

The Freethinker

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SUNDAY SHOPS: THOUSANDS DEFY THE "KEEP CHRISTIANITY PRIVILEGED" LOBBY

Describing legal restrictions on Sunday trading as "unpopular, outdated and unworkable", the Consumers' Association has called on the Government to scrap laws relating to Sunday opening. The CA's call for reform follows widespread pre-Christmas flouting of the law last month by thousands of stores, with a massive demonstration of public support for Sunday shopping.

Derek Prentice, the Association's head of campaigning, also urged local authorities to stop wasting scarce resources on taking traders to court. He declared: "Everyone agrees that the law is a mess. Sunday opening works in Scotland. Why should English and Welsh consumers be penalised?"

Mr Prentice also advised the Government "to resist the temptation to try to tidy up an unworkable piece of legislation."

The popularity of Sunday opening was evident in many parts of the country, particularly London. Roger Boaden, director of the Shopping Hours Reform Council, estimated that around 15,000 stores in England and Wales opened on at least one of the two Sundays prior to Christmas.

A spokesman for British Home Stores admitted they were breaking the law.

"But we believe the public has made it clear that it is time to end the Sunday trading ban", he added.

"They are grateful we have decided to open, and have showed it by turning up in huge numbers."

Habitat and Heals both opened on the three Sundays before Christmas. They did better business than on a normal weekday.

Hamleys, the leading toy store, opened despite

being fined £800 for Sunday trading last October. Over a thousand customers were waiting for the doors to open at noon. When the store closed five hours later, an estimated 25,000 people had called.

Manager Gavin Brewer commented: "There is a definite public demand for Sunday shopping. We don't want to be prosecuted and we don't like breaking the law. It's something that has to be sorted out."

But while thousands of customers voted with their feet in favour of Sunday shopping, the Keep Sunday Special Campaign, a religious pressure group, was actively campaigning to prevent them from doing so. Under the 1950 Shops Act, the onus is on local authorities to prosecute traders who open on Sunday if complaints are received from the public. In recent years informers have increased pressure on councils to take legal action. And last month the names of some London stores were noted with a view to prosecuting individual directors. Sabbatarian narks and informers thus continue in the ignoble tradition of Christian "morality" groups.

While the Lord's Day Observance Society, which was founded in 1831, has always proclaimed its opposition to Sunday freedom as being based on "the word of God", the Cambridge-based Keep Sunday Special Campaign is somewhat reticent about its religious motivation. KSSC's slick propaganda places much emphasis on "the family" and a spurious interest in workers' welfare. There appears to be little if any contact between the KSSC upstarts and the battle-scarred LDOS veterans. But beneath the veneer of social concern, the KSSC is as fundamentally Christian as the venerable

(continued on back page)



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NEWS

CONTRADICTIONS

On realising that she had to vacate 10 Downing Street and move bag and handbag to Dunranton Villa, Dulwich, Margaret Thatcher made the profoundly philosophical comment: "It's a funny old world."

It is indeed. The Order of Merit was conferred on Mrs Thatcher, who played a key role in creating and then presiding over a society in which greed, selfishness and aggression became virtues. During her premiership, "cardboard cities" of young homeless sprung up while local authorities were compelled by law to sell off council-owned houses at knock-down prices; Thatcherite "think tanks" formulated policies which savaged the education, health and social services; restrictive legislation was introduced to curb press and broadcasting freedom.

Membership of the Order of Merit is restricted to 24, and it is ironic that Margaret Thatcher should fill a vacancy caused by the death of Lord Olivier (the actor Laurence Olivier). For the Thatcherite era of militant philistinism was a bleak time for the arts, particularly the theatre. Many small companies performing new plays and taking established classics to theatreless areas went under, their subsidies cut or withdrawn. Playwright Howard Brenton summarised their plight: "Under the Thatcher Government the Arts Council became a politically censorious production agency. Getting any support from them became a nightmare." Provincial theatres, thriving again after having survived the television and bingo crazes, are now under threat as local councils are compelled by poll capping to withdraw financial support. Even the "alternative national theatre", the Royal Shakespeare Company, has been forced to close its London theatres for four months.

Small wonder Howard Brenton said that the resignation of Margaret Thatcher, OM, "was to many of us in the arts as if a curse had been lifted, if only for a day."

Mrs Thatcher's "funny old world" dictum was confirmed at another level. The selection of John Taylor as Conservative parliamentary candidate for Cheltenham caused quite a flutter in the true-blue doves. Norman Tebbit, a former party chairman, pointed out that Mr Taylor is British, Conservative and Christian, so what was all the fuss

AND NOTES

about. Actually it was about a local Conservative activist publicly objecting to "a bloody nigger from Birmingham" being selected as Conservative candidate for the genteel spa town.

Mr Taylor, a considerably more personable and intelligent man than your saloon bar racist, is a barrister and adviser to the Home Office. He was born in Britain and therefore must know the score regarding attitudes to skin colour. It is incredible that he is a Conservative parliamentary candidate.

Equally incredible is the fact that John Taylor and so many black citizens of West Indian origin are among the most enthusiastic upholders of the Christian creed in Britain today. Many of their ancestors were the property of slave-owning Christians who had no difficulty in producing biblical justification for ownership of other human beings. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel employed slaves on its estates in the West Indies. American abolitionists soon discovered that the Christian churches and clergy were among their fiercest opponents. In South Africa the Dutch Reformed Church provided theological endorsement for apartheid and a near-slave status for thousands of black workers.

A highly educated black man put his talent at the service of a party that is crawling with racial bigots; women clamour for ordination in a church which for centuries relegated them to an inferior position; Left-wing opponents of censorship join forces with Mary Whitehouse to prevent newsagents selling "girlie" magazines; Christians kow-tow to anti-Christian Islamic fanatics. Yes, it's a funny old world.

Many religious opponents of euthanasia are not just misguided. They are arrogantly cruel. Nancy Cruzan, of Mount Vernon, Missouri, was in a coma for eight years following a road accident. Surgeons implanted a feeding tube which kept her "alive". Since 1987 her parents fought a legal battle for the process to be discontinued so that their daughter could die. Miss Cruzan, a teacher of severely handicapped children, had said she would not want to "live like a vegetable". But when the court granted her parents' request last month, members of the Centre for Christian Activism, led by a priest, attempted to enter the hospital and reattach the feeding tube.

"JEWS FOR JESUS"

A violent religious conflict that has been going on in the United States for the past ten years is likely to spread to Britain. Bomb scares, kidnapping and violence have featured in a bitter conflict between an evangelising group known as Jews for Jesus and their Orthodox Jewish opponents.

Five months ago a folk group, all members of Jews for Jesus, toured Britain. The organisation has confirmed that it is planning to extend its ministry to this country, a development that has alarmed other Christian groups endeavouring to convert Jews.

A Jewish organisation, Operation Judaism, has been set up to resist the proselytisers. It offers counselling services 24 hours a day and is known to have kidnapped two Jews who were to have been baptised as Christians. One of them was sent to Israel. It is also involved in intelligence gathering.

Operation Judaism is sponsored by the Chief Rabbi and financially supported by the Lubavitch Foundation of Orthodox Jews.

