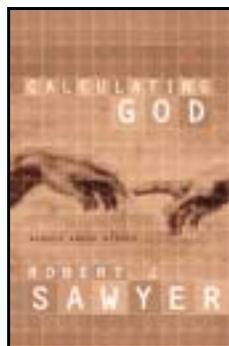


Calculating God

Robert J. Sawyer

Hollus, an alien, arrives at a museum in Toronto. She thinks that the fossil collections prove the existence of God. The curator, Tom Jericho, is an atheist. But, unbeknownst to Hollus, Tom's life is about to end. As he faces his own mortality, will he waver in his convictions?

Calculating God is science fiction on a grand scale.



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The following questions should stimulate an interesting group discussion. Please note that they reveal much of the novel's plot; to preserve your reading pleasure, please don't look at these questions until after you've finished the book.

1. When was the last time you were in a museum or planetarium? How important are these institutions to your life? What did you think of Tom Jericho's fight against the "dumbing down" of museums?

2. Is there any way to solve the dilemma of family when traveling in space? Hollus carried photos of her two children, but she never saw them again after leaving Beta Hydri III. Tom never saw Ricky again. The Wreed lifespan is so short that, by the time they reached Earth, their children would have been dead. Can you take your family with you? Or will space travel be for the unattached — a single lifestyle?

3. Did you believe the way the two alien species used science to prove the existence of God? Do you believe that science and religion should be completely separate? Are science and religion two sides of the same coin — two different ways of explaining our world?

4. Are you a creationist or an evolutionist? Is it possible to find a middle ground between such disparate points of view? Did Sawyer portray creationists fairly in his novel? Did he portray the evolutionists fairly?

5. To Hollus, abortion is not a moral quandary because with infallible birth control no woman should ever have an unwanted pregnancy. Given that the Forhilnor are about 100 years ahead of us, do you think Earth will be like that in 100 years, too? Does science make us less moral by eliminating the consequences of our mistakes?

6. For the dramatic purposes of the novel, why does Tom Jericho have lung cancer? Did Sawyer's depiction of Tom's disease ring true? Did you expect either the aliens, or God, to save Tom at the end of the novel?

7. What would you do if Betelgeuse went supernova right now? Where would you go? Earth is saved by what seems to many to be a miracle. Do supernatural miracles exist, or are they just scientific phenomena we don't yet fully understand?

8. Do you believe it was morally correct for Tom to leave Susan and Ricky and go to Betelgeuse? Contrast Tom's decision-making process with that of the Richard Dreyfuss character in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Given that Tom was dying, should we simply accept whatever decision he made as his "last wish?" Tom asked a Wreed for advice in this one matter: if you could ask a Wreed one question, what would it be?

9. At one point Tom prays, indicating, perhaps, that the walls of his scientific rationalism are tumbling down as his own death approaches. Did that ring true? Contrast Jericho's feelings with those of the renowned atheist scientist Carl Sagan, who (publicly, at least) maintained his rationalism until his death.

10. Sawyer predicts that the lifespan of a technological race as physical, biological entities is very short. Do you agree with him?

11. What did you think of the creation of Wibadal? Early Christians seemed to feel humans need a tangible god; do we still have that need today? What purpose, if any, does prayer serve if God exists but is not listening?

12. Did it bother you that Hollus was essentially a large spider? Did you find yourself thinking of her as a human being? What about T'kna? Was he too alien for you to relate to?

13. What do you think ultimately happened to Susan and Ricky? Are they dead, or uploaded into a computer, or immortal? Do you want science to continue to find ways to lengthen our lifespans? What about immortality inside a computer? Inside a computer you never have to age, fall ill, or become senile. Is real life better than life inside a virtual world?

Robert J. Sawyer — "the dean of Canadian science fiction," according to *The Ottawa Citizen* — is the only writer in history to win the top SF awards in the U.S., Canada, Japan, France, and Spain. His twelve novels include **Frameshift**, **Flashforward**, **Factoring Humanity**, and **The Terminal Experiment**, which won the Science Fiction Writers of America's Nebula Award for Best Novel of the Year. Born in Ottawa in 1960, Rob lives just north of Toronto with his wife, poet Carolyn Clink.

