate Christmas and had the city bedecked with lights and decorations honouring Winterval, short for winter festival.'³⁹ Already many journalists had fallen for the myth and it is particularly insightful that journalists are prepared to award a 'Clown Of The Year award' without even the merest hint of any research taking place. It is also interesting how quickly a myth that a council had renamed Christmas can evolve into the exclamation that they actually had 'refused to celebrate Christmas' or had actually 'abolished' it.

In the ten months that followed the original 1997 Winterval not a single media outlet suggested in any way that Birmingham had 'refused to celebrate Christmas'. In less than two months following the November 8th article and editorial in the *Sunday Mercury* at the end of 1998 the myth had received 26 mentions in total; in newspapers both local and national, tabloid and broadsheet.

This was, however, just the beginning.

Part 2: The phoney war on Christmas, 1998 – 2005

The initial flurry of articles in 1998 focused on the 'political correctness gone mad' angle of the Winterval story, but there were already signs from some newspapers that Muslims were being singled out as the ethnic minority most to blame for the supposed renaming of a Christian festival. Whilst the original comments from Bishop Santer were largely interpreted as suggesting that the council's decision had been taken to avoid causing offence to 'other religions' or other 'ethnic minorities', *The Sun* picks out Muslims as if they were somehow separate from other ethnic minorities:

Churchmen believe the Winterval name is intended to avoid offending Muslims and other minorities.⁴⁰

The Sun's article also manages the most aggressive initial coverage, going through the full spectrum of tabloid emotive language: 'crazy', 'provoked outrage', "a joke", 'furious', "political correctness gone mad", 'protests' and the most extreme assertion so far from an unnamed church council member that "The word Winterval has a nasty echo of communists who banned any Christian connotation in East Germany."⁴¹

The *Times* felt it was necessary to check with a bemused Muslim and Hindu just to make sure 'non-Christians' were not in the slightest bit offended⁴². It discovered that they were not. The *Scotsman*, *Daily Mail* and *Irish Times* all quoted (with the tell-tale signs of classic churnalism) the Ven John Barton, (then Archdeacon of Aston) as saying:

"It is a totally unnecessary example of political correctness to avoid sensitivities people simply do not have. Christians wish Muslims a happy Diwali and Muslims wish us a merry Christmas."⁴³

It seems a little odd to wish Muslims a Happy Diwali (or Divali), given that it is actually a Hindu festival. The *Guardian* perhaps sheds a little light on this because they appear to quote the Ven John Barton in full:

"Christians wish Muslims well at Eid and Hindus at Diwali and they wish us a merry Christmas. No one is offended by the term Christmas."⁴⁴

It seems that the desire of the tabloids to single out Muslims meant that the original comments were condensed so that they no longer made sense. The Hindus – who the tabloids have no particular agenda with – are removed but sloppy journalism removes the wrong festival, leaving the Hindu festival in the quote whilst removing the Muslim festival of Eid. In the constant stream of tabloid news such subtleties are easily overlooked, but the drip, drip, drip effect on the public perception of Muslims is far harder to ignore.

The *Sun* was by far and away the worst offender in the 1998 flurry of articles for linking the Winterval myth with supposed Muslim intolerance. They followed up the initial article on Winterval by publishing a letter from a reader that reiterates the message of the Winterval myth without the need for the journalistic disclaimer – which basically required the journalist to end the article with a denial from Birmingham council.

This disclaimer is significant; all of the initial articles on Winterval included it. This disclaimer limited the acceptance of the myth as fact. Any reasonably lucid reader who made it to the end of the article would have been faced with one simple conclusion: somebody was lying to them. Whether the reader believed the council or the newspaper depended on whom they trusted most (or indeed, least). Either way, the inclusion of clear denials from the council and the lack of any evidence whatsoever that the council was renaming Christmas certainly meant that the myth remained effectively dormant for the 6 years following its birth.

However, *The Sun* was removing this disclaimer almost immediately when mentioning Winterval. Just 3 days after their initial Winterval article they published a letter from a reader that repeated the myth as fact:

SO politically correct Birmingham Council wants to rename Christmas "Winterval" to avoid offence to non-Christians. Ireland could rename St Patrick's Day out of sensitivity to people who aren't Irish. And Mother's Day could be renamed, so as not to hurt feelings of people without mothers!⁴⁵

This was aided on the same day by an article by Rikki Brown that makes overt references to Muslim extremism and intolerance. Although she clearly blames the 'PC mob' for the renaming of Christmas, she still thinks it is helpful to imagine what would happen if we tried to change one of *their* festivals:

I can't really see how non-Christians could possibly be offended by Christmas, but they would be really offended if their religious festivals were renamed for PC reasons. Actually, offended wouldn't be the word for it.

So, even though the decision has nothing to do with any direct action or sensitivities on the part of 'non-Christians', here we are being invited to imagine the outrage that non-Christians would feel anyway, along with the dark statement that 'offended wouldn't be the word for it'. Brown makes it perfectly clear what she means by this statement when she accuses the council of:

going on fact-finding junkets to the Holy Land to run their idea past a few non-Christian religious leaders.

These 'non-Christian religious leaders' are, of course, savages who respond:

"Hey, it's your God mate, mess with him if you want, but mess with ours and we'll kill you."

Whilst Brown may refrain from mentioning Muslims – preferring the more neutral 'non-Christians', it is clear from the *Sun's* coverage of the issue exactly who she meant. So, within 4 days of the original Winterval myth the *Sun* was already stirring up racial tension by implying that Muslims played some part in the consultation process behind the Winterval brand. Furthermore, the *Sun* also links Winterval to a media narrative that would grow increasingly powerful in the following years: Christianity and Christmas can be attacked with impunity, whilst Muslims and other

ethnic minorities' religions are sacred and attacks on those would be met with death threats. Indeed, such is the fear of Muslims that councils rename / rebrand or ban Christmas on the off-chance that 'Muslims' are offended. This idea nicely implies that all Muslims are to be feared, as if they are all one big homogeneous extremist mass.

The *Sun* reinforced these narratives 6 days later by publishing two more reader letters. The first letter drove home that Muslims were to blame and reinforces the idea being promoted by Rikki Brown that all religions are exalted apart from Christianity:

BIRMINGHAM Council are crass and insensitive with their idiotic idea to rename Christmas festivities Winterval. In their desperation not to offend muslims, they are offending almost everyone else. Why should people choosing to live in this country be offended by Christian festivals? It strikes me that every culture and religion is promoted here - apart from our own.⁴⁶

The next letter focuses on the idea that Winterval is just part of the 'PC brigade's' attempt to destroy the heritage of Britain:

BIRMINGHAM City Council's decision to re-name Christmas "Winterval" is political correctness gone mad. What other race is hell-bent on destroying it's heritage like we are? Is being British and Christian such a terrible thing to be ashamed of?⁴⁷

Bringing the idea of race into the discussion sets the scene for the later assertions that the destruction of Christmas is in fact part of the wider Islamification of Britain – a narrative that moves the Muslims from passive (councils renaming Christmas in case it offends them) to active (councils renaming Christmas because of threats from them).

Whilst the *Sun* was creating racial tension other more respectable news sources were giving legitimacy to the myth simply by featuring it without the disclaimer. However, the myth was hardly staple fare for newspapers in the early years. In 1999 the myth received just 8 seasonal mentions and was mentioned almost solely to support new claims that various aspects of Christmas were being banned. It was, however, always repeated as fact and never featured any kind of statement from the council.

In 2000 the myth only received 11 airings, although it was interesting to see how the myth was now becoming embellished and that politicians were starting to get involved. In October the *Daily Mail* ran a story about how the then Conservative Party leader William Hague would "end [the] idiocy of PC" claiming that:

Mr Hague will appeal to 'all the people who look on helpless at the march of political correctness' highlighting the decision by Birmingham's Labour council to rename Christmas the 'winterval'.⁴⁸

Although the original Winterval was now 3-years-old it didn't stop Ross Clark featuring it in his 'weekly survey of the things our rulers want to prohibit' for the

Spectator in December. The two years in which Birmingham council used the brand of Winterval became 'several years' in which the council:

followed in the footsteps of Oliver Cromwell, who outlawed Christmas between 1648 and 1660, by refusing to have any reference to the festival on its streets in case the city's Hindus and Muslims should feel upset⁴⁹

Not only is Clark 3 years late with his 'weekly survey' he falsely claims that the council 'refused to have any reference' to Christmas on its streets and he implies that the 'outlawing' is ongoing. At around the same time Polly Toynbee – who would debunk the myth in 2007⁵⁰ - was repeating it as fact in the *Guardian*⁵¹.

