

**Victor Stenger: Physicist, Philosopher, Author, Skeptic, and Atheist Debater  
(January 29, 1935 – August 25, 2014)**

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

*Science flies you to the moon. Religion flies you into buildings. – Victor J. Stenger*

Victor Stenger was born in Bayonne, New Jersey. He spent a successful career as an elementary particle physicist and research scientist. He worked at the Department of Physics at the University of Hawaii. He retired in 2000 and became a professor *emeritus*. He was one of those rare scientists that had the courage to challenge absurd religious ideas, especially when they were in very clear conflict with firmly established scientific knowledge. He had no patience with scientists, like the late Stephen Jay Gould, that insisted that science and religion occupied separate non-overlapping magisteria (or NOMA), meaning, ultimately, that the two areas were concerned with addressing different kinds of questions. Stenger knew better. Indeed, Stenger insisted that theists made actual scientific claims, and insisted that scientists should put those claims to the test.

The writers of the Bible wrote about the age of the Earth, the universe, humanity, etc. They wrote about how stars, planets, rainbows, etc. are formed. They wrote about how day and night arrive. These kinds of ideas can be tested by science, so why not test them if we are serious about learning about the natural world and our place in it?

Stenger wrote several books directly challenging the claims of theists. Among them are:

- *God: The Failed Hypothesis, How Science Shows that God Does Not Exist*
- *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*
- *Not by Design: The Origin of the Universe*
- *Physics and Psychics: The Search for a World Beyond the Senses*
- *Has Science Found God? The Latest Results in the Search for Purpose in the Universe*
- *The Fallacy of Fine-Tuning: Why the Universe is Not Designed for Us*
- *God and the Multiverse: Humanity's Expanding View of the Cosmos*

Stenger debated such Christian apologists as Hugh Ross, John Lennox and David J. Bartholomew. However, he is best known for two debates he held with the fast-talking William Lane Craig. I was one of his debate coaches for his first debate with Craig at the University of Hawaii, Manoa Campus. (The second debate was held at the University of Oregon.) Stenger was a brilliant scientist, but he was not a great debater. However, he was very thick-skinned and preferred honest assessments of his performances over ego-stroking. Some atheists, like the brilliant debater and debate coach Jeff Lowder, believe that only the most highly skilled and experienced debaters should take on the likes of the polished Craig. Jeff believes that a poor showing by an atheist debater could set the cause of atheism back many years. This is not necessarily the case, however. After all, there are not many physicists, like Lawrence Krauss and Stenger that are willing to debate theists. Moreover, to paraphrase the humanist and former president of Planned Parenthood, Faye Wattleton, the problem is not that there are so few qualified physicists to win the race. It is that there are so few willing to enter the race in the first place. That is why Stenger insisted that atheists in general try to persuade more scientists to come forward to challenge theistic claims, especially those like Intelligent Design and Creationism that threaten good science.

Some theists claim that quantum mechanics can undermine naturalism and materialism. Stenger spent a lot of time battling this idea. Some go so far as to assert that human beings can change destiny by the mere power of their minds. However, Stenger says, "...the notion that we can control reality by merely thinking about it is nowhere implied by quantum mechanics and nowhere indicated by any scientific data." (quoted by Michael Shermer at [www.skeptic.com/insight/the-fifth-horseman-the-insights-of-victor-stenger-1935-2014/](http://www.skeptic.com/insight/the-fifth-horseman-the-insights-of-victor-stenger-1935-2014/))

Every once in a while, the media will make some sensational claim that science has found God. It is almost always the case that some scientist has used theistic language to call attention to his or her naturalistic finding and/or that irresponsible media persons have extrapolated from the data and reached their own absurd conclusions. However, Stenger said: "I am dubious and suspicious whenever an important result has been obtained too easily or too quickly, and reported in the media before it has run the gamut of critical review by disinterested, knowledgeable parties." (from *Has Science Found God?, draft: 2001*, quoted at [www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/stenger.htm](http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/stenger.htm))

From the same Website, a person asks "Where does all the matter [in the universe] come from?" Stenger responds: "if by 'matter' you mean the equivalent of rest energy, then that came from gravitational energy during the expansion in the early universe." (In a letter to Cliff Walker, September 13, 2001.) However, such an answer is not likely to impress theists. They will simply ask, "Where did the gravitational energy during the expansion in the early universe come from?" Or, "Where does gravity come from?" Theists understand that, until we have a theory of everything, there will always be gaps in our knowledge, and they will always rush to fill in those gaps by positing a mystery God. Yet they have yet to provide strong evidence to support their extraordinary claim that God has always existed. Until they can do so, it would be wise to accept the idea that nature requires no God whatsoever for anything. As Richard Dawkins has noted, however, most theists just do not have enough scientific imagination to see how the universe could have come to be without divine intervention. All animals, though, are necessarily aware of nature, as they are a part of it. As far as

we know, nature is a brute fact and requires no explanation outside itself. Nature certainly does not feel compelled to reveal its secrets to human beings. It is up to us to discover as many of its secrets as we can. This is what science is all about.

Stenger was a kind man. He never hesitated to answer emails from scientists and laypersons wanting to learn about the natural world. We could certainly use more scientists like him.