



## Of Craters and Creators

In the latest round of its [ongoing campaign](#) to remove or reform “Thought for the Day”, the National Secular Society launched an [online petition](#), noting that this particular slot on Radio 4’s flagship “Today” programme excludes the non-religious, offers no right of reply, and is often used to proselytise. I listen to the programme on some mornings whilst preparing for work, and the slot can elicit a variety of reactions. Sometimes the speaker couches the vast majority of what’s said in perfectly reasonable terms. You’d think I’d enjoy a slot like that, but I can’t; I realise all too well that an otherwise thoughtful analysis of events is about to be soiled by the gratuitous introduction of mythology. On other occasions, the entire slot leaves me feeling incredulous. As an example of one such occasion, take [the following offering](#) from Rabbi Jonathan Sachs:

*I was riveted by a television program this week called ‘The Day the Dinosaurs Died.’ It was about a team of scientists who’ve been drilling deep into the rock beneath the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mexico at the precise point where a 9 mile wide asteroid crashed into the Earth 66 million years ago with an impact equal to ten billion Hiroshima atomic bombs. The result was a dense cloud of sulphur that plunged the planet into a global winter, killing the dinosaurs and causing the greatest mass extinction in history. The result was space for small mammals to flourish, including eventually Homo sapiens, i.e. us.*

*What was fascinating was the scientists’ conclusion that what made the difference wasn’t that the asteroid struck but precisely where. Had it fallen thirty seconds earlier in deep waters, or thirty seconds later on dry land, the impact wouldn’t have been so great. The dinosaurs would have survived and we might never have emerged. Thirty seconds isn’t that long, even in a Thought for the Day, let alone when set against the four and a half billion years of the existence of planet Earth.*

*This is just the latest in an astonishing series of discoveries of how many things had to be just so for the universe, the stars, the chemical elements, Earth and life itself to come into being, let alone to culminate in the one species thus far known to us capable of asking the question ‘Why?’ For some of us that’s evidence of a divine Creator; for others, it’s just a series of strange coincidences.*

Unlike *Diplodocus*, Rabbi Sachs didn’t stick his neck out and explicitly place himself in the “God did it” camp—although he did marvel at the precision of the asteroid strike, he had introduced this topic in a religious discussion slot, and he had noted that “For some of us that’s evidence of a divine Creator”. What the rabbi failed to do was address or even acknowledge any of the flaws in this idea. A god who is responsible for unleashing the equivalent of “ten billion Hiroshima atomic bombs” (wiping out about three quarters of the species on the planet) can hardly be termed “loving to all he has made” (Psalm 145:9). The same psalm says of God, “You satisfy the desires of every living thing”. I suppose the dinosaurs had a “desire” to be killed off in a global winter? What rubbish! If, as some theologians would have us believe, God needed to remove the dinosaurs in order to pave the way for humans, why did God create the dinosaurs in the first place?

The dinosaur extinction is the most famous mass extinction event in the Earth’s history, but it wasn’t the only one; nor, in contrast to what Sachs implied, was it the most severe; some 252 million years ago at the end of the Permian period, about 96% of all marine species, along with 70% of terrestrial vertebrates, were wiped out. Was God’s loving hand at work during that mass extinction as well?

Why suppose that God condemns the odd terrorist strike if he actually *orchestrates* mass extinction events? Not exactly a “strong and stable” theological basis for opposing Islamic fundamentalism, is it? The theologian’s ability to reconcile a loving god with an asteroid strike brought to mind Francis Bacon’s description of superstition: “The root of all superstition is that men observe when a thing hits, but not when it misses.” Radio 4 and the world as a whole would be better off without such nonsense; I hope (but don’t pray....) that *Thought for the*

## Summer 2017

*Day* goes extinct soon.

The idea that a fit between an organism and its environment must be designed was lampooned by author Douglas Adams, who wrote, “This is rather as if you imagine a puddle waking up one morning and thinking, ‘This is an interesting world I find myself in — an interesting hole I find myself in — fits me rather neatly, doesn’t it? In fact it fits me staggeringly well, must have been made to have me in it!’ Adams’ point was that some fits can be explained though laws; a puddle fits its hole neither by design nor (to use the rabbi’s loaded phrase) by “a series of strange coincidences”, but by forces acting in an orderly and predictable fashion. The Force of Gravity, by pulling water towards the Earth’s core, ensures that there’ll always a snug fit between the ground below and the puddle above—no engineer—or anthropocentric conceit—is required.