2001 was equally quiet, generating only 10 mentions, but it did break the trend of Winterval being a winter-only seasonal myth by popping up in articles in February⁵², May (twice⁵³) and September⁵⁴. The myth is repeated in fairly standard ways: the *Scotsman* claimed that 'Birmingham Council changed Christmas to "Winterval" for fear of offending non-Christian groups' and the *Observer* in much the same language claimed that 'Birmingham City Council abandoned the traditional Christmas holiday for a "non-Christian" break'⁵⁵. Minette Marrin deserves a special mention for getting the myth into the *Guardian* in May⁵⁶ and the *Daily Telegraph* in September⁵⁷. She would go on to repeat the myth another 3 times in later years⁵⁸.

The *Scotsman*'s Fiona McCade argued that Christmas was being rebranded because it was not "multi-cultural" enough' (the speech marks are hers) before christening the event 'the festival that dare not speak its name'⁵⁹. Richard Littlejohn – not know for his originality or ability to separate fact from fiction – jumped onto the same band wagon a month later with a column titled: 'Don't mention the C-word'. 'Welcome to the multicultural, sorry about this, C-word' he writes, before exclaiming that 'the festival which dare not speak its name is upon us'⁶⁰.

The message from McCade and Littlejohn is clear: multiculturalism does not have room for Christianity. Multiculturalism means replacing 'our' Christian festivals with 'their' festivals, diversity - such logic dictates - is not diverse at all. Again, it is worth repeating here that Winterval retained Christmas – in all its glory - as the focal point for a season of festivals, it was never banned or shunned or not mentioned in any way. It is divisive, ignorant and xenophobic of McCade and Littlejohn to suggest otherwise.

The final mention in 2001 goes to James Delingpole who wishes 'a Happy Christmas to everyone, apart from the people who want to call it 'Winterval', 'Holidays' and other bollocks euphemisms'⁶¹.

2002 turned up just 2 mentions, but one of the articles stands out as being one of the worst pieces of journalism associated with the Winterval myth. In December 2002 – over 5 years after the Winterval brand was born – the *Evening Standard* claimed that Birmingham Council 'has this year given Christmas itself a new name, Winterval'. As if this wasn't bad enough it also claimed that the same council had 'five years ago decreed that Christmas lights should be renamed "festive lights"', which in reality was something that was alleged to have happened in 1992. Brilliantly, the article ends by musing that 'perhaps it will repent its timidity next time round'; blissfully

unaware that Birmingham City Council had already abandoned the name three years earlier in 1999⁶².

2003 saw a resurgence with 9 seasonal mentions, whilst the narrative was evolving to include New Labour. Political correctness was now seen as an obsession of the 'loony left' so references to Winterval increasingly replaced 'Birmingham City Council' with 'Labour authority'⁶³. It was a bad year for the *Times* who repeated the myth 3 times in 4 days⁶⁴. It was also time for a new bishop to pick up where Mark Santer left off in 1998. This time it was the Rt Rev Nigel McCullough who – during his seasonal address – urged Christians to celebrate their faith 'as if they meant it'. He argues:

A lot of people are surprised that in the Koran Muslims have a story of Jesus's birth. How misplaced and silly are those attempts at political correctness when local authorities ban school nativity plays or replace Christmas with something called 'Winterval'.⁶⁵

Given that local authorities did not 'ban school nativity' plays or replace Christmas with Winterval it seems deeply ironic that Bishop McCullough labels them 'misplaced and silly'. These 3 words do describe almost every outraged repetition of the Winterval myth, especially when the repetition forms part of a seasonal address that you assume a modicum of thought would have gone into.

2004 saw just 6 mentions starting with Jonathan Petre in the *Daily Telegraph* in July⁶⁶. The *Sun* dedicated a letters page to angry readers in November as part of their 'don't sack Santa' campaign because the Birmingham Bullring had allegedly 'banned Santa'⁶⁷. Richard Littlejohn took up the cause the following day, referring to Birmingham Council as 'po-faced prats' and pointing out that the council 'was the first to officially outlaw Christmas some years ago – renaming the holiday "Winterval"'⁶⁸. A month later the *Sun* published a correction (buried on page 36) sent in by Tim Walley, then general manager of the Bullring:

SANTA has certainly not been "sacked" from the Bullring! In fact, he is appearing daily at two of our biggest stores and is being made to feel very welcome by all of our staff. I don't know where our PC tag came from, but we can assure everyone that the festive spirit is alive and well at the Bullring.⁶⁹

No such correction was published for the repetition of the Winterval myth. The correction issued for the Bullring story did not prevent the myth spreading anyway. Just 4 days after the correction was issued the *Yorkshire Post* reported that the Bullring had 'banned Santa', whilst the article referred to Birmingham as 'the city that re-named Christmas'⁷⁰. This seems to be the first time the *Yorkshire Post* mentioned the Winterval, it certainly would not be the last.

Other notable mentions in 2004 go to Rod Liddle in the *Sunday Times*⁷¹ and Anthony Browne who refers to the myth in an article for the *Times* titled 'We are committing cultural suicide'. Browne argued that:

Once Christmas has been supplanted by a spiritually vacuous post-Christian orgy of consumption, the next phase of the war is to ban it

altogether. Simply turn it, as Birmingham famously did, into a generic "Winterval" to make it equally meaningless to everyone.⁷²

Whilst his argument was hardly original, or based on any factual evidence, it would set the tone for the next 5 years.

The phoney war on Christmas was over. From now on Winterval would dominate the media narrative that 'our' Christian culture was under attack from political correctness, multi-culturalism, ethnic minorities, Muslims or simply 'them'. Despite the fact that Winterval was coined in 1997, never replaced or devalued Christmas in any way in one city and was abolished by 1999, it was not going to die off.

It was, in fact, about to really capture the imagination and outrage of the media.

Part 3: The War on Christmas

On the 5th of May 2005 Tony Blair and New Labour won a third term in office. The right-wing media – who had already suffered 8 years of the ‘loony-left’s’ obsession with multiculturalism, political correctness and diversity – were now becoming increasingly angry and desperate. A month after the election the *Daily Mail* led the fight back against New Labour’s perceived meddling by reporting that a hospital had ‘banned’ the bible and that this was simply the ‘latest indication that Christianity is now regarded as offensive in Leftwing and some official circles’. As expected the article then argued that this was following ‘a trend to remove Christianity from Christmas which saw Birmingham rename the festival Winterval’⁷³.

The media narrative was clear: New Labour – interchangeable by now with ‘the leftwing’, ‘meddling councils’ and the ‘PC brigade’ – were attempting a cultural cleansing of Christianity and had to be stopped. This narrative has intimate links with the media narratives on immigration and the ethnic make-up of Britain. It is therefore not surprising that the Winterval myth is called upon as evidence more and more as these other narratives are pursued aggressively by the right-wing media. The *Daily Mail* article above is typical of the way that Winterval is inserted as evidence to support new myths. By this point the Winterval myth was reported as absolute fact; for journalists it was the trusty foundation upon which they could stand their latest lie.

Just four days after the *Daily Mail* article the *Express* requested that people should not ‘blame Islam for the religious meddling of the politically correct’⁷⁴. However, they were happy to blame immigration a year later, claiming that ‘our country is being given away’, stating that:

The liberal elite may sneer at British traditions and shrug its shoulders as Christmas is renamed Winterval and Guy Fawkes night is replaced with a Bengali tiger festival by officials anxious not to offend the new arrivals. But for millions of us, such nonsense looks like an officially sanctioned attack on our traditional way of life.⁷⁵

The article finishes, firstly, by laughably concluding that with the influx of foreigners and the breakdown of ‘our traditional way of life’ it is ‘no wonder Britons are also quitting the country in record numbers’. Because, of course, if you dislike foreigners or different cultures the best thing you can do is up sticks and move to a country with a different culture that is full of foreigners. The second aspect of the article’s conclusion is far more problematic. The article suggests that the actions of New Labour are driving people to vote ‘for the obnoxious policies of the BNP in protest’. In reality, people who vote BNP do so because their perception of immigration and cultural issues is false and based on articles such as this. The cultural attack only exists in the minds of journalists, editors and the people who are swayed by them.

