

# Intelligence Squared atheists vs. Christians debate: Does science refute the existence of God?

By [Dakota O'Leary](#)

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It's time for a good debate, and Intelligence Squared is giving us another one asking the question "Does science refute God?" The debate's participants for the motion were Lawrence Krauss and Michael Shermer. Krauss is a Canadian-American theoretical physicist who is a professor of physics, Foundation Professor of the School of Earth and Space Exploration, and director of the Origins Project at Arizona State University. Shermer is an American science writer, historian of science, founder of The Skeptics Society, and Editor in Chief of its magazine Sceptic, which is largely devoted to investigating pseudoscientific and supernatural claims.

Against the motion was Ian Hutchinson, professor of nuclear science and engineering at MIT, as well as Dinesh D'Souza, well known conservative, former president of the evangelical King's College in Manhattan, NY, and political commentator, and probably best known for his film 2016: Obama's America, which argues that Obama absorbed anticolonial hatred of America from his father.

The site states that "on the fundamental question—evolution or creation?—Americans are on the fence. According to one survey, while 61% of Americans believe we have evolved over time, 22% believe this evolution was guided by a higher power, with another 31% on the side of creationism. For some, modern science debunks many of religion's core beliefs, but for others, questions like "Why are we here?" and "How did it all come about?" can only be answered through a belief in the existence of God. Can science and religion co-exist?"

The debate sought to change people's minds. Before the debate, 37% were for the motion, 34% were against, and 27% were undecided. After the debate, Shermer and Krauss were declared the winners, with 50% for the motion, 38% against, and 12% undecided. Online voting results showed 64% for the motion, 36% against, with no undecided votes. John Donovan served as moderator.

When the debate started, the chairman of IQ2 gave a reason behind why he was interested in this particular question:

So, Robert, why this debate? Why does this one intrigue you, in particular? Because I know it does.

Robert Rosenkranz: I kind of got interested in this topic by reading a book about science. It was by the astronomer royal of England, a man called Martin Rees, and the book was called "Just Six Numbers." And it was about six physical constants that were imprinted in the early universe, in

the first 100 millionth of a second after the Big Bang. And these constants express ideas like the strength of gravity, the strength of the bond that keeps the nucleus of atoms together, the uniformity of that initial fireball. And if any of those six numbers was much larger or much smaller, we would really not have a universe; either stars and galaxies wouldn't have formed, or there'd be no elements as complicated as carbon and oxygen, or the Big Bang would've been succeeded by a big crunch into a black hole in which all matter would've disappeared.

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And when you think about this, or at least for me, I thought, could this be just chance or is there some uncanny intelligence at work in this early design?

John Donvan: And for the — what we're doing here tonight, why is this not — you know, this has been going on for a long time, this conversation, why is this not just the Scopes Monkey trial all over again?

Robert Rosenkranz: Well, because I think this conversation should be much more sophisticated than when dealing with the literal truth of something in the Old Testament. And, in addition, of course, science has moved on so much since that time. So I think this is going to be a very — a much more subtle and interesting debate than that one might have been.

Donovan started the debate by discussing scientists who believed in God: Isaac Newton, father of calculus, Max Planck, father of quantum physics, Copernicus, Galileo, Francis Bacon, and Pascal. He made the point that today, 3 out of 5 scientists do not believe in God. Yet 2 out of 5 scientists do. What's that all about? And then the debate began. Donovan introduced Shermer, who said he used to be a born again evangelical Christian who knocked on doors to get people to convert. And later, when he became an atheist, he went back to knock on those same doors to tell people he was wrong. Shermer and Krauss introduced their proposition for the motion by saying "Actually, evidence is just one type of reason for belief in God, and there is a loss of evidence for Christianity. But what the critics mean, I think, is — they're saying there's no scientific evidence for God. And that goes to the heart of this question and the myth that science has somehow refuted God. Actually, there are some things we've learned about the universe through science that are highly suggestive of a creator, but for the sake of argument, suppose that the scientific evidence for God were non-existent. Would that mean that science refutes God, or would it even mean and support the more modest claim that there's no evidence for God? Not at all." They concluded by saying God is not a scientific question, so the evidence for God is not scientific.