Another American group, the Christian Jew Foundation, already has missionaries in Britain. A spokesman said they fear for their safety following threats of violence received through the post.

It appears that 1991 is unlikely to be a peaceful year for the disciples of Jesus and Jehovah.

UNEQUAL AND UNJUST

It is to be hoped that Robin Corbett's comments on blasphemy law, published in a recent issue of *Muslim News*, is not the definitive Labour Party view on this question. Mr Corbett, MP for Birmingham, Erdington, and Shadow Home Office spokesman, said: "Either abolishing the blasphemy law, or amending it to apply to all religions, would achieve the same result: equality for all religions."

Amending would certainly not be the same as abolishing blasphemy law and would have consequences we will charitably assume Mr Corbett has not envisaged.

First, if all religions were granted legal protection against criticism, the law could be exploited by some very unscrupulous operators in the religious market place.

Secondly, followers of various faiths — and often of the same faith — have different concepts of "God". Their squabbles are grist to the freethinkers' mill and add to the gaiety of nations. However, if all of them enjoyed the protection of blasphemy law,

fanatics would be encouraged to initiate a prosecution any time they felt that their deity had been slighted. This would be fine and dandy for the legal profession, but a constant threat to writers, broadcasters and even some religious leaders.

Thirdly, the recent clamour for an extension of blasphemy law has for the most part emanated from Islamic terrorists reacting to protests against the monstrous death sentence passed on Salman Rushdie. Muslims claim that blasphemy law in Britain is discriminatory. Quite so, but it does not discriminate against Muslims alone. And it is not more discriminatory than the fiercely intolerant attitude prevailing towards Christians — particularly Muslims who have converted to Christianity — in most Muslim countries.

Finally, an extension of blasphemy law to all religions would still be unjust. Obviously it would not give protection to the non-religious and anti-religious views held by a substantial proportion of the population. Of course unbelievers do not seek such protection, preferring open debate and freedom of expression.

However, there is one good argument in favour of extending blasphemy law. Its invocation by followers of gods, saviours and prophets would bring their superstitious faith into disrepute.

HAVING A BASH

Last month two shaven-headed, orange-robed Hare Krishna devotees were spreading the message of peace and love in the quiet Somerset town of Bridgwater when they encountered a born-again Christian on a similar mission. Unkind words were exchanged, followed by blows and an unseemly dust-up. The Christian sustained a bloody nose and bruises. The peace-and-love duo departed with torn robes and broken drum.

Shoppers telephoned the police who restored order. A number of people went to the cop shop to help with inquiries.

The Krishna-bashed Bible-basher decided not to press charges. It was easy enough to trace his mystical assailants. Not many people are seen walking the streets of Bridgwater with shaven heads, torn orange robes and a broken drum.

Newspaper reports are always required by The Freethinker. The source and date should be clearly marked and the clippings sent without delay to The Editor, The Freethinker, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield, S6 3NT

Freethinker Fund

Later this year we will be celebrating the 110th anniversary of *The Freethinker*. Its regular publication since 1881 — as a weekly for many years — is a notable achievement in the annals of British freethought. Critics have dismissed the paper as “parochial”, but in fact it has a readership in over a dozen countries outside Britain.

The Freethinker has always enjoyed the unflinching goodwill of its unpaid writers. Readers’ generosity is reflected in the list of donations to the Fund which is published every month, enabling us to meet the annual deficit. It is a constant struggle to cope with ever increasing costs while keeping the subscription rate at a realistic level.

The final list of donors in 1990 is given below. Warm appreciation is expressed to them and to all friends of *The Freethinker*.

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Total for November and December 1990: £423.70 and \$80. Grand total for 1990: £6169.15 and \$130.

Three Italian political parties have accused Pope John Paul of “pushing Italy back into the Middle Ages”. They were responding to the Pope’s appeal to chemists not to sell “anti-life” (contraceptive) drugs. Alberto Ambrick, president of the Catholic Chemists’ Federation, commented: “While the Pope’s appeal reflects church teaching, it is not in line with Italian law which obliges pharmacists to sell products like the contraceptive pill on the presentation of a prescription.”

Religious Intolerance in Saudi Arabia

GOVIND DEODHEKAR

The presence of Western military forces in the Gulf has brought into the limelight the incredible intolerance of the Saudi Government towards the practice on its soil of any religion other than Islam. Remembrance Day (11 November) services had to be held discreetly in tents and mess halls, and advertised by word of mouth or inconspicuous notices. Chaplains attached to the forces are not allowed to wear a cross or a dog collar, or even carry a Bible openly. Alcohol is forbidden and female members of the forces must cover their arms at work. As a gesture of conciliation (or gratitude?), the Saudi authorities lifted a ban on Christmas trees and holly. They even reversed the prohibition on Christmas cards, provided they did not carry pictures of Jesus Christ, Mary or the three Eastern Kings. The face of pure Islam as practised in Saudi Arabia shows intolerance and ingratitude beyond imagination.

Saudi Arabia is governed by the puritanical Wahabi sect. Towards the end of the first world war, the victorious Allies had put Hussain, Sheriff of Mecca (an ancestor of the present king of Jordan) in charge of the Arabian Peninsula. But Hussain was dethroned by the leader of the Wahabis, Ibn Saud, whose numerous descendants through many wives now constitute the ruling Royal Family. Wahabi puritanism not only excludes the possibility of any other religion in Dar.ul.Islam (The Abode of Submission), but it also extends to the confiscation (and presumably burning or tearing up) of any copies of the Koran which do not meet with Wahabi approval — a sore point with Muslim pilgrims from the Indian sub-continent. The Koran reputedly has only one single Arabic authorised text, so the Wahabi objection is most probably to the version translated into Indian languages.

It is ironic that the UN-approved forces of so many nations are assembled to defend the most intolerant of Islamic regimes. "Socialist" Iraq seems to tolerate Christians (Tariq Aziz, the Foreign Minister is a Christian), Shia Iran seems to tolerate Sunnis, Christians and the insignificant minority of Zoroastrians, though it persecutes the post-Islamic faith of the Bahais. Pakistan, which is trying hard to become a thoroughly Islamic State, tolerates Christians and the tiny remnants of the Hindu faith, but it cannot tolerate the nineteenth-century sect of Kadiyanis, who have been proclaimed non-Muslims by legislation and despite their protestations.

It is odd that British Muslims who have freedom of worship here, but many of whom are complaining about discrimination and are putting forward additional demands, have not bothered to criticise Saudi Arabia for its complete denial of freedom of worship. Far from doing so, many of them have asserted that Saudi Arabia has caused offence to Muslims by permitting Christian (and Jewish) soldiers on Muslim holy land. One can understand that Muslims consider Mecca, Medina and their environs to be special or holy places. But to suggest that every square inch of Saudi Arabia, including the Empty Quarter, where no life survives, is holy land, is patently absurd. In any case, the Western forces are hundreds of miles to the east of Mecca and have neither the need nor the slightest intention of taking over Mecca or Medina.