This takes us back to the *Express* asking its readers not to ‘blame Islam’ for the war on Christmas / Christianity. The problem with tabloids (and indeed broadsheets to an lesser extent) is that it is pointless to ask readers not to blame Islam or Muslims whilst they constantly lie about what motivated the decisions of councils (we will ignore for the purposes of this argument the fact that most of these ‘decisions’ never even took place in the first place). In 2004 the *Yorkshire Post* started what can only

really be described as a hate campaign against Muslims. It started with an article in which they claimed that Santa had been banned from the Bullring shopping centre in Birmingham. In the article they made it clear who was really to blame for such bans. Santa was banned from the Bullring "in case it offends Muslims", Luton had 'renamed their Christmas lights Luminos "to avoid upsetting Muslims"' and the Red Cross had 'banned all mention of Christmas from its stores in case... yes, you guessed it - "it offends Muslims"'⁷⁶.

The repetition of the myth that organisations pander to Muslims out of fear shifts the blame away from councils and onto Muslims. If you keep stating that organisations feel it is necessary to act upon a fear of 'upsetting' or 'offending' Muslims then you plant the seed that such fear is valid. After all, if you have a mixture of councils, charities and private businesses making decisions based on a fear of Muslims then surely they can't all of been infiltrated by the 'PC brigade' and they must be acting to combat some real threat.

Another perception that this media narrative generates is that the threat of extremism works. If Muslims are perceived to get 'offended' and 'upset' easily and that such offense has a violent undercurrent which leads to councils giving Muslims and Islam preferential treatment, then it is a clear message that other religious groups need to more actively embrace this technique to hold their own. This leads to the Christian call to arms that had rumbled on since 1998 with Bishop Santer's seasonal address but from 2006 would really start to capture the imagination of the press and would eventually lead to the formation of the EDL to fight extremism with extremism and essentially view themselves as the defenders of Christianity.

Going back to 2005 we can see the way in which certain sections of the media delicately avoided blaming Muslims directly, but still did enough to let the reader take away a contradictory message. In August of that year Ruth Dudley Edwards wrote an article for the *Daily Mail* with the following question as the title: 'How do we deal with this poison in our midst?'. The article makes the following statement:

Birmingham City Council renamed Christmas 'Winterval' to avoid upsetting Muslims (who retorted sensibly that Christians should celebrate Christmas).⁷⁷

The message of the article is clear: the 'poison in our midst' is political correctness. However, regular tabloid readers by this point have now become familiar with the drip, drip, drip effect of regular stories about councils pandering to Muslims out of fear – or indeed, Muslims reacting with threats of violence to perceived insults against their religion. There is just as much chance that such a reader would walk away from this article believing that the 'poison in our midst' was actually referring to Muslims. After all, if Muslims did not exist, or didn't embrace extremism and the threat of violence, then the council would not have banned Christmas. Edwards might well defend the piece by pointing out that such an interpretation would be solely the responsibility of the reader, which seems a perfectly valid point. However, such an interpretation would not be possible if she reported the facts accurately: Birmingham City Council never renamed Christmas and the Winterval brand had absolutely nothing to do with Muslims.

This is the problem with the Winterval myth. Several journalists over the years tried to point out that Muslims were the scapegoats for 'political correctness gone mad' and that the council had made the decision without checking whether Muslims were in fact offended. Such attempts are sometimes written by Muslims or are interviews with Muslims who point out that they are not offended by Christmas in any way. However, they all fail because they all start on the premise that Winterval was created to avoid offending Muslims. It was not. If journalists really wanted to avoid making Muslims the scapegoat they could have simply reported the reality of Winterval. If newspapers had done this in the first place then Muslims would never have been associated with Winterval, let alone be perceived as the reason why it existed.

By November 2005 the tabloids were in full swing in 'exposing' – what Keith Waterhouse called – 'examples of what is nowadays inevitably known as political correctness gone mad'⁷⁸. He then goes on to repeat the Winterval myth and states that it was motivated by the 'fear of offending non-Christians'. The *Daily Mail* repeated the myth a further 6 times before the year was over – including a mention from Melanie Phillips who described it in her usual understated style as a 'meaningless multicultural monstrosity'⁷⁹.

In 2005 the Winterval myth claimed a few well-known victims. Andrew Marr repeated it in the *Daily Telegraph*⁸⁰, Caitlin Moran in the *Times*⁸¹, Roland White in the *Sunday Times* (who mistakenly claimed the term was coined in 1999)⁸², John Humphrys in the *Daily Mail*⁸³, Ann Widdecombe in the *Times*⁸⁴ and worst of all, respected historian Michael Burleigh in the *Times*⁸⁵. Burleigh is an historian who wrote a well-received history of the Third Reich in which he analyses the use of propaganda in demonising a particular group of people. Yet here he demonstrates that he has fallen for the media propaganda that Christian culture is under attack in the UK:

The Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, recently struck a blow for those who have had enough of attempts to write this country's dominant religious tradition out of the story, lest reference to it offend sensitive minorities... Resistance to politically correct attempts to expunge Christianity from our culture -the conversion of Christmas into "winterval" is symptomatic -should be encouraged, but one can push the defence of Christianity farther by imagining what Western society would be like without it.⁸⁶

It just demonstrates how easily historical training and professional integrity can be abandoned in favour of prejudiced nonsense. The worst aspect is that you expect the press to repeat the untrue but on-message seasonal ravings of church leaders, but you would expect an historian to at the very least question the truth of them.

In total the myth was repeated 28 times in 2005 and the year ended with a Boxing Day plea from Santa Claus in the *Sun*:

please can we forget all this claptrap about offending people and just get on with making sure 2006 has the best and merriest Christmas ever. Be on your guard early. If you spot anyone trying to rebrand it Winterval or banning your nativity play tell them to stick it up their chimney.⁸⁷

If Santa Claus read the papers in 2006 he must have been sorely disappointed because it appeared that the assault on Christmas was worse than ever. It started on the first day of the new year when the Express published 'your handy guide to the universe in 2006' in which it informed readers that Christmas was 'now renamed Winterval'⁸⁸. The Newcastle *Evening Chronicle* continued in the same vein in June by stating that 'some cities now keep Winterval, a mass booze-up when nobody knows what they are celebrating'⁸⁹. Which 'cities' were celebrating Winterval is not made clear in the article.

In August Nick Ferrari in the *News of the World* makes the point (as discussed above) that 'Muslims are wrongly made the villains of the piece' when it comes to Winterval stories, which they are. The media is to blame for: a, inventing instances of Christmas-related activities / celebrations / Christmas itself being banned and b, claiming that these invented bans were enforced to avoid upsetting Muslims / ethnic minorities / non-Christians. Naturally the *News of the World* finds a different group is to blame:

mostly white, bleeding-heart, do-gooding councils are allowed to ban Christmas lights in the town centre and rename the Yuletide season "winterval"⁹⁰

The article then undermines the point it was trying to make by reinforcing the idea that Muslims are the reason for the 'do-gooders' taking these actions because they have the 'the daft belief that Jingle Bells is against the teachings of Islam'.

September was a busy month because yet another religious leader repeated the myth as evidence that there was a concerted attack on Christianity that Christians needed to fight. This time it was the then Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu who argued that 'creeping secularisation' wanted to 'replace "Christmas" with "Winterval"⁹¹. These comments made it into the *Yorkshire Post* (twice⁹²) and the *Daily Mail*⁹³. Further comments from the Archbishop along the same lines were picked up in November by the *Independent on Sunday*⁹⁴, the *Mail on Sunday*⁹⁵, the *Sunday Times*⁹⁶, the *Yorkshire Post*⁹⁷, the *Express*⁹⁸, the *Economist*⁹⁹ and the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*¹⁰⁰.

At around the same time the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, and the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor introduced a 'new think tank report that [challenged] the secular dream of taking Christ out of Christmas'¹⁰¹. The *Times* states that 'among the reports targets are the "annual rash of Winterval stories" about councils that try to rename Christmas'. Rather than challenge the accuracy of the think tank's report the *Times* decides to opt for the fawningly unquestioning headline 'Wise men of the churches set out to keep Christ in Christmas'¹⁰².