Fine Tuning arguments marvel at the fit between an environment and life, but the Argument from Design rests (at least in part) on the fact that an organism fits its environment. But this strikes me as a form of double-counting, akin to praising a locksmith for how well the key fits the lock, whilst also marvelling at how well the lock fits the key!

Let’s assume, for the sake of argument, that God exists, and that he wants to create beings capable of asking themselves such questions such as “Why do I exist?”. If God desired sentient beings, why require that such beings be physical, particularly given that believers are said to achieve immortality as spiritual rather than physical beings? God is said not to require a physical universe in which to live; if that’s true, a physical universe is not required for sentient beings. Although the Fine Tuning Argument *purports* to explain why our physical universe is as it is, but fails to explain why a physical universe is required at all. - Robert Stovold

**Brighton Secular Humanists  
Living Without Religion.  
Challenging Religious  
Privilege.**



**Programme, 2017-2018**

We meet in the King and Queen  
Pub, Marlborough Place,  
Brighton, on the first Wednesday  
of every month except August,  
7:30pm for an 8pm start

August 2017 - No meeting

September 2017 - To Be  
Announced

4 October 2017

**Houzan Mahmoud**

Houzan was one of the six  
runners-up for the National  
Secular Society "Secularist of the  
Year" Irwin Prize in 2017. The  
nomination and recognition of the  
work of Houzan and the Kurdish  
Culture project came about from  
their initiative in providing a  
platform for Kurdish writers,  
feminists, artists and activists in  
advancing gender equality,  
freedom and universal rights.

1 November 2017

**"Ancient Stoicism and Modern  
Humanism"**

Professor Christopher Gill of  
Exeter University

6 December 2017

**Debate: "Jesus of Nazareth Did  
Not Exist"** (working title)

Proposer: Kenneth Humphreys  
(author, "Jesus Never Existed")  
Opposer: Peter D. Williams  
(Catholic Voices)

3 January 2018, Discussion:  
**"What is Humanism?"**

## Selborne Manor Summer Outing, 12 August

This summer's outing will be to Selbourne Manor, home to pioneering naturalist Gilbert White. If you have offers of/requests for lifts, please ring Valerie Mainstone with on 01273 729311, *after 16 July*, and she will co-ordinate lift requests. For more details of the trip, see the website <http://gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk>

## Garden Party. 19 August

The Brighton and Hove Secular Humanists' Garden Party is on 19 August, from 2pm onwards, at the house of longstanding member Joan Oram, 19 Ridgeside Avenue, Patcham, Brighton BN1 8WD. Please bring a dish to share, and phone Valerie *after 16 July* on 01273 729311 to confirm your attendance, what you are bringing (Valerie will need to know what you are bringing so we don't end up with a mountain of sausage rolls!) and with offers of or requests for lifts. The 5a bus service stops at Ridgeside Avenue (just off the London Road, before the bus reaches Patcham Village). Please could people label food contributions that are vegetarian, vegan, or gluten-free.

## Representation for Humanists in Brighton and Sussex Medical School Video

On 18th July, Maggie Hall will be taking part in a training video for medical students on the subject of end-of-life issues. We have been invited to take part in this by Rev. Cannon Peter Wells, who is Lead Chaplain at the Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust. I am very appreciative that we have been invited to take part in this project as Humanists are not often included in such endeavours. Along with representatives of various faiths, I will be interviewed for approximately five minutes by Dr. Julia Montgomery, who is the Sub-Dean of the Medical School. The text of the interviews will also be available to students online.

## Bus Company Money on Offer!

Brighton and Hove Buses is offering grants under its Community Fund "to continue to make Brighton & Hove the unique, vibrant, exciting, innovative arts and culture magnet that has made it the envy of cities throughout the country". Well we reckon we contribute significantly to that end, so our Secretary, Valerie Mainstone, is currently working to submit a funding application on our behalf. We'll keep you updated on progress.

## Coffee Morning - Camp Quest Fundraiser

Our "Bring-and-Buy" Fundraiser for Camp Quest (an organisation that runs inclusive non-religious summer camps for children) took place at Valerie's on 14 May, and was a great success, raising £102.50 for that organisation. Thank you to those who attended or contributed, and special thanks to Valerie for hosting.

## Contacts

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Maggie Hall (Tel. 01903 813953, for funerals).