Muslim critics have a valid point when they accuse the West of double standards, insofar as Israel has been allowed to flout international borders for years. But when this criticism is bolstered up with religious illogicality, it only shows the spuriousness of those who claim that their religious feelings have been hurt. It will be recalled that at least one Muslim faction thought nothing of fighting in the Grand Mosque at Mecca, causing much bloodshed in trying to capture it. That transgression against the very heart of Muslim worship has been forgotten or forgiven. Now the sacredness of the Grand Mosque has been expanded to include the whole of Saudi Arabia and those who may have to defend the country are accused of polluting the holy land.

When the Gulf crisis is over, there will be many immediate military and political problems — including the Palestinian problem — to be tackled in the Middle East. In view of the intermingling of Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe and the Middle East, the question of religious tolerance in Islamic states cannot be swept under the carpet. On what basis can this question be approached?

One approach was suggested in a *Times* editorial (13 November 1990) entitled "Rites in the Gulf". It stated: "A true Muslim fundamentalist insists on the observance of Islamic law, the Sharia, in every detail. The Sharia places the Muslims under a solemn duty to protect the religious rites of 'the people of the Book', in which category Christians, far from being persecuted as 'infidels', are specifically included."

This advice, emanating from such an authoritative source, has implications which are disastrous, even if unintended. First, it implies that in Western opinion, the protection of Christians and Jews is of prime importance while it is prepared to ignore the persecution of "infidels" such as Buddhists, Hindus, atheists or apostates from Islam. Secondly, it confirms the Muslim fundamentalist in his assumption that his attitudes and actions need not be re-examined in the light of modern knowledge and conditions. Lastly, it ignores the fact that edicts in the Koran can be ambiguous, depending on the circumstances when they were uttered.

Although fundamentalist Muslims are supposed to believe that every word of the Koran is applicable for all time, in practice they have made friends of Christians as they have done in the Gulf under the UN umbrella, even though the Koran says: "Believers, take neither Jews nor Christians for your friends" (Sura 5). Nevertheless they have taken arms with equal fervour against polytheists, Kitabiyas or fellow Muslims. So instead of appealing to Muslims to go back to the Sharia, surely the time has come for the modern world to press them to allow freedom of expression and religion to all, whether polytheists, atheists, heretics or apostates from Islam.

"What a Friend We Have in Rupert" TERRY SANDERSON

The Press Council has been replaced by the Press Complaints Commission which, it is claimed, will ensure protection of individual privacy. Newspapers will have to curb their excesses, otherwise the Government will do so. But the new body is unlikely to do anything about political bias and promotion of superstition by the press.

One thing the new Press Complaints Commission will not undertake to do is look at balance in the papers. We are all well aware of the constraints upon the broadcast media to ensure impartiality, just as we are probably all equally aware of the partisan nature of newspapers. For many reasons it is traditional for newspapers to give only one side of an argument, while television and radio are monitored day and night, and regularly accused by Conservative pressure groups of Left-wing bias.

So given that most of our national newspapers avidly support the Tory Party and espouse the Establishment's values, particularly Christianity, what sort of coverage does the non-religious point of view get? I decided to examine the national press for a month to find out.

I cannot claim that my researches were exhaustive, but they will give a small insight into newspaper coverage of issues that would interest readers of *The Freethinker*.

Perhaps the most directly relevant article was published in the *Independent*; it was one man's account of his introduction to humanism. He told of his initial visit to his local Humanist group and the sense of relief he experienced in discovering that there are plenty of viable ethical codes by which to

live that do not require the supernatural to support them. Like so many other people, he found that it was possible to be good without God and not feel guilty about it.

Another interesting piece, that would not have looked out of place in this journal, was published in the *Observer*. In a small section which examines the origin and meaning of words, John Silverlight was pondering a reader's question: "Why is there no word to describe a man who is not concerned whether there is a God or not, but insists that he is neither an atheist (one who denies God's existence) nor an agnostic (one who doubts God's existence)?" My position can only be described by a periphrasis: I don't care; it doesn't matter. I have almost persuaded myself that we have been brainwashed by the Church into accepting without proper consideration the proposition that belief or unbelief in God is so important that everybody must make a decision."

D.J. Enright suggests "nullifidian" as a possible solution, from Latin *nullius*, no, and *fides*, faith. However, Mr. Silverlight rejects this as not quite accurate enough; he accepts that there is a gap in the language and no word exists to describe his correspondent's position of "not caring" whether there is a God or not. (The London *Evening Standard*, by the way, revealed that Thatcher-slayer, Michael Heseltine, is not tormented by this dilemma and is happy to describe himself as "a reluctant agnostic".)

Meanwhile, the *Guardian* included in its obituary of the writer Roald Dahl, a short piece he had written for them last year in which the author

mused on the Afterlife. "I would love to embrace the Christian belief in the Afterlife," said Mr Dahl, "but common sense tells me this is wishful thinking."

He went on to tell about a visit, made after the death of his seven-year-old daughter, to an ex-Archbishop of Canterbury. Mr Dahl was assured that his daughter was in heaven. "Curiously enough a favourite dog of ours had died that same week. I said to the Archbishop: "What about Bumpy? Is he also in heaven?" The Archbishop threw up his hands in horror and was genuinely shocked by this suggestion. I said: 'Only us humans, then?' and he said 'Yes'."

Mr Dahl, however, was insistent that all creatures should go to heaven, right down to "cockroaches and harmful bacteria".

Eventually he came to the conclusion: "The only role any human being has in life is to behave as well as he can to other people. That's any decent person's creed, though the religions grab it as theirs. The simplest value, and the best, is kindness. You don't have to be a Christian to be kind to others."

Despite these few positive illustrations of humanism in action, the biggest service the newspapers do for atheism is to continue reporting the doings of religionists. The maniacal goings-on in Muslim countries get plenty of coverage, of course, mainly because we are all ultimately threatened by the fanaticism. And there is no escape from the murder and mayhem that Protestants and Catholics inflict upon one another in Northern Ireland. But it is the daily doings of good, ordinary church folk that make the best reading. And this brings us on to Rupert Murdoch, that famous born-again Christian who intends to spread the word of how exciting life as a committed Christian can be.

Looking at the *Sun* and the *News of the World*, you see what he means. They simply love reporting the "sex romps" of gay vicars and they always make a splash headline when the verger runs off with a choirgirl, as happened this month. *The Sun* headed it "Hymn and Her", which I thought was a pretty good pun. And there is nothing the tabloids like better than exposing religious hypocrites — being such gigantic hypocrites themselves, I suppose it helps make them feel a bit better about it. *The Sun* loved it when they found out that pious "morals" crusader Victoria Gillick's daughter Hannah (aged 19) had given birth to a baby outside of wedlock. And they made much of "a cathedral verger who funded a luxury lifestyle by stealing more than £47,000 from church funds". And they loved the case of the Rev Tom Tyler of Henfield, Sussex,

who preached chastity whilst "fornicating" with two female members of his congregation.

Of course in order to encourage their readers to Believe — belief in anything, it seems, is better than no belief at all — the tabloids are packed with astrologers, psychics and faith healers. *The Sun* even has its own resident witch to interpret readers' dreams. They also have a psychic agony uncle called Christian Dion who solves problems with his Tarot cards.