Steve Doughty, a stoic champion of the Winterval myth, was recycling the annual story that the Royal Mail were 'stamping out the Christmas stamp'¹⁰³, a myth that deserves some attention. The Royal Mail's policy for Christmas stamps is to 'alternate non-secular and secular themes'¹⁰⁴. The Royal Mail makes this clear every year. In its notes to editors in 2010 it made it absolutely clear that:

For almost 50 years Royal Mail's Special Stamp programme has commemorated and celebrated events and anniversaries pertinent to British heritage and life.

And, anticipating the 'banning Christmas stamps' stories from the media it makes clear that this year Wallace and Gromit were being featured because:

The 2009 stamps showed the nativity as depicted in stained glass windows from the Pre-Raphaelite era and in 2010 a secular theme is featured.

It didn't work. *TabloidWatch*¹⁰⁵, *Minority Thought*¹⁰⁶ (and probably others) covered the way in which the *Express* reported the 'story'. The *Express* headline was, frankly, embarrassingly stupid: 'ROYAL MAIL BANS RELIGION'. The article was just as ludicrous (the author, David Paul, even had the cheek to slap an 'Exclusive' tag on it):

Church leaders are furious with Royal Mail bosses who ditched Christian images on Christmas stamps in favour of children's favourites Wallace and Gromit.

Last night, the Archbishop of Canterbury was being asked to take action, just two days before the stamps go on sale.¹⁰⁷

Steve Doughty's article was written 4 years earlier but is pretty much the same in tone and content:

ROYAL Mail was accused yesterday of cutting the true meaning of Christmas from its new set of festive stamps.

The stamps feature a snowman, a reindeer, Father Christmas and a Christmas tree but no trace of the Bible story...

A spokesman for the Church of England said it 'regretted' the Royal Mail decision.¹⁰⁸

Doughty then brings the Muslims in to highlight the gross unfair treatment that they receive:

Many feel increasingly under pressure to downplay or sideline their beliefs.

British Airways recently told a check-in worker that she cannot wear a cross in a job where she meets the public.

It applies no such ban, however, in the case of Muslims who choose to wear full veils.¹⁰⁹

Doughty seems a bit confused throughout the article, firstly by claiming that 'Christmas stamps were introduced 40 years ago. Since the 1960s, religious themes have appeared in most years'. He then claims that 'in 2004, after none had featured for four years, the Church of England complained' and that the 'Royal Mail insisted

that religious symbols were inappropriate because stamps serve a multifaith society'. It then states that the 'Royal Mail said last night it was alternating its designs between religious and non-religious cards each year'. Well, which is it? As usual, because journalists are not required to reveal their sources it is impossible to tell whether the Royal Mail really did take the religion out of stamps for 4 years or whether they 'insisted that religious symbols were inappropriate' – given the lack of speech marks it does not appear that Steve Doughty is quoting anyone.

I would even go so far as suggesting Mr Doughty is simply making it up. Certainly he has an abysmal track record of repeating the Winterval myth as fact. He has repeated the myth on at least 9 separate occasions¹¹⁰ and has described the 'decision' to rebrand Christmas as Winterval as 'notorious' at least 4 times¹¹¹. The stamps myth accompanies 11 of the Winterval articles looked at for this essay¹¹². Each time the journalist seems utterly unaware that the Royal Mail annually alternates between secular and non-secular stamps.

The increasingly aggressive, organised rallying cry from Church leaders and religious groups in 2006 was met with increasing joy from some journalists. Minette Marrin in the *Sunday Times* declared in a subtle headline "Hallelujah, they're standing up for Jesus'. The article continued in the same celebratory tone:

Christians standing up for themselves! Whatever next? For years it has been obvious to anyone interested in such things that Christian and post-Christian traditions in this country have been belittled and repressed by multicultural activists concerned to promote any culture other than our indigenous one... I am not a great fan of Christian student evangelists, but at least someone is beginning to stand up against the constant attacks on our common Christian culture.¹¹³

Mary Ann Sieghart in the Times 'was glad to see Muslim leaders criticising the trend towards obliterating Christmas', asking, 'if we start calling Christmas "Winterval", where will it end?'¹¹⁴. The Winterval myth was now perpetuated by a vicious circle of ignorance: the media invented numerous stories about Christmas being marginalised / outlawed / banned; Church leaders get upset and release a call to arms - repeating the myths they have read; the media reports this as about time and take the opportunity to repeat all the same myths. As soon as they add some new myths the Church leaders get upset again and the process repeats itself.

This is a process best demonstrated by the former Archbishop of Canterbury who wrote that 'the encroachments upon the nativity become a more serious issue year-on-year'¹¹⁵. Instead of citing any actual evidence or even personal anecdotes the Archbishop merely points to the 'annual rash of "winterval" stories in the press about local authorities that ban Christmas lights, or schools that deem nativity plays to be politically incorrect' which he suggests 'highlights the problems'.

This essay charts the rise of the Winterval myth and hopefully demonstrates that it

grew because it existed in a kind of echo chamber. The more the media reported Winterval-type myths, the more Church leaders dedicated their seasonal messages to it. The more seasonal messages dedicated to Winterval, the more repetitions of the myths by the media that created them in the first place. The Church leaders use the media as evidence that Christianity is under attack, the media use Church leaders as evidence that Christianity is under attack. No real evidence actually exists. The media, church leaders, politicians and media consumers can repeat the Winterval myth as much as they like, it doesn't make it real.

What is so embarrassing for the media is just how poorly they challenge – if at all – the comments of religious leaders. A prime example is the comments of John Sentamu, then Archbishop of York which were discussed earlier. His entire argument was based on a series of tabloid / broadsheet lies, yet the *Sunday Times* was lauding him as the 'Champion of Christianity', referring to him as 'the Archbishop of Canterbury-in-waiting' and 'the man who should be No1'¹¹⁶.

Sentamu's attacks included questioning the right of Muslim women to wear the veil in public, saying that it did not 'conform to the norms of decency' (which logically, would surely equally apply to the suggestion that they should not be allowed to wear what they want / need). He claimed that the BBC was biased against the Church of England, arguing that 'we get more knocks. They do to us what they dare not do to Muslims'. The fawning description the *Sunday Times* gives of his battle to save Christmas makes me glad that it has now disappeared behind a paywall:

In an impassioned critique of the "systematic erosion" of the majority faith by an "illiberal atheism", he castigated the abandonment of traditional Christmas cards in favour of Season's Greetings versions, the introduction of "Winterval" in the Christmas holiday period and the Royal Mail for not featuring Jesus on Christmas stamps.¹¹⁷

How can the repetition of silly tabloid lies possibly be described as an 'impassioned critique'? The general definition of 'critique' is 'a serious examination and judgment of something'¹¹⁸. Its usage in this case is just part of the systematic abuse of language that is carried out by the mainstream media.

Still, as low as the *Sunday Times* was sinking, the *Daily Mail* demonstrated that you could still go much further with the article they published the day before, titled: 'WAR OF THE CROSS'. The author of the article – Andy Collier – abandons all pretence at subtlety and rants:

For years Christians have stayed silent while militant Muslims have brought fear and mayhem to the streets of Britain; while religious assemblies have been squeezed out of schools; while Christmas has been renamed Holiday or Winterval; while the Resurrection and even hot crossbuns have been excised from Easter in favour of eggs and bunnies.¹¹⁹

Yes, Winterval was the result of 'militant Muslims', as are Easter eggs and bunnies.

Days later Ann Widdecombe was on message in the *Express*, with the kind of brash headline so typically used by the paper: 'IT'S TIME FOR CHRISTIANS TO FIGHT BACK AND REINSTATE THE CHRISTMAS STORY'. The article was equally bombastic declaring:

No more will Christians be meek when councils rename Christmas the "winterval" or forbid the sale of hot-cross buns in schools at Easter.¹²⁰

The *Daily Mail* followed up the 'WAR OF THE CROSS ESSAY' – in what seemed to be a competition to create the most hyperbolic headline - with a Saturday essay by A N Wilson titled: 'GOD-HATERS WHO WANT TO EXPUNGE BRITAIN'S PAST, WELL MEANING NINNIES AND (HALLELUJAH!) A CAMPAIGN TO RESURRECT CHRISTMAS'¹²¹.