D'Souza and Hutchinson took a different tack in arguing against the motion saying the questions for which God is the answer are fundamentally not scientific questions.

Here is what I mean. Here we are as human beings. We're thrown into the world. And we can't help if we're curious, if we're thoughtful to say, first of all, why is there a universe? Second, what's our purpose? What are we doing here? Third, what's going to come after? We're going to die, but what next? Now I ask you, what are the scientific answers to those questions? And in fact, the answers are, from science, don't have a clue, don't have a clue, and don't have a clue.

Why? Because none of those questions is amenable to being decided empirically. Science can show how we got a universe but not why. On the question of what our purpose is here, science is completely silent. Moral issues are in a way outside the province of science. Why? Because science deals with what is, and morality is what ought to be.

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And finally, under the question of what comes after death, what possible empirical evidence can science provide on either side of that question? So because science is in no position to refute God, what we get from the other side is pop psychology. And we've been getting pop psychology from atheists for several hundred years. It's an effort to explain why people believe instead of providing any kind of a real refutation. You remember a few decades ago Freud basically said that God and religion could be dismissed as wishful thinking, "We wish for a better world and so we make one up." Well, that would kind of explain Heaven which satisfies wishful thinking, but it really wouldn't explain why major religions have invented Hell. Who would wish for that? Hell is a lot worse than diabetes or the suffering we have in this life.

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And then you've heard here people like Richard Dawkins say, "Well, belief in God depends on where you're born. If you're born in Afghanistan you're going to be a Muslim. If you're born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, you're likely to be a Christian." Michael Shermer alluded to that a little bit when he talked about multiple gods. But the sociology of the origin of belief says nothing about the truth of a belief. I'm sure that people who are born in Oxford, England, are most likely to believe in Darwin's theory of evolution than people who are born in Oxford, Mississippi. I'm sure people who are born in New York are more likely to believe in relativity than people who are born in New Guinea. What does that say about whether evolution or relativity is true? Nothing. The genesis of a belief, how you came to it, has nothing to do with whether or not that belief can be sustained as a matter of argument. The reality is, and we keep hearing a lot about Darwin because the last good argument against God came out in 1850 — in the 1850s, science has made a whole bunch of discoveries since then but they point in the opposite direction.

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And, therefore, what you find very often from atheists is now highly complicated defensive maneuvers to account for things that atheists resisted all the way. When the discovery of the big bang came — this, by the way, was at a time when most scientists believed the universe was eternal, the steady state universe was the prevailing doctrine of American and Western science — so it came as a shock that the universe had a beginning. Why? Because, in a way, it wasn't just that matter had a beginning, but space and time also had a beginning. In other words, this was something that the ancient Hebrews had said thousands of years ago and without conducting a single scientific experiment. By the way, this is not the same as other cosmologies. Other ancient cosmologies posited the universe being fashioned by a kind of carpenter god who made it out of some preexisting stuff, but the ancient Hebrews said, "No, first there was nothing, and then there was a universe."

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By the way, that's almost identical to what Lawrence Krauss said, "First, there was nothing, no particles, no energy, no laws, and then there was the universe," completely consistent to what — with what Christians believe, and exactly said by the ancient Hebrews thousands of years ago without doing a single experiment but solely on the basis of, "God told us." And the astounding fact is that 2,000 years later, modern science, after climbing round and round the mountain, has arrived at the top only to find a bunch of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries. [there was laughter here].

The transcript is [here](#), and the video below is for your viewing pleasure. Intelligence Squared debates are formatted in the Oxford style, with one side proposing and the other side opposing a framed motion. Before the debate, the audience registers via computer their pre-debate opinions on the subject, then re-submits their opinion after the debate so that changes in opinion can be tracked. Questions are also taken from the audience after a 7 minute opening statement.