The *Daily Star* carried a lovely exposé of Doris Stokes, giving away the secrets of the famous medium's messages from "the other side". Apparently when she received pleas from people who had been recently bereaved, Doris would send them free tickets to one of her shows. When they arrived she was, of course, ready armed with their full particulars, which they had conveniently provided in their letters and phone calls. And so her "spirit guide" knew everything — names, addresses, cause of death, the lot. Her huge — and paying — audiences were gobstruck by Doris's apparent access to the celestial switchboard. What the *Daily Star* omits to mention in its article is that when she was on this side of the veil, they promoted Doris Stokes unquestioningly.

Not that the *Sun* is consciously anti-religion, of course. Indeed, in one of their famous editorials (succinct, incisive, crackers) they said: "A couple of decades ago, so-called free thinkers led the assault on family ties. They said the permissive society was the real route to happiness. A new report reveals that only a quarter of households are made up of married couples and children. There are MORE divorcees, MORE broken homes, MORE single parent families, MORE illegitimate children than ever in our history. This is happiness?"

I'm sure it is for some people. But the point is: hasn't the "party of the family" been in power for twelve of the twenty years that *The Sun* refers to? What was their heroine's role in all this social collapse? I think we ought to know!

Amid all this hilarity, the *Independent on Sunday* was telling its readers about the Archbishop of York's recent speech to the Institute of Marketing in Leeds. Dr John Habgood said the media image of the Church of England was often "bizarre, sensational, divisive and shameful". Perhaps he should have a chat with Mr Murdoch, who appears to be a Christian only so long as it turns a profit. Surely it is the devout Rupert who is ensuring, almost single-handedly, that the churches have the bad name they so richly deserve.

Even by the standards of a century ago, Charles Bradlaugh's funeral was an impressive affair. Three special trains conveyed mourners from London to Brookwood Cemetery, in Surrey. Scores of national organisations, Liberal Associations and Secular Societies were represented. Individual mourners, some famous, some to become famous, included John M. Robertson, Annie Besant, John Morley, Emmeline Pankhurst, David Lloyd George, the Rev Stewart Headlam, the Marquess of Queensbury and a young Indian student named Gandhi. David Tribe, Bradlaugh's biographer and a former president of the National Secular Society, pays tribute to one of the greatest of the great Victorians.

At 6.30 am on 30 January 1891 Charles Bradlaugh died of chronic renal disease and uraemia. To the thousands who attended his funeral it seemed like the death of an epoch. It wasn't, of course, but it was the death of one of the greatest freethinkers of any country at any time.

Freethinker readers will know that he was the founding president of the National Secular Society from 1866 to 1890, a Liberal MP for Northampton from 1880 until his death, co-defendant with Annie Besant in 1877 in the most notorious trial ever of publishers of a contraceptive manual, a leading republican who might conceivably have become Britain's first President in the early 1870s had political events turned out differently, and a law reformer of unparalleled energy.

It is ironical that many histories of the nineteenth century manage to omit him, while those that do accord him a footnote not infrequently get the details wrong. So it's often said that he was elected in 1880 but not allowed to take his seat in the House of Commons till 1886 because he refused to take the oath. The truth is that he all along offered to affirm or take the oath but thought the former "more decorous" for an atheist. Indeed, Parliament originally allowed him to affirm — a right he'd won for unbelieving witnesses in law courts in 1869 — sit and vote, but he was unseated in 1881 when a court held the 1869 statute didn't extend to Parliament. When he took his seat definitively in 1886 it was after taking the oath before a new Speaker, and his — and others' — unquestioned right to affirm was secured by the Oaths Act 1888.

In assessing his achievements we must also remember the difficulties he overcame: leaving school at 11; suffering chronic ill health; having an alcoholic wife, three children and a father-in-law to

support; conducting litigation at his own expense on behalf of freethought causes and his parliamentary struggle, whose details were so complex that even J.M. Robertson got several of them wrong in his long addendum to Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner's biography of her father; representing not only his own constituents but serving as an unofficial Ombudsman in Parliament at a time when MPs received no salary or expenses; contending not only with opposition (some of it physical) from religious and political antagonists but with factional fights inside the Liberal Party, the republican movement and the NSS.

Yet this centenary shouldn't be the occasion of *laus ad hominem* but of reappraisal of his circumstances, his policies and his tactics.

Bradlaugh's career is a perfect demonstration of what ought to be a truism but sadly isn't, *viz*, that in all but the rarest circumstances individuals don't dominate events or events dominate individuals, but there's a symbiosis between leaders and their times. Put another way, Bradlaugh was the supreme opportunist who, while remaining loyal to his principles, fought with whatever weapons were to hand: street demonstrations, litigation, legislation. And, as a practical man of affairs, he knew that successful organisation and activity cost money, and so gladly accepted profits from his early business ventures (which failed in the economic downturn of 1869-70, though he attributed their collapse to political and religious bias), earnings from his lecturing, writing and publishing, damages from successful libel actions (though most of this went to the Royal Masonic Institution for Boys), bequests, public testimonials. This opportunism was denounced (anonymously or pseudonymously, of course) by two secularist exponents of the art, who achieved much less but lived much better than Bradlaugh: William Stewart Ross and George Jacob Holyoake.

Before affirmation was legal he took the oath "as a mere form of words" whenever he was allowed to. He denounced Royalty but served on two Royal Commissions (Vaccination and Market Rights and Tolls), recognising that republicanism — despite minor revivals in the 1880s and later — had ceased to be a vital force in the 1870s when Victoria stopped being the "Widow of Windsor" and began again to earn her keep. In 1890 he reluctantly handed over the NSS presidency to G.W. Foote as his health declined and his parliamentary duties

expanded; but secularism had reached the end of its golden age in 1886, when his parliamentary struggle ended. In his last years he was vilified by socialists and dissident secularists for being so highly regarded in the Commons that Gladstone reputedly intended to appoint him Under-Secretary of State for India and even the Tories recognised a "man who has endeavoured to do his duty". But if it's better to be in Parliament than in the town square, it's better to be on the front than on the back bench.

What certain "freethinkers" of his day — and ours — couldn't or wouldn't see was that it's one thing to change arenas and weapons, it's quite another to forget what you're fighting for. There's either a demonstrable God or there isn't. Religion either deserves a special place in society or it doesn't. Contraception should be promoted whether or not it's popular or respectable. And so to the end he remained an atheist, not an agnostic; a secularist, not an oecumenist; a debater, not a dialoguer; a birth controller, not a "family planner".

Seizing on this chain of consistency, academic agnostics and others criticised him for his "obsession with superstitions that nobody believes any more" — when they weren't condemning him for involvement with "obscene" publications. Some with a taste for what became known as psychoanalysis hinted that his attacks on the Church of England were connected with his early conflicts with his father and his local Anglican priest over the Thirty-Nine Articles, which led to his leaving home as a teenager. In their Oxbridge cocoons they failed to observe that millions still believed in the literal inspiration of the Bible, and that in country areas the Anglican rector was not only the curate of souls, but the arbiter of morals, the dispenser of parochial charity, the chairman of magistrates and a leading local employer and landlord. In fact, towards the end of his life, Bradlaugh recognised other sectarian hazards, and was investigating the Roman Catholics and Salvation Army. So pervasive has this academic agnosticism become that educationists and authors are now expressing amazement and shock at the "emergence" of Christian (and Islamic) fundamentalism and "creation science", and a whole generation of "freethinkers" has stopped debating religion, not only through preference but also through ignorance. They will, of course, be totally unprepared for the crescendo of millenarianism in the year 2000.