The whole thing was getting ludicrous now. On the 6th December the *Sun* started a campaign to 'Save Christmas'¹²². The *Express* followed suit the next day¹²³, whilst the *Daily Telegraph* exclaimed that 'Christmas is being crucified by white, middle-class do-gooders'¹²⁴. On the 11th December future Prime Minister David Cameron gave an interview to the *Daily Mail* in which he claimed he was 'ready to get serious'. One of his concerns was the eradication of Christmas:

'It is ridiculous pretending we have to call it Winterval. I don't like the phrase "political correctness gone mad", but on this occasion it is. This is Christmas and we should celebrate it.'¹²⁵

Ironically, the interview was supposed to help him answer the charge that he was 'lacking real substance'. It is unclear how repeating popular lies and catchphrases was going to help achieve this. If he was being more honest he would have said: 'I don't like the phrase "political correctness gone mad", but my PR team have advised me to use it'. He was in good company. Tony Blair backed the *Sun's* campaign for a "Merry Christmas" just 5 days later. He 'showed real common sense', cooed Lorraine Kelly, before adding 'we don't want to say "Happy Holidays" like the yanks and we don't want "Winterval" festivals'¹²⁶. By the 21st December Stephen Glover was declaring 'Hallelujah! Christianity is fighting back at last' in the *Daily Mail*, referring to Winterval as what 'a few idiots would like [Christmas] to be called'¹²⁷.

2006 was the year in which a lot of papers became obsessed with the idea that they were chronicling a 'great Christmas-versus-Winterval battle'¹²⁸, but none of them could match the efforts of the Leeds *Yorkshire Post*. They published 6 articles on Winterval in just 13 December days, starting on the 8th with a mention of Winterval and that 'Christmas stamps [were now] devoid of all religious imagery'¹²⁹. Three days later Stephen Biscoe wrote a short history of Christmas bans, claiming that 'Birmingham City Council started it off with its daft – and soon abandoned – decision to substitute "Christmas" with "Winterval"'. He then goes on to confidently suggest that 'while the universal derision which that attracted should have been a warning to others, every succeeding year a new bunch of volunteers step forward to be shied at for their rank stupidity'¹³⁰.

In reality the 'universal derision' should have been aimed at Bishop Santer for missing the simple reality of Winterval, and for the journalists who churned the story. Likewise, the 'rank stupidity' belongs to the lazy journalists who repeat the Winterval myth as fact 'every succeeding year'.

Four days later they published another article titled 'A divisive attack on Christmas' which claimed that 'Birmingham will probably never live down its ill-fated attempt a few years back to abolish Christmas in favour of "Winterval"'¹³¹. The article goes on to cite other examples including Christmas light grants being axed 'because they didn't fit in with its "diversity" agenda', as well as a sly dig at Muslims with a story that a library had 'banned a poster advertising a carol service in case it caused offence to non-Christians (although it was happy to host an Eid party)'.

Three days after this it was reporting the comments of Dr John Sentamu¹³², three days after this it was referring to Winterval as a 'secular name dreamt up by over-anxious councillors mindful of causing offence to non-Christians'¹³³. As well as repeating Dr Sentamu's comments again on the same day¹³⁴.

2006 ended with two more examples of bad journalism. The first was an article published by the *Express on Sunday* on the 24th December. The author – Anne Atkins – starts the article with: 'THE trouble with all this nonsense about Winterval – whether or not there is any substance to it – is that it is divisive'[116]. So, Atkins admits she does not know whether Winterval is true or not and makes it clear that she has not made any effort to research the matter. Instead, she ignores any doubts she has and happily writes about what impact Winterval has on people. Surely her first instinct as a journalist should have been to investigate whether Winterval actually replaced Christmas, considering she was to write an entire article based on the assumption that it did. At the very least, considering she writes 'it suggests you must be in one camp or another: Christian or non-Christian, religious or secularist, traditionalist or PC', she should have just left the pointless doubting introduction out. Why raise a doubt that you have no intention of investigating it further?

The second article was published by the *Sunday Times* on the 31st December it started:

Merry Christmas everyone. Yep, I'm not afraid to say it, despite the stories which seem to gain more currency every year that Muslims are offended by Christmas'¹³⁵.

The journalist does not seem concerned with how these stories are 'gaining currency' – whether because they are repeated more and more each year or because they are becoming somehow more truthful. The article continues: 'sections of the media love it because it conforms to the stereotype of Muslims being joyless and soulless creatures'. Again, the journalist does not stop to question whether the narrative is true, or whether it is simply repeated to suit the prejudice of those certain 'sections'. That a journalist can poke the notion of Winterval and the stereotypes that it feeds without wanting to investigate whether it was true is worrying – as is the way they refer to Muslims as 'creatures'.

It is hard to pinpoint exactly why 2006 saw the largest number of Winterval mentions - 66 in total. The sheer volume of mentions forced Birmingham City Council to pay for a 'full page advert in national newspapers to convince the world that it still celebrates Christmas'¹³⁶. It also led to the myth finally being debunked by Oliver Burkeman in the *Guardian*ⁱ. It took 8 years for this first debunking in the mainstream media. By this point the myth had already been repeated 94 times in various newspapers, with 18 of these mentions occurring in 2006 up to the point that Burkeman debunks it.

The reception that Burkeman's article receives is indicative of the way that newspapers can happily ignore the truth when it is in opposition to dominant or established media narratives. The original Winterval article was clearly complete rubbish, but it was repeated by 8 newspapers the following day because it reinforced an existing media narrative about political correctness 'going mad'. In contrast, Burkeman's article was only covered by the *Independent*¹³⁷, the *Independent on Sunday*¹³⁸ and the *Plymouth Western Morning News*¹³⁹. Only one of these articles was published the following day – in contrast to the 8 published the day following the first Winterval mention.

The *Sunday Telegraph* mentioned in passing a few weeks later that Winterval was 'a canard, trotted out by lazy journalists'¹⁴⁰. The paper would repeat the myth twice in 2007¹⁴¹, whilst sister paper the *Daily Telegraph* would repeat the myth a further 7 times – the most recent mention coming in 2009¹⁴². No tabloid newspaper covered the debunking of Winterval. Between the publication of Burkeman's article (8th December) and the end of the year the myth was repeated as fact another 48 times.

Equally as worrying is not only the fact that it took 8 years to debunk the myth, but also that the debunking pays so little attention to the role of the media in creating the myth in the first place. Whilst Burkeman rightly mocks outraged tabloid commentators and the laughable campaigns to save Christmas, he misses the actual 'news' journalism that allowed the tabloids to build a respectable foundation for these campaigns and comments. The Winterval myth was perpetuated by 'respectable' broadsheets just as much as the 'downmarket' tabloids. If anything, the broadsheets are more able to successfully legitimise myths because research shows that people tend to place more faith in them as the tellers of truthⁱⁱ.

Burkeman does not step back to analyse the initial birth of the Winterval myth. If he did he would clearly see that churnalism – across the board – was to blame. After all, his own newspaper was one of the 8 that mindlessly repeated the myth on that first day. As admirable as it is for a journalist to finally point out that the 'PC campaign' against Christmas was 'pure nonsense', it does not alter the fact that it is 8 years too late. The time to declare the Winterval story as the 'pure nonsense' that it clearly was, was back in 1998 when the story first hit the news desks of national

i According to Mike Chubb the Winterval myth was debunked in 1998 by Oliver Burkeman². However, no evidence for this can be found but the quotations that Chubb uses can all be traced to the 2006 article³.

ii A YouGov survey conducted in September 2010 found that 'total trust' of journalists working on 'upmarket' newspapers was 41%, 'mid-market' 21% and 'red-tops' 10%. Total 'not much / no trust' of journalists working on 'upmarket' newspapers was 51%, 'mid-market' 71% and 'red-top' 83%. Compared to results from 2003, 'trust in the media has declined significantly'; which suggests that trust in the broadsheets when they were originally repeating the myth was even higher.⁴

newspapers. The failure to do this meant that the eventual debunking did little to dampen the repetition of the myth.

