

The Sylvans

Detailed summary powered by AI

13 April 2026

Motion: the world would be a safer place without religion.

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Analysis of the outcome powered by AI:

The debate over whether the world would be a safer place without religion was an intensely contested, highly philosophical and deeply emotional clash of ideas. Ultimately, the motion did not carry. The overarching narrative that drove this result was the opposition's successful reframing of religion not as the root cause of human violence, but as a secondary vehicle for innate human flaws. While the proposition mounted a ferocious attack on the dogmatism and historical atrocities perpetrated in the name of God, the opposition and the floor effectively sowed doubt that excising religion would cure humanity of its tribalism, greed and thirst for power.

Here is an in-depth analysis of the arguments, the ebb and flow of the debate and the pivotal factors that decided the outcome.

The proposition's offensive: dogma, violence and divine authority

The proposition opened the debate with a sweeping historical and contemporary indictment of organised religion. The core thesis was simple but devastating: religion states unprovable beliefs as absolute facts. This leads to dogma, dogma breeds fanaticism and fanaticism inevitably results in intolerance and bloodshed.

The opening speaker effectively mapped this trajectory across time and geography. They cited the slaughter of the Crusades, the systemic violence of Islamic State and the theocratic proxy wars waged by Iran. Crucially, the proposition grounded their argument in modern geopolitics, explicitly linking the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict to unyielding biblical and Quranic claims over the Temple Mount and Jerusalem. They further highlighted the dangerous

geopolitical influence of Christian Zionists in the United States who actively support conflict in the Middle East to hasten a biblical Armageddon. By establishing that religious texts allow actors to claim 'divine authority' for their actions, the proposition argued that religion creates a uniquely dangerous form of conflict that is immune to rational compromise.

The opposition's defence: human nature and the substitution effect

The opposition, speaking second, fundamentally shifted the paradigm of the debate. Rather than defending the atrocities outlined by the proposition, they conceded that religion is frequently abused. However, they anchored their case in realism and human psychology. Their central premise was that removing religion would not remove the underlying drivers of human conflict: competition for resources, fear, grievance and the desire for power.

The opposition argued that if religion were eradicated, human beings would simply attach their tribalism to new ideologies. They pointed to the secular populist movements of Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán as evidence that charismatic leaders can easily weaponise nationalism and economic grievance to foster 'us versus them' dynamics without needing a theological mandate. Furthermore, the opposition warned of the dangers of a secular void. Religion, they argued, provides a rare framework for large-scale social cohesion across national boundaries. Stripping it away would risk fracturing the world into smaller, more volatile tribal identities.

The ebb and flow of the floor debate

The contributions from the audience were deeply polarised but revealed three distinct battlegrounds that ultimately swayed the room.

1. The nature of the texts vs. the nature of humanity

A fierce sub-debate emerged regarding whether religious texts are inherently violent or merely misinterpreted by flawed humans. Supporters of the motion pointed out that holy books explicitly endorse violence, with one speaker referencing Deuteronomy, the Gospel of Matthew and the Quran to prove that holy texts command the subjugation or murder of non-believers. Another speaker noted that because religious dogma claims a monopoly on morality, it crushes critical thinking and treats humans merely as a means to a divine end.

Conversely, defenders of religion argued that humans are naturally wicked and will weaponise anything. They pointed to the peaceful teachings of Jesus and Buddhist philosophies of loving-kindness. For these speakers, the issue was never the faith itself but the cynical rulers and flawed individuals who warp texts to justify earthly ambitions.

2. Secular atrocities and institutional abuse

The debate swung heavily on historical comparisons. Those backing the proposition delivered blistering condemnations of institutional abuse, most notably the systemic cover-up of child

sexual abuse by the Catholic Church and within Islamic madrassas. This effectively painted organised religion as an institutional shield for predators.

However, the floor provided a robust counter-narrative by highlighting the horrors of enforced atheism. Speakers cited the Soviet Union, the Khmer Rouge and Communist China to demonstrate that when the ethical barriers of religion are removed, secular regimes are perfectly capable of unleashing mass murder and genocide. This effectively neutralised the proposition's claim that a post-religious world would inherently default to peace.