If Bradlaugh outlived the peak of some of the causes dear to him, he died before that of others. One of these was "nineteenth-century" radicalism, which flowered in 1906-15 despite being under siege

by socialism since the 1880s. While this campaign manoeuvred Bradlaugh and other radicals into the false position of seeming to defend the ruling classes, recent history has vindicated his main position, or positions. These were that you can't pull down a structure which shelters whole populations, however imperfectly, without knowing what to put in its place; that you can change human nature only marginally and over a very long time; that you need draconian powers to change control of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and that the concomitant political and social changes are just as likely to be adverse as favourable to the real interests of ordinary people. Fortunately for Britain, its Labour Party only played with socialism, but Bradlaugh was debating with serious Marxists.

Were he alive today he would be pleased to observe how some of his "old-fashioned" issues like the "Chunnel", universal affirmation, disestablishment and abolition of the blasphemy laws are alive and well, and one at least is near consummation. Whether he himself would be successful in a world dominated by media moguls and party machines is another issue entirely.

- CHARLES BRADLAUGH
Died 30 January 1891
- COMMEMORATION
MEETING
- Wednesday, 30 January 1991, 7 pm

Speakers include

- MICHAEL FOOT, MP
- CONRAD RUSSELL
- RENÉE SHORT

In the Chair: Barbara Smoker

National Liberal Club, Whitehall
Place (off Northumberland Avenue),
London, SW1

Organised by the National Secular Society,
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL,
Telephone 071-272 1266

OUT OF WORK, by "John Law" (Margaret Harkness).
Merlin Press, £4.99

Out of Work stands in the distinguished tradition of politically committed novels set in the East End of London. First published in 1888, when the socialist movement was in its infancy, it is the story of a young carpenter who comes to London to look for work, but is reduced to casual labour at the docks, dossing in Trafalgar Square, and eventually the Workhouse.

Although no literary masterpiece, it is a novel which merits republication. It is of interest both for its social realism, and the attempt to use the novel for political propaganda. Margaret Harkness was an assiduous social observer. At one point in the novel she remarks, of a police cell, "that place needs a Zola to do it justice". There are particularly sharp accounts of a Sunday scene in Victoria Park, the casual ward of the Workhouse, and hard labour at the tobacco docks.

The author was a supporter, indeed a modest financier of the early socialist movement, and slips easily into polemic. Describing the clamour for a day's work at the docks, she says years hence it would stand as testimony to the Age of Competition:

Boys and girls will read that thousands of Englishmen fought daily at the dock gates for tickets; that starving men behind pressed so hard on starving men in front, that the latter were nearly cut in two by the iron railings which kept them from work; that contractors were mauled by hungry men; that brick-bats and stones were hauled at labour masters by men whose families were starving.

In an era when Trafalgar Square has again become the scene of pitched battles, it is intriguing to read Harkness's account of "Bloody Sunday" in November 1887, when those same streets were the venue for a violent confrontation between police and an assortment of radicals, socialists and unemployed. "This thing is certain", Harkness dutifully informs the reader, "if more people had followed the example of those men and women, if it had really been a Bloody Sunday, that labour programme which is looming in the distance would now be before Parliament."

The daughter of a rural rector, Harkness's own Christian sympathies are evident in the novel. But she savages East End Methodism and the hypocrisies and social superiorities it nurtured.

There are passing references to the appeal of

freethought. One dock labourer displays a print of Charles Bradlaugh above the fireplace. Another character, fed up of his landlady's homilies, declares: "Now it's like a breath of fresh air to go and hear Bradlaugh after listening to (her) jaw about religion ... I'll take my Davy, that I will, Charley hasn't made as many sceptics as Christians have done with their queer religion." A socialist agitator on Mile End Waste expresses a more hostile view: "Mr Bradlaugh? He is looking out for a seat in the next Liberal Government."

Out of Work is one of four novels, disparate in date and style, republished to launch the Merlin Radical Fiction series. It's graced by an introduction by Bernadette Kirwan. She should have known, however, that some of the mystery about Margaret Harkness's private life, and the date of her death, was resolved three years ago by the biographical note in the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*.

JOHN PETHER

FALL FROM GRACE: THE FAILED CRUSADE OF THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT, by Michael D'Antonio.
Andre Deutsch, £14.99

Not for the first time, this is a study of American born-again Christendom constructed from an awe-inspiring amount of cross-country travel and interviewing of zealots. But if it is not an original idea, it is certainly well done. There are accounts not only of Jim and Tammy Bakker's Heritage USA Christian holiday resort and the Oral Roberts University, both almost old friends to readers on American evangelicalism, but also the factionally torn Southern Baptist Convention, Pat Robertson's 1988 bid for the Presidency and crusaders against humanism in Alabama school textbooks.

D'Antonio even goes outside the United States to visit Christian evangelists in Honduras. Through his work, we see what draws people to the evangelists, even when, as with the Bakkers or Jimmy Swaggart, they prove to have feet of clay. He is also very informative on the work of the Christian Right, and is particularly interesting about Robertson's Freedom Council and Phyllis Schlafly's antifeminist, textbook-censoring Eagle Forum.

REVIEWS

In this wide-ranging survey we encounter the Christian surgeon who attributes his non-believing colleague's skills at operating on children, sometimes without payment, to the intervention of Satan. "But in the end, the poor sucker is going to hell because he's not born-again...It's eternal torment too, like being strapped into an electric chair forever but you never quite die." We meet the man who recalls that when his wife was saved their relationship was changed. "As she became a Christian she became more submissive. I liked that." And we meet the American missionary in Central America with his fervent declaration: "Religion aside, Honduras is the front line between communism and Texas."

D'Antonio interviews all these people who we will never meet and brings them to life. He brings into focus too the Christian Right world-view, in which sex is reserved for marriage and AIDS is a punishment for permissiveness and a warning of the impending "end times".

But although *Fall From Grace* has many virtues it is not wholly convincing. The problem lies centrally with the book's subtitle, and for two different reasons. First, how helpful is it to put together evangelists, such as Bakker or Roberts, who play little or no part in Right-wing politics, with those who make political involvement a central priority? By collapsing the larger world of American evangelical Christianity into the smaller sphere of the Christian Right, D'Antonio overstates the politicisation of born-again Christianity. Secondly, has the Christian Right (and US evangelicals more broadly) failed? Certainly the disgrace of leading figures and the demise of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority are important. (Unusually, we could do with more about Falwell in this book. Where he has often been the main or even only figure discussed in accounts of the Christian Right, here he hardly appears at all.) But if Christian conservatives have fallen upon hard times and TV evangelists have had to implement cutbacks, it seems far too early to write them off. Instead, many groups have proliferated in the 'Eighties, some surviving better than others, and on a global scale, as the chapter on Honduras should remind us, US televangelists are on the offensive, including in the formerly Communist countries.