Although 2007 saw a slight reduction (from 66 to 49) in the mentions of Winterval, it clearly demonstrates that debunking a dominant media myth is futile. The myth was repeated as fact by the following newspapers: the *Sunday Times* (4 times¹⁴³); the *Sunday Telegraph* (twice¹⁴⁴); the *Daily Telegraph* (4 times¹⁴⁵); the *Observer*¹⁴⁶; the *Daily Mail* (5 times¹⁴⁷); the *Sun* (5 times¹⁴⁸); the *Express on Sunday* (4 times¹⁴⁹); the *Express*¹⁵⁰; the *Belfast Telegraph*¹⁵¹; the *Wales on Sunday*¹⁵²; the *Daily Mirror*¹⁵³; the *Hull Daily Mail*¹⁵⁴; the *Stoke-on-Trent Sentinel*¹⁵⁵; the *Citizen Gloucestershire*¹⁵⁶; the *Birmingham Sunday Mercury*¹⁵⁷; the *Birmingham Post* (twice¹⁵⁸); the *Irish Independent* (twice¹⁵⁹); the *Glasgow Daily Record*¹⁶⁰; the *South Wales Evening Post* (3 times¹⁶¹); the *Darlington Northern Echo*¹⁶²; the *Glasgow Herald* (twice¹⁶³); the *South Wales Echo*¹⁶⁴; the *Liverpool Daily Post*¹⁶⁵; the *Scotland on Sunday*¹⁶⁶; the *Cardiff Western Mail*¹⁶⁷ and the *Newcastle-Upon-Tyne Journal*¹⁶⁸.

David Cameron in the *Observer* wrote about what he had learnt from his two-day stay with a Muslim family in Birmingham. He made the assertion that:

You can't even start to talk about a truly integrated society while people are suffering racist insults and abuse, as many still are in our country on a daily basis.¹⁶⁹

Before continuing:

We must also be careful about the language we use. No Muslim I've ever met is offended by Christmas, or supports its replacement with 'Winterval'.¹⁷⁰

I would point out that we need to be equally careful not to repeat myths that would eventually lead to the anti-Muslim EDL threatening councils if they dared pander to those Muslims who supposedly wanted to ban Christmas. Perhaps he should have used his time in Birmingham to investigate whether the local council had actually ever tried to replace Christmas with Winterval.

This was, of course, Cameron's second repetition of the myth, but as we saw above the Winterval myth's strength comes from the amount of new news outlets that discover and publicise the myth each year. The *Citizen Gloucestershire* printed a lengthy letter from a reader about 'wimpy winterval'. The writer states that 'as we all know, it isn't long since various wimpish bodies, scared of being found wanting in the PC department by our oppressive government, tried renaming Christmas as Winterval'¹⁷¹. Clearly, 10 years 'isn't long' in this reader's mind.

The utterly repellent Jon Gaunt mentioned it in two unpleasant columns – one a rant against Muslims 'taking advantage of our tolerance'¹⁷². According to the *Daily Mirror*, 'politically correct killjoys were ordered not to ban Christmas by the government'. The *Mirror* cited the then cabinet minister Hazel Blears as 'instructing town halls to uphold carols, festive lights and other Yuletide traditions', saying that "other people have different customs, but it is absurd to suggest we have to change our culture"¹⁷³.

Another Christmas message from an Archbishop (a Dr Morgan this time) was churnalised in late December. Dr Morgan claimed that 'local authorities [were] calling Christmas "Winterval"' and that such decisions were 'undermining the basic cultural tenets of Western life'¹⁷⁴. These comments were repeated – unchallenged – by the *South Wales Evening Post* (twice¹⁷⁵), the *South Wales Echo*¹⁷⁶, the *Liverpool Daily Post*¹⁷⁷ and the *Birmingham Post*¹⁷⁸. The only national newspaper to cover the comments was the *Daily Mail* – who warned readers about the threat of "extreme" atheists¹⁷⁹.

2008 saw a significant fall in Winterval coverage with just 16 mentions. However, the myth was receiving enough attention to force Mike Chubb – the person responsible for creating the Winterval marketing label – to step into the public limelight to defend the concept. In an article for the *Birmingham Post* he makes it absolutely clear – a decade after the controversy was invented – that Christmas was traditional in every sense during the two years that Winterval was run. He also confirms that 'political correctness was never the reasoning behind Winterval'¹⁸⁰. His article received fierce criticism in the letters page, something we will return to later.

The rest of the coverage in 2008 was simply a repetition of articles that had been published many times before. Ross Clark in the *Express* claimed that Birmingham City Council had 'banned Christmas decorations on its premises' in 1998 and had demanded that the 'city should celebrate the hithertounknown festival of "Winterval"'. The article points out that Muslim leaders came forward to make it clear that they were not 'offended by Christmas' but that they were 'worried that Birmingham's crude attempts to please them had played into the hands of extremists by portraying Muslims as intent on undermining British traditions'¹⁸¹.

Again, at the risk of sounding as if I am banging my head against a wall, it was never anything to do with Muslims. The media invented the idea that Winterval was the product of a council afraid of offending Muslims or non-Christians. The same media then wheeled out Muslims to say 'Hey, we're not offended', thereby cementing the idea that somehow it had something to do with them and that they had to respond to it. It is this link – purely an invention of the media – that leads to extremism against Muslims.

Other journalists made the connection much more bluntly than Clark did in the *Express*. The aptly-named Fiona Looney blamed Winterval on 'a determined campaign [to] secularise a religious festival'. The problem is she described this 'secular' campaign in far from secular terms: 'CORRECT JIHAD ON CHRISTMAS'¹⁸². Suddenly a secular campaign has turned into a holy war declared by Muslims. The *Daily Mail*, subtle and restrained as always.

The *Daily Mail* was not the only newspaper indulging in wanton hyperbole. Liz Hunt in the *Daily Telegraph* declared 'Onward Christian soldiers' before asking: 'should we confront the Christianophobes for whom it must always be Winterval, but never Christmas?'¹⁸³ Earlier in the year the same newspaper listed 'Winterval festivals' as one 'of the most controversial issues facing the Government', and that all of these issues led 'back to the question: is Britain a Christian country any more?'¹⁸⁴

i Other 'issues' referred to included: 'the row over headscarves'; 'debate about the blasphemy laws'; 'the benefits system to faith schools, from stem cell research to abortion' and so on.

Although 2008 continued the trend of falling mentions the myth made a storming comeback in 2009 with 45 mentions. Winterval was proving very addictive for the media – and 2008 proved that respected journalists could still fall for it as well with John Humphrys repeating it (for a second time) in the *Daily Mail*¹⁸⁵. It was now 12 years since the first Winterval took place, and 2 and a half years since the myth was thoroughly debunked. Yet broadsheet journalists were still repeating the myth as fact.

Melanie McDonagh – complaining that 'Christmas lights in August is a perversion of the seasons' in the *Daily Telegraph* – referred to Winterval as 'that all-embracing celebration that was correctly interpreted as a clumsy attempt to bypass Christmas'¹⁸⁶. She provides no evidence for her self-assured and utterly false assertion. The *Financial Times* was equally certain that readers would recognise 'the non-denominational Winterval decorations that probably already adorn your local council offices'¹⁸⁷.

In November the *Times* was talking about 'certain controversies that crop up as regularly as Bonfire Night' and gave the example of 'local authorities renaming Christmas as "Winterval" in a moronic attempt to avoid causing offence to ethnic minorities'¹⁸⁸. A month later the same paper would give the same writer, Sathnam Sanghera, the chance to make it clear that they did not 'know a single Asian family that doesn't celebrate [Christmas], and Christmas is a bigger deal around the Sangheras' than Sikh festivals such as Vaisakhi and Diwali combined'¹⁸⁹. So why, the article asks, do 'local authorities [erase] references to Christmas in favour of "Winterval"?' If the writer had wanted to answer that question a quick Google search would have made it clear to them that no local authorities were guilty of this. In all the *Times* managed three repeats in 2009¹⁹⁰. Other respectable publications repeating the myth were the *Sunday Times*¹⁹¹, the *Independent*¹⁹² and the *New Statesman*¹⁹³.

