

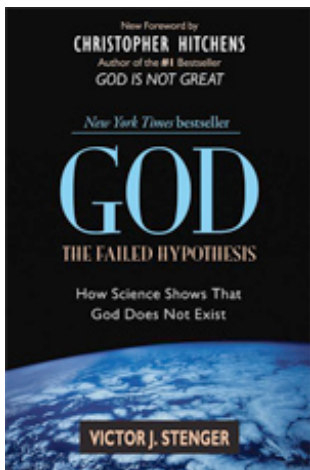
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Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (Prometheus Books, 2007). 287pp.

By Jerry Petersen



The U.S. National Academy of Sciences states, "Whether God exists or not is a question about which science is neutral."

The late, great Stephen J. Gould posited that science and religion can be described as properly having "non-overlapping magisteria" – in other words, that religion doesn't describe the processes of the natural world and science has nothing to say about morality.

Nonsense, says Victor Stenger in "God: The Failed Hypothesis." The book is subtitled, "How science shows that God does not exist." Chapter by chapter, the author shows that the existence of God would suggest certain realities in the world that would be verifiable by scientific inquiry. But the data don't support these would-be realities, thereby providing evidence that no God exists.

Stenger, retired professor of Philosophy at University of Colorado and of Physics and Astronomy at University of Hawaii, is successful in this line of reasoning because of his clearly stated definition that he is not just talking about any kind of god, but specifically the capital-g God of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition.

For instance, he tackles the question of the efficacy of prayer, in which the followers of these faiths fervently believe. If God exists, he argues, prayers could be shown to have been answered, using verifiable, replicable studies. And indeed, such studies have been conducted, with universally negative results. (Some studies, which supposedly yielded positive results, used flawed methodology and thus the conclusion is dismissible.) "If prayer were as important as it is taken to be by Jews, Christians and Muslims, its positive effects should be obvious and measurable," Stenger concludes. "They are not. It does not appear – based on the scientific evidence – that a God exists who answers prayers in any significant, observable way."

And so it goes, as each argument a theist may present in favor of God's existence, either as designer of the universe or arbiter of morality, is refuted.

The logical purist may object that one can't "prove a negative," that one can no more disprove God than disprove the

existence of Santa Claus or an invisible unicorn in the backyard. But the fact that most people do believe in God while rejecting the latter two is part of the point. Given no real reason to believe in Santa Claus or invisible unicorns, people reject such beliefs. Yet they hold tenaciously not only to belief in their God, but specifically to the tenets that their religion teaches about him. It is really these tenets that Stenger is addressing. By showing that they are wrong, like the efficacy of prayer or the notion that God fine-tuned the universe specifically for the sake of existence of humanity, the author demonstrates that belief in God is equally unfounded.

If there is a flaw in Stenger's analysis, it comes in the question of whether moral standards can exist without God. He correctly points to statistics showing nonbelievers are no more apt to improper behavior than believers; in fact, the opposite may be true. (Prison populations have a smaller proportion of atheists than the general population, according to a survey mentioned in the book). But a theist might argue that a person's moral rightness comes from God whether he believes in him or not. In other words, the book only addresses the question of morality among believers vs. nonbelievers, not whether the existence of God itself implies moral standards. Of course, we get into a very gray area here because even believers in God often come to different moral conclusions. But it would have been good for the book to address this issue more fully.

This volume joins the current wave of popular books about atheism, including Richard Dawkins' "The God Delusion" and Christopher Hitchens' "God is Not Great." It also joins a string of books Stenger has written on the intersection of cosmology, philosophy and religion, including "Not By Design: The Origin of the Universe," going back to 1988, as well as 2003's "Has Science Found God? The Latest Results in the Search for Purpose in the Universe."

One may wonder if these books are "preaching to the choir" of people who already agree with their conclusions. Indeed, a hard-core theist is unlikely to even pick up a book calling God a "failed hypothesis," let alone read it objectively. But the fact that these works are becoming best-sellers in a world dominated by religious belief suggests many people on the fringes are being drawn in.

And if it is mostly the choir hearing the sermon, so what? If the preacher is telling the story in a new way, as Stenger does by taking a different approach than the others, they at least can enjoy it. And perhaps they can then share the message with their friends who are willing to listen.

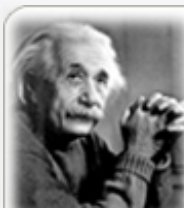
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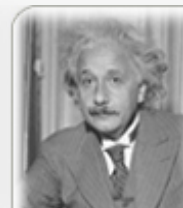
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