But does this international expansion pose a problem for the evangelical movement? With the demise of world Communism, has the Christian Right lost an enemy to fight against and explain

everything through? D'Antonio suggest that there are some signs that a new enemy is being constructed in the shape of New Age philosophy and its noticeable presence among sections of the American population. Indeed, the evidence is much stronger than he suggests that this has been for some years a key aspect of Christian Right concern. In addition, another candidate has more recently emerged in the form of Islam, with some preachers even linking the Iraq-Kuwait conflict with the prophesied Armageddon. But one foe will do as well for the 'Nineties as it has done for the 'Seventies and 'Eighties. Faced with divorce, abortion, feminism and all the other indicators of what they see as moral decline, born-again Christians will unhesitatingly attribute all it opposes to the machinations of secular humanism.

ALAN GROVE

VOX HUMANA, by Norman MacDonald. Glasgow Humanist Society, £2

These 32 poems, published by Glasgow Humanist Society as its contribution to Glasgow's year as European City of Culture, are well worth a read. They fall into various categories, from the chatty quatrain to the high style, and include several poems in the Scottish dialect, for which this reader at least feels the need of a glossary. However, the dialect adds lift and refreshment to the collection, and is appropriate to the Glasgow scene.

There are useful humanist poems setting forth the classical arguments against Christianity, eg "A Humanist Anthem", "Heaven", "Hell", "Apartheid" and "The Bible Says". There are some "Green" poems which, though close to humanism, are distinct, belonging to a more recent tradition and concerned for the globe rather than the individual. I don't, by the way, agree with the concluding lines of "Amends", which seem to relinquish all responsibility. Would other species make a better job of Earth Control than *Homo Sapiens*? How does a humanist define Nature with a capital N? Does this let God in by the back door? I prefer ordinary scientific method, agreeing with John Gilmour "All absolutes the enemy", and thinking it impossible to make "amends", although we can try to do better for the planet and our fellows in the future.

On the lighter side there are funny lines, witty

lines, a whole range of observed experience which, taken together, present a capable, authoritative and good-natured personality. I thought of emulating Schumann when he first heard Chopin play and shouted: "Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!" But then I hesitated, because I am a woman and a feminist. It is easy to advocate treating females with consideration; the question is, how do you actually behave? The poem, "View From the Acropolis", extols the glories of Plato, Aeschylus, etc., but does not mention that these splendid figures depended on slaves, male and female.

The long poem, "Ter Ughlas", reminds me of Edwin Muir's "The Day Before the Last Day". Both are accounts of humanity's death by nuclear attack; both are sincerely written and hard to follow. Edwin Muir has a curious, unexpected diction, full

of colour and strange phrases. MacDonald's conviction, integrity and real feeling mitigate the harshness of his theme. Who could truly convey the horror of this situation? Shakespeare? Byron? Milton? Or Edgar Allan Poe?

However, here is a humanist and a poet who has plenty to say and says it well. He might improve his style here and there; but the meaning matters more, and here he covers a broad field with a strong, easy and attractive flow. More, Mr MacDonald, please!

BET CHERRINGTON

Vox Humana, by Norman MacDonald. Obtainable from Alice Atkinson, 16 Minerva Court, 20 Elliot Street, Glasgow G3, price £2 plus 25p postage (cheques, etc payable to Glasgow Humanist Society).

LETTERS

NO SECULARIST "GODS"

With one refreshingly candid phrase S.J. Nicholls (Letters, December) reduces his proclaimed religious beliefs to the level of an insurance premium and by association condemns much of an angry letter as humbug. A choice of answers to his question is offered by the scriptures I assume he hears read every Sunday, the nature of his selection being dictated by personal charitable inclinations.

To suggest the existence of a secularist triumvirate of divinities is a groundless contradiction. A deeper understanding of the humanist movement would reveal that it has neither wish nor desire to create a deity or deities before which to grovel or prostrate itself. Logic and reason are respected as tools necessary to overcome obstacles in the perennial search for truth because it is primarily ignorance of truth which ensures the perpetuation of the imperfect grossly unjust and insecure world we inhabit. A word the existence of which is irrefutable fact. That S.J. Nicholls prefers his pie-in-the-sky-tomorrow-perhaps philosophy is a matter for him alone. It is often cold reality that inspires dreams both practical and improbable.

ROBERT BARR, Leicester.

A CHRISTIAN'S "SCIENCE"

A.J. Nicholls (Letters, December) has written a schoolboy howler: "Atheists should not attribute to the Christian's God the same characteristics as the gods they worship." Why should atheists be interested in attributing characteristics to something they don't believe exists?

"Blind chance and evolutionary progress" are simplistic labels for complex phenomena, but to describe these and science as "gods" is simply playing with language. It is not, of course, the function of science to bring comfort or and human emotion; so in attacking science for not doing so and calling it a "god", Mr Nicholls is attacking a caricature of his own making. In consequence, he has wasted his time and a postage stamp to state absolutely nothing.

RAY MCDOWELL, Larne, County Antrim.

WHAT PRICE PRAYER?

In his letter on prayer (December), S.J. Nicholls says he has no doubt that "an infinite personal God" hears and answers prayers "according to his own will". Big deal!

I am sometimes the target of begging in the street from Moonies and other religious beggars, beseeching me to donate to their unspecified "charity", and I answer their prayers according to my own will - in other words, as Mr. Nicholls' god apparently does most of the time, with an emphatic "Certainly not!" But unlike the divine potentate, I expect no thanks for my answer.

Mr Nicholls adds that, if he and his fellow believers are right in their belief and we are wrong, "then what"? The implication of this question is, I suppose, that then we will reap our just deserts for unbelief in this life — an eternity of "weeping and gnashing of teeth". But if there really were a god who prepared an eternity of torment for **any** of his creatures, I hope I would have the moral courage to curse him rather than worship him. And if this world of suffering were deliberately created by him, I hope I would have the unselfishness to curse him for the sufferings endured by so many of his putative creatures, rather than thank him for my own relative good fortune.

BARBARA SMOKER, London, SE6.

ANOTHER PUZZLE

I read R.J. Condon's article, *The Cult of Padre Pio* (November), with considerable interest, as the whole question of stigmata has often puzzled me.

According to the great Voltaire, "neither the Jews nor any other people thought of fixing persons to the cross by nails ... it is a fiction of some painter."

Nearer our own time, Macleod Yearsley, in his excellent little book, *The Story of the Bible* (Thinkers' Library, 1933), states that "victims were bound with cord, NOT nailed."

If both these writers have got their facts right, then surely the whole question whether stigmata are "genuine" or not just doesn't arise.

A.T. LAMBERT, New Milton, Hampshire.

GODS AND THEIR MAKERS

The information, that many more people believe in God than go to any sort of religious services, reported in your November issue, is quite in line with many surveys made over the years.

Have we drawn the right conclusion from these facts; have we drawn any conclusion at all from the two sets of data taken together?

It appears that there is a positive acceptance of the supposed reality of God accompanied by an explicit rejection of all the priestly accounts of this supposed being's attributes. Does this not mean that very many people are Deists — as Thomas Paine defined the word? They perceive God as evidenced by the world around them and they evidently regard priests and scriptures as deceptive intrusions between Man and God.

There cannot very well be a Deist Church — that would be rather like a vegetarian abattoir — but we secularists would perhaps do well to publicise Paine's *The Age of Reason* far more than we do. As a down-to-earth critique of biblical religion it is unsurpassed (the more so as its author sees such religion as a blasphemy upon his God) and, given that Christian revivalists set out their pitch on Bibliolatry, we neglect Paine at our peril.