It was business as usual for the tabloids. Pat Flanagan in the *Daily Mirror* was claiming that 'Correctmas time has killed off all good will'. She was trying in pinpoint why ordinary people feared diversity and she blames the fact that:

It seems that multi-culturalism only applies to people who are hardly a wet day in the country. Just imagine what would happen if Irish people called for the Islamic holy month of Ramadan to be called something like Fast Fest. Actually, don't even imagine.¹⁹⁴

Again, the implications are clear: newly arrived immigrants are violently demanding we change our culture, whilst simultaneously defending their own. Not for the first time we are being told that the Muslim response to any alterations to their religion would be unimaginable. Again, the journalist blames everybody except the real culprits – the media she belongs to:

What has been taking place on December 25 for the best part of 2,000 years is not the "holidays", "festive season" or, worst of all, "Winterval". It is Christmas. Whether true or not there is certainly the perception that there is a political dimension to this apparent push to have the last vestiges of Christianity removed from western societies. Instead of bringing communities closer together, acts like the virtual banning of Christmas only serve to further alienate people who have a lot more in

common than they realise. Much of the blame lies with gutless politicians who are terrified of discussing any subject which even borders on race or religion. But people are not stupid and, given the chance, they will make their feelings known as the Swiss public did when they voted to ban the construction of new minarets at Mosques... When large minorities not only refuse to become part of a society, but actually want to change it to suit themselves, is any wonder ordinary people get spooked? Certainly there are racists waiting in the wings to exploit these fears but this is only because mainstream politicians refuse to confront these issues. Calling Christmas by another name or pretending it's not there does nothing to alleviate these worries.¹⁹⁵

All of these points are based on the myth that immigrants arrive in the UK and immediately start demanding that Christmas decorations are taken down because they are offended by them in some way. It is the worst load of xenophobic nonsense – as is the implication that immigrants (a minority, often disenfranchised for various reasons) are somehow more powerful than the majority of ‘indigenous’ people – so powerful that the culture of the ‘indigenous’ people is destroyed to appease the immigrants. This media narrative drives the EDL who see Muslims and immigrants in general as so threatening that they must be physically fought and protested against – with the EDL slogan of ‘No surrender’, heightening the sense that we really are being attacked.

Flanagan concludes the article in the same way that any right-wing organisation would:

If someone is really offended by a festival which promotes peace and goodwill to all men, it might be better for them, and us, to change country rather than change Christmas.¹⁹⁶

This was printed by the supposedly left-wing *Daily Mirror*.

As I write this 2010 is rapidly drawing to a close and Winterval has just turned 13 years old. The year started with the paper that started it all – the *Sunday Mercury* – standing by the myth and adopting the same tone they used way back in 1998. The *Sunday Mercury* created the Winterval ‘controversy’, it was not a popular uprising from the citizens of Birmingham or even a journalistic response to a local event. It was simply the ludicrous repetition of nonsensical comments made by Bishop Mark Santer a year after the first Winterval was a great success in Birmingham. Christmas was never re-branded, outlawed, banned or marginalised in any way – nor, importantly, had anyone even suggested that it had been until the *Sunday Mercury* told the world that it had – contrary to all the evidence.

12 years after creating the Winterval myth the *Sunday Mercury* had the nerve to declare that Birmingham City Council ‘faced international mockery when it attempted to re-brand Britain's best known-holiday as “Winterval”’¹⁹⁷. No, it did not. It faced ‘international mockery’ because the *Sunday Mercury* produced a terrible piece of journalism and accompanied it with an equally terrible editorial claiming that Christmas had been banned. The 2010 article accuses the council of stopping workers ‘from using the word Christmas’ simply because notice boards set up for staff to ‘leave goodwill messages on’ were labelled ‘Holiday Season Notice Boards’.

Quite how this is supposed to prevent workers using the word Christmas is not explained by the newspaper – which is far too busy getting quotations from an ‘outraged’ Coun Lines, described by the newspaper as ‘a senior Tory and anti-PC crusader’.

The newspaper produced a groundhog day article: invented suggestion that Christmas is somehow being banned by the council, some angry words from outraged Tory councillor and the article even uses Bishop Santer’s words from 1998. Although they do update them somewhat with additional remarks made ‘more recently’ by Archbishop Dr John Sentamu. He made those comments in 2006. Meanwhile, Coun Lines provides the stable outrage present in so much of the Winterval coverage:

No-one, of any faith or background, is offended by Christmas - it is all in the heads of a few politically correct Guardian-reading idiots.¹⁹⁸

The article finishes with the observation that ‘the city has struggled to live down the Winterval label ever since’. Presumably the author of the piece – Neil Elkes – had no epiphany of self-awareness as he wrote this.

The year also demonstrated why the myth would continue to be repeated: there will always be someone with a public profile who is stupid enough to repeat it. Step forward Eric Pickles, a Conservative MP who fancies himself as the saviour of Christmas. In July Pickles gave an interview to the *Express* in which he went for the usual populist claims that politicians make on the subject: ‘I’ll ditch nanny state and the PC nonsense’. The article claims that:

Over the last decade there has been a growing clamour of complaints from Christian groups concerned about the sidelining of their religion by politically correct town hall tin pots. Festivals like Christmas were abolished by Labour-run councils who re-dubbed the holiday names like Winterval and Winter-ice.¹⁹⁹

Pickles makes it perfectly clear what he thinks of this:

Can you honestly tell me someone has ever said to you ‘Merry Winter-ice? No they have not. Winter festivals exist only in the minds of a few bean bag-sitting weirdos.²⁰⁰

Government pledges and policy dictated by media myths and Christian pressure groups highlights a depressing trend where politicians are so desperate to please they don’t even care whether a problem is real or not.

Perhaps Pickles is actually a shrewd operator. There has never been a war on Christmas, yet in July Pickles stated he would fight against it and win it. Lo and behold, a few months later Pickles is declaring that:

The war on Christmas is over, and the likes of Winterval, [and other alternative names for Christmas festivities] Winter Lights and Luminous deserve to be in the dustbin of history.²⁰¹

Pickles has won a stunning victory against an enemy that never existed. Moreover, he was also 'urging' councils to entice shoppers with 'Christmas lights, Christmas trees, carol services and nativity scenes', which they always have, year-after-year. No doubt we will still try to claim the credit for any council Christmas decorations this year. Needless to say the tabloids love Pickles and covered his victory over council 'grinches'²⁰².

It is all so depressingly stupid. Of course, Pickles was not the only public figure fighting to save Christmas in 2010, he was joined by the Pope. 'Benedict blasts PC culture in Britain as he pleads to save Christmas' reported the *Evening Standard*²⁰³, 'Pope: Don't let the PC brigade wreck Christmas' reported the *Sun*²⁰⁴ - who also dedicated two editorials to the story on separate days titled 'Papal power'²⁰⁵ and 'He's Popetastic'²⁰⁶. The *Express* went with 'Pope's plea to help save Christmas from the PC brigade'²⁰⁷, whilst the *Daily Mail* chose: "POPE'S BATTLE TO SAVE CHRISTMAS"²⁰⁸.

All of these articles repeated the Winterval myth as fact.

But there is hope. The recent 'Not ashamed' campaign started by Christians who feel that Christianity is under attack and that Christmas is a prime example of this, discussed the usual banning Christmas myths, but Winterval was not mentioned. The *Sun* carries the plea from Lord Carey which does ask the question: 'do we really want to rebrand Christmas'? But it resists the temptation to repeat the myth that this is precisely what happened in Birmingham a few years back²⁰⁹.

As far as I can tell the Not Ashamed campaign has not tempted the media into repeating the Winterval myth. Perhaps it has finally been debunked one-to-many times, in particular a Google search now leads to Wikipedia as the top result and that makes it clear that it is rubbish. Newspapers sometimes want to avoid looking stupid, perhaps we will see no more of this myth – or maybe they are merely waiting for the next Pickles outburst or any other ignorant politician to repeat the myth. This has certainly kept the myth going for 12 years. So there is little to suggest we will not see further mentions in 2011.

Part 4: Bad Journalism & why Winterval matters

In 2008 Mike Chubb wrote an article for the *Birmingham Post* explaining exactly what Winterval was. Bob Haywood – the journalist who broke the Winterval 'story' back in 1998 – wrote a strongly-worded letter to the *Birmingham Post* to attempt to set Mike straight. It make interesting reading.

The first thing that needs to be said is that Bob Haywood stands by one of the worst pieces of journalism in the last 20 years, and indeed, is proud of it. He claims that he was motivated to write the article 'by the fact that it [Winterval] was a stupendously barmy and ill-conceived concept'. He also claims that his article was 'supported by almost everyone - except Mr Chubb'. Perhaps his most startling assertion is that his journalistic zeal was fuelled by the 'breathtaking arrogance that marketing practitioners feel they can rip up centuries of tradition - in this case 2,000 years - on a whim and expect to get away with it'²¹⁰.

The next thing that needs to be said is that Bob Haywood's role in creating the Winterval myth is also deeply ironic. The title of his angry letter of justification, for example, complains that: 'Winterval idea made city a laughing stock so it's simply mad to bring it up again'. This, of course, is completely untrue. The Winterval brand was a success; it was the ignorant comments of Mark Santer and his own terrible journalism that made the city 'a laughing stock'.

In a final insult to the ideals of good journalism Bob Haywood – less than four months after this shocking piece of journalism – was named 'BT Midlands Daily News Journalist of the Year'. The judges' decision was based on his "'string of well-crafted exclusives'" which included his story 'on the fury over Birmingham City Council's controversial Winterval celebrations'. The importance of the Winterval 'scoop' was reinforced by *Sunday Mercury* editor Fiona Alexander who said: "'Bob's controversial Winterval story was picked up by every national newspaper and he deserves the award for that story alone. This recognition is just reward for Bob's contribution and commitment to the Mercury'"²¹¹.

It seems that one of the reasons why the Winterval myth lasted so well is the abject failure of the local press to point out that the story was nonsense. Often the best way of debunking bad journalism in national newspapers is to go to the local news source. The local newspaper will often carry the real story, which has been wildly distorted and taken out of context by the national press. However, in this case the local paper that broke the story – the *Sunday Mercury* - stood by it. I guess they had no choice but to perform a huge u-turn and admit they were wrong or just keep plugging away with a myth.

The *Sunday Mercury's* sister newspaper the *Birmingham Post* was just as guilty of this. In 2008 Paul Dale – public affairs editor for the newspaper – wrote a blog post titled: 'Why winterval fiasco continues to haunt Birmingham', opening the post with the eye-popping claim that 'The winterval deniers are at it again'²¹². The article continues:

Ten years after Birmingham City Council invited ridicule by airbrushing out the word Christmas from its official celebrations, there are still some

people eager to blame everyone other than local authority leaders at the time for bad publicity arising from the winterval fiasco...

One correspondent suggested a combination of lazy journalists and publicity-hungry bishops was to blame.

That correspondent was absolutely correct, but Dale has other ideas, 'Let's look at the facts', he writes, before repeating lie after lie:

It is true that the city council never admitted it had rebranded Christmas in order to avoid offending non-Christians.

On the other hand, the council failed at the time and has done ever since to explain why it did what it did.

The best explanation was that winterval represented a collective name for the events held from mid-November through to the first week in January.

The council explained what it had done repeatedly to hundreds of lazy journalists, year-after-year and still a local journalist is able to seriously suggest that the council did not explain the purpose of Winterval. As Oliver Burkeman wrote in 2006:

when you telephone the Birmingham city council press office to ask about it [Winterval], you are met first of all with a silence that might seasonably be described as frosty. "We get this every year," a press officer sighs, eventually. "It just depends how many rogue journalists you get in any given year. We tell them it's bollocks, but it doesn't seem to make much difference."²¹³

This is a really shocking piece of journalism from Paul Dale. Every paragraph is face-palmingly ignorant. The assertion that the 'best explanation was that winterval represented a collective name for the events held from mid-November through to the first week in January' is just bizarre. That is not the best explanation, it is the only valid explanation, it is a description of what the event was.

Amazingly it gets worse:

The fact remains that winterval was regarded as a ridiculous attempt to avoid mentioning Christmas in case ethnic minorities might take offence, and is still seen in that way by many prominent people. The last thing Birmingham needed was a reason for the city to be branded as a member of the loony left-wing council club. Winterval provided just that reason.

It seems someone needs to explain to Paul Dale exactly what a 'fact' is, seeing that he is using the word twice in this article to introduce a series of lies. He finishes with a lesson for his readers:

The lesson from winterval is that perceptions do matter.

The council could in 1998 have killed the controversy stone dead by abandoning such a meaningless title.

It did not do so, and is still living with the loss of reputation today.

The council did abandon Winterval after 1998, how can he be a local journalist working in Birmingham and not realise this? I will be forwarding a copy of this essay to the Birmingham Post for the attention of Paul Dale to see if he is willing to admit that he was utterly wrong with every single point that he attempted to make in this blog post.

The Birmingham Post – even after publishing Mike Chubb's clear explanation of what Winterval was in 2008 (a few days after Paul Dale's blog post) – was still backing the myth in November 2010. This time it was the turn of Jonathan Walker – political editor of the newspaper, no less – who wrote about comedian Stewart Lee who had 'been on the radio pushing the familiar line that Birmingham City Council was accused of "banning" Christmas'²¹⁴.

Jonathan Walker thinks 'it might be useful to remind people what was actually reported, in our sister paper *The Sunday Mercury* by the excellent Bob Haywood, at the time' and then he copies and pastes the entire original article into the blog post. Trying to counteract the arguments that Stewart Lee was making by using the exact, moronic coverage that Lee was questioning is amusingly stupid. As is describing Bob Haywood as excellent, only to drop his finest journalistic turd into the article.

I have tried to be as neutral and polite as possible throughout this essay, but it has been increasingly difficult when you wade through article after article that is making absurd claims based on a myth. It angers me that journalism has come to this, that our printed media industry is so poorly regulated that such a simple lie can be repeated for 12 years. That such a lie can be used to fuel the fear and hatred of Muslims, immigrants and 'non-Christians' in general is shameful.

It is important to remember Winterval – even if the myth now dies off – as an example of what a poorly-regulated, agenda-driven media can do with a simple concept. If the media are prepared to repeat, as fact, something that was so blatantly a complete lie right from the beginning, then imagine that they apply the same treatment to a huge amount of the stories that feed into the same narratives. The stories about 'Cafe owners being forced to remove extractor fan "'because smell of frying bacon offends Muslims'"²¹⁵ or swimming pools being blacked out to appease Muslims²¹⁶ are just two examples of the myriad of stories that are based on shameless lies. Like Winterval they will live-on as complete untruth not only because the tabloid press will repeat them, but also because they have already entered the consciousness of those that want to believe that Muslims really are trying to take over Britain. No amount of corrections is likely to alter this misconception.

This is why the media needs to be properly regulated, it is not enough to retract or debunk a story - as the Winterval myth demonstrates, given that it is still going strong four years after it was thoroughly shown as false. The regulators of the print media need to recognise that as soon as a lie is printed – especially when such lies are aimed at certain racial or religious groups – the damage is done and is largely irreparable. This year the EDL have become the latest group to become inspired by the Winterval myth, along with threatening councils they have also dedicated a thread to 'christmas banned again' on their chat forums. One member wrote that 'Birmingham council was the first to come up with the idea of Winterval in 1998' and

whilst the majority of the vitriol was aimed at Muslims, it was pointed out that the PC brigade was also to blame. One poster – in the non-racist organisation that is only supposed to be protesting against extremist Muslims, you understand – wrote that 'i hate the lefty pc wrongens more than muslims if im honest'²¹⁷. This is the intended audience for the Winterval myth – and the other lies about Muslims – and it is about time the media regulators took some responsibility for this.

Bad journalism has unpleasant consequences.

I'll end this essay with the thoughts of Mike Chubb who was asked how he felt about the Winterval myth 10 years after it was first created by the *Sunday Mercury*:

So as originator of Winterval, what are my thoughts?

Rather like Oliver Burkeman of the Guardian, that it's nonsense and I feel that around the festive season, when news is fairly thin on the ground, the media seek out what they term "silly season" stories.

Political correctness was never the reasoning behind Winterval, but yes it was intended to be inclusive, which is no bad thing to my mind, and a brand to which other initiatives could be developed as part of the Winterval offer in order to sell Birmingham at a time when all cities are competing against each other for the seasonal trade.

I do believe that those who took umbrage did it for their own reasons, to peddle their own message and of course, everybody got on to their own hobby horses in the process.

I am amazed that no-one could see the simplicity of The Winterval brand, but read into it what they wanted; to further and give voice to their own aspirations and prejudices.

It remains to be seen whether any journalist will dare to repeat the myth as fact again, but this is now largely irrelevant when those who need to justify their own intolerance and hate can still call upon it.

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