"God" is really a side issue. It would be the Diests' God's will that we accept his creation and get on with it — that we be secular humanists for all practical purposes.

ERIC STOCKTON, Sanday, Orkney.

CRITIC VINDICATED

Exactly a year ago (*The Freethinker*, January 1990) I was the first and only person to draw public attention to a developing scandal which threatened to reflect adversely on the humanist movement. The activities of a woman who was appointed Funeral Organiser of the British Humanist Association were, I suggested, likely to bring the movement into disrepute. The only support I received was from George Vale of the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group, who, resisting the commercialisation of humanist funerals, said "I don't want to be part of a 'funeral business'."

The other letters were very critical. Jane Wynne Willson accused me of "a tirade of abuse"; others of "ill-considered and petty infighting" and "very little commonsense".

Now, almost a year later, the BHA has sent to its funeral officiants a circular letter (26 November 1990) signed by Jane Wynne Willson and Harry Stopes-Roe. It regrets that BHA plans for reorganising the funeral network are "back to square one". This is attributed to the activities of the person I named in my letter (January 1990), who, independently of the BHA, set up an organisation called Humanist Services and "entered into negotiations with the major consortia of funeral directors."

The letter continues: "Unfortunately these negotiations were based on grossly inaccurate estimates of our membership figures and of the number of funeral enquiries that she was currently getting. Also it was not always made clear when she was operating on behalf of the BHA or Humanist Services, and what, if any, the connection was. Inevitably the BHA became implicated in these transactions. In September the BHA, with advice from our solicitors, issued a statement ... dissociating ourselves from Humanist Services."

When I mentioned, in my original letter, the inflated membership claims, Jane Wynne Willson dismissed this

lightly as "a mistake". Now she says "grossly inaccurate". Another correspondent blamed journalists as "notorious for printing inaccurate statistics". Barbara Smoker, in reply, pointed out that the same exaggeration, by a factor of twenty, had appeared in more than one newspaper.

Who has been proved right by these events? Who has been vindicated?

It will be interesting to see what acknowledgement, if any, is forthcoming from my critics. If my warning had been heeded a year ago, the BHA might perhaps not be "back to square one".

KARL HEATH, Coventry.

INFORMATION WANTED

I am interested in the issue of Nazi-Catholic collaboration in Yugoslavia between 1939 and 1945. I am particularly anxious to research the activities of the Croatian Catholic militia (the Ustashi, who were pro-Nazi), and the mass killing of Orthodox believers at the Ustashi-run concentration camp at Jasenovac. Have any readers got information on this subject?

MIKE SHANKLAND, c/o Box 522, Sheffield, S1 3FF.

CONTACTS

I am a playwright and songwriter seeking an agent or other contacts in show business and publishing.

RALPH LENCH, 33 Lansdowne Road, Littlehampton, Sussex, BN17 6JG, Telephone (0903) 1715568.

Israel's parliament, the Knesset, has passed laws described by opposition spokesman Michael Bar-Lohar as "putting the country alongside the most backward and repressive nations." Local authorities have been given powers to close restaurants and theatres on the Sabbath. The move is seen as a Government attempt to retain support by the ultra-Orthodox Augdat Israel and the National Religious Party.

Chris Mullin, MP (Labour, Sunderland South), told a conference on Labour's plans for criminal justice reform that Freemasons should be forced to disclose their membership when applying for posts as judges, magistrates or police officers. He said that no one concerned with miscarriages of justice could fail to notice the large number of Freemasons involved in such cases.

A traditional healer or witch doctor named Myofu, claimed to have magical powers which enabled him to breathe under water for 48 hours. In a demonstration to a group of trainees, he dived into a dam in southern Zimbabwe. His followers sang and danced as they waited for his return. Two days later he had not surfaced. His body was later recovered. Followers say he was killed by a mermaid who lives in the dam.

An Atheist at a Church Wedding

LESLIE SCRASE

Recently I went to a wedding in a parish church. It is a long time since I have been inside a parish church so I was genuinely interested to see what I would find.

The ceremony was preceded by some "Notices", all of them negatives vetoing things like flash photography and confetti. Apparently it was wrong to spread confetti in the church grounds and in the forecourt of the local pub, but the rest of the village could be plastered in the stuff.

We sat in the traditional discomfort of a pew and faced a crucifix. This in itself I found offensive. My feelings are reinforced during the service by references to Christ's atoning sacrifice and the final dread day of judgement.

Afterwards I asked a Christian friend about these things and he shrugged them off: "We no longer think of Christ's death as a sacrifice", he said. If he is right, Christianity needs to be purged of these obnoxious sacrificial ideas. If he is wrong, he needs education — perhaps even conversion.

I have heard snippets of the debate in Christian circles about modernised services and was curious to know whether this would be ancient or modern. I'm still not sure. The prayers were addressed to a "you" not a "thou". But the phrase "godly matrons" hardly struck me as modern.

I was more than a little surprised to find that the church continues its obsession with sex and procreation — an obsession underlined by the

clergyman with his views on love and lust. However, he advised the couple to "let Jesus stand between" them. If they do they will obviously have no problems with either sexual love or lust.

But perhaps it is time that the church laid more emphasis on the "mutual society help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other". This lovely picture of marriage seemed to come across almost as an afterthought.

Earlier in the ceremony we had been told that "matrimony was ordained by God himself". It struck me that the quiet omission of the word "himself" would avoid antagonising feminists and would also relieve the ceremony of an anthropomorphic view of God. But I was to discover that Christians have no desire to be so relieved. During his homily the clergyman asked us to think about God: "Imagine him sitting up there and looking down on all of us ..."

He is an educated, experienced, fully trained and qualified clergyman. We were a congregation of reasonably educated adults. He went on to speak of this benign god who is nevertheless to be feared at the final judgement.

After the ceremony was over and before we were able to get out of the church, the choir rushed around in unseemly haste wiping out every sign that a wedding had taken place and preparing for Sunday. At the end of it all I could only give the church one plus mark: the flowers were magnificent.

Secularism Under Threat

TED GOODMAN

The subcontinent of India was partitioned by Britain against the wishes of the majority of its inhabitants. The result is the existence of two authoritarian, sectarian states, namely the Islamic Republics of Bangladesh and Pakistan. The Republic of India, by contrast, is a secular, democratic country. The latter's status is now under threat.

On 7 November 1990 the Lok Sabha (Indian Parliament) voted out the Government of the Prime Minister, V.P. Singh. He accordingly submitted his resignation to the President who, on 10 November, appointed Chandra Shekar caretaker Prime Minister of a minority Government. A General Election may soon be called, and it is likely to be won by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which wants to convert India into a sectarian "Hindu Rashtra" (Hindu State),

thus prejudicing one-fifth of the country's citizens (Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, etc).

This serious situation arose as follows. V.P. Singh's coalition Government accepted the Mandal Commission's recommendation that a quarter of Civil Service posts be reserved for the underprivileged Other Backward Classes, in addition to the 22.5 per cent already reserved for the former "untouchables" and scheduled tribes. This enraged the Hindu BJP which belonged to the ruling coalition. It therefore decided to play the religious card. Party leader L.K. Adwani led a huge procession to the town of Ayodhya. Their intention was to demolish the main mosque and replace it with a Hindu temple on the site where, according to tradition, the Hindu god Rama was born, and whose

EVENTS

temple, they claim, was razed by the Muslim conqueror Babur to build a mosque.

Police apprehended thousands of Hindu activists who were making their way to Ayodhya. But crowds broke through the cordon and to shouts of "Victory to Rama" started demolishing the mosque. The confrontation led to widespread destruction and over two hundred deaths in riots which continued for several days.

The Ayodhya affair was regarded by many Indians as an outrage against the country's secular tradition. S.R. Bommai, President of the Prime Minister's Janata Dal party, declared: "The country is at a crossroads. We have to choose between secularism and religious fundamentalism, between democracy and mobocracy, between unity and disintegration."

The Ayodhya mosque has been unused since 1949 and the local Hindus had installed an image of their god inside. The BJP leader, L.K. Adwani, has offered to rebuild it a few kilometres away at the expense of Hindus who have collected large funds for the Rama Temple. The Muslims rejected this, even though they would have gained a functioning mosque. Thus has Islam's intransigence fed Hindu militancy.

Prime Minister Singh realised that an attack on the Ayodhya mosque would provoke nationwide protests by Muslims. He ordered the police to prevent it, and Adwani was arrested on 23 October. The following day his fanatical supporters called a general strike and went on the rampage. The ensuing sectarian violence caused several hundred deaths.

Meanwhile, Sikh extremists in the Indian State of Punjab continued their terrorist campaign in support of an independent, sectarian Republic of "Khalistan". Likewise terrorists in the State of Kashmir and Assam continued their guerrilla campaigns.

The Hindu BJP brought down the Government by voting against it and thereby destroying its majority in Parliament. Thus the world's most populous democracy is endangered by fanaticism and sectarianism.

Pope John Paul II has made it clear that even "natural" methods of birth control are unacceptable to the church if they are used for "selfish ends". Addressing a Rome conference on the Billing Method of family planning, the Pope said all methods were forbidden if couples were "closed to the transmission of life".

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 3 February, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Len Goldman: The German Democratic Republic.

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme of forum meetings obtainable from the Secretary, 2 Savile Terrace, Edinburgh, EH9 3AD, telephone 031 667 8389.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Meetings on the second Friday of the month at 7.30 pm.

Glasgow Humanist Society. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Mrs Marguerite Morrow, 32 Pollock Road, Glasgow, G61 2NJ, telephone 041-942 0129.

Humanist Holidays. Easter (29 March - 2 April) at Lincoln. Deadline for bookings: Thursday, 7 February. Information obtainable from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone (0242) 39175.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Tuesday, 22 January, 7.45 pm. Annual General Meeting and social evening at 14 Foxholes Crescent, Claverley, Pudsey (telephone Leeds 577009). Tuesday, 12 February, 7.30 pm, Swarthmore Education Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. David Parker: Is Marxism Dead?

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 31 January, 8 pm. Jim Herrick: The Relevance of Bradlaugh Today.

National Secular Society. The Bonnington Hotel, London, Saturday, 13 April. Annual Dinner.

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 21 February, 7.30 pm. Joy Croft: Can You be a Religious Humanist?

Preston and District Humanist Group. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, telephone (0772) 769829.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 13 February, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Extraordinary General Meeting.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth. Meetings on the third Monday of the month, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Information: telephone Kenilworth 58450.

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The Noose: "Life" Ghouls Lose Commons Vote

Yet another attempt to reinstate the hangman has been defeated in the House of Commons. This time the majority against capital punishment was significantly larger than when the question was debated on previous occasions.

Mr Baker, the Home Secretary, spoke out in strong terms against restoration of the death penalty. He referred to the concern now being felt in Parliament and the country over the Guildford Four whose convictions were quashed, and the Birmingham Six, whose convictions are seriously questioned.

"The possibility of an innocent person being hanged cannot be dismissed with a shrug", Mr Baker declared.

"We must still have the possibility of rectifying a mistaken verdict. Capital punishment denies that redress. There is no appeal from the grave."

(continued from front page)

defenders of "Our Lord and His Day". The basic objection to Sunday shopping is religious, not social.

It is ironic that while ignoring their LDOS brethren in Christ, the KSSC has made common cause with a trade union. The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) has also been picketing stores and demanding the prosecution of Sunday traders.

The union's work on behalf of its members is deserving of support. But at present its leaders are being led up a sabbatarian blind alley, defending an outmoded and unpopular religious prohibition. They should be looking to the future, preparing to negotiate the best possible deal for shopworkers when Sunday opening becomes the general rule.

USDAW's objections to Sunday work are rather selective. Its members use public transport, buy newspapers, visit museums, watch television, attend football matches and enjoy a lunch-time drink — all of which necessitate Sunday work. Scottish shopworkers have adapted, and there is no difficulty in staffing shops which are allowed by law to open on Sunday in holiday resorts during the season.

The Shops Act 1950 states that "every shop shall ... be closed for the serving of customers on Sunday." But there are some weird and wonderful exceptions to this prohibition. Fish and chips may be sold (except in a fish-and-chip shop), and for those who can face it, cooked or partly cooked tripe

Once again it was the "pro-Life" (anti-abortion) champions who were the most vociferous supporters of the death penalty. Sir Bernard Braine was joined in the hanging lobby with other "pro-lifers" like Andrew Bowden, Geoffrey Dickens, Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman, Dame Jill Knight, Ivor Stanbrook and Ann Widdecombe.

The Reverends William McCrea, Ian Paisley and Martin Smyth, together with Sir John Stokes, a member of the Church of England General Synod, were also numbered among the hangers.

The Guildford and Birmingham cases have undoubtedly convinced many in Parliament and the country that innocent people have been and could be executed. Timothy Evans and Derek Bentley are not forgotten, but there are still those, mainly in Mr Baker's party and the "pro-Life" camp, who are prepared to dismiss such tragedies "with a shrug".

may also be purchased on the Lord's Day. Many churches and cathedrals take advantage of the Section which permits them to sell guidebooks, postcards and souvenirs (at the same time supporting the campaign against Sunday trading).

Several years ago a Home Office departmental committee, chaired by Robin Auld, was set up to consider the question of Sunday trading with all its complications and anomalies. Its report, published in 1984, included the recommendation that legal restrictions on shopping hours should be abolished.

The Government's Shop Bill 1985 would have repealed Sections of the 1950 Act relating to Sunday trading. It was defeated by an assorted coalition of evangelical Christians, Right-wing and Left-wing politicians.

The Prime Minister favours fundamental reform of the law on Sunday trading. He has described much of the law in this field as bizarre, and expressed the view that supporters and opponents of reform should work out an acceptable compromise.

The battle to free Sunday from restrictions on trading, recreational and cultural activities goes back several centuries. Every attempt to liberalise the law has provoked a recitation of the Fourth commandment. Unfortunately for the Prime Minister and like-minded politicians, those who believe that they are doing their God's will are unlikely to compromise. Having lost so many battles, Sabbatarians are making a determined last-ditch stand against Sunday shopping.