3. Social utility, cohesion and the void

The factor that seemed to pull many undecided voters away from the motion was the question of what would replace religion. Several speakers acknowledged that while wars are fought over resources and hegemony regardless of faith, religion provides unparalleled social utility. Speakers highlighted the foundational role of religious institutions in creating universities, hospitals and the abolitionist movement. Others pointed to the psychological comfort, emotional stability and community networks that religion provides to billions of people. As one speaker noted, for those suffering in the darkest corners of the globe, religion is the only mechanism that makes life endurable.

The closing arguments and what drove the result

In the penultimate speech, the opposition consolidated their strongest points. They reiterated that dogmatism and moral superiority are not exclusive to religion, pointing to Western secular interventionism as proof that humans will always find excuses to impose their will on others. They successfully framed the proposition's argument as a misdiagnosis, treating the symptom rather than the disease.

The proposition used the final speech to deliver a passionate rebuttal. They attacked the 'social utility' argument by highlighting the cruelty of the Catholic Magdalene laundries. They vigorously rejected the idea that modern conflicts are purely about land, reiterating that the clash in the Middle East is entirely driven by theological obsessions over holy sites. They closed by dismissing organised religion as a mere confidence trick designed to consolidate power.

Conclusion

The motion did not carry because the opposition successfully convinced the room that human beings are the architects of their own misery. While the proposition masterfully proved that religion has been the catalyst for immense suffering, systemic abuse and unyielding dogma, they failed to convince the audience that erasing religion would cure humanity of its destructive nature.

The floor debate revealed a deep fear that removing the social cohesion, ethical boundaries and psychological comfort of religion would not lead to a rational utopia. Instead, it would leave a

void quickly filled by hyper-nationalism, secular authoritarianism and tribal fragmentation. Ultimately, the room accepted the opposition's pragmatic, slightly cynical view of human nature: people do not need God to go to war, but many need God to survive the peace.

Detailed transcript:

Mr President, fellow Sylvans, people pray to God in over 7,000 languages, 24/7, all over the world. But is anyone listening? Of course, people believe that God is listening. Otherwise, why do it? But there's no proof. And of course, religion is based on beliefs without proof. We believe because it says it in the Bible or in the Quran or we're brought up that way, but religion states beliefs as fact. Go to church, and the priest will tell you as fact, Jesus walked on water, fed the 5,000, rose on the third day. As fact. Belief stated as fact leads to dogma, and challenging dogma is blasphemy, the devil speaking. And dogma in turn leads to fanaticism in some people, not everyone, but fanaticism goes hand in hand with intolerance of other people's beliefs. In 1095, Pope Urban the Second called for a crusade to establish a Christian kingdom in the land where Jesus walked, and he told the Crusaders, your sins will be forgiven you and you'll go to heaven. And after marching through hostile territory for four years, they arrived at Jerusalem, and they slaughtered every man, woman and child in the city, and they established a Christian kingdom that lasted nearly 200 years. However, the Muslims reconquered Jerusalem after 88 years by Saladin because they wanted the Muslim holy sites, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount, to be in Muslim hands. Worth also mentioning is the Albigensian crusade, which was on Christian soil against the Cathars. The Cathars were a group who lived in southern France, the Languedoc, and they believed in Jesus and the New Testament, but they did not accept the Pope or Catholic doctrine, and so they had to be wiped out. They were, by papal forces between 1209 and 1229. On the 22nd of July, 1209, for example, the city of Béziers, where a few hundred Cathars had taken refuge, was surrounded by papal forces, but they couldn't tell who were Cathars and who was the local population. And the papal legate who was in charge, called Arnaud Amalric, said, "Kill them all, for the Lord knows those that are His." And 20,000 people of Béziers were put to the sword.

Now, more recently, after the Iraq War, Islamic State was formed and spread across northern Iraq and Syria. There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet, and kill all those who don't accept that, the unbelievers, the kafirs, the infidels. Now, in this country, the UK, in the last 21 years, there have been 13 Islamist attacks, terrorist attacks which have killed 98 people and maimed or injured at least 1,822. Now the attackers didn't expect to survive. Death as a martyr means that they go straight to heaven, which is blissfully better than down here. Well, of course, no one has ever come back and said, "Yes, actually, it's all it's cracked up to be." They believe what their religion tells them about heaven up there, and death as a martyr killing kafirs, unbelievers, will guarantee them a place in this heaven.

Now in Iran, victory is framed as an ideological good versus evil, where the survival of the theocratic regime, the good, is a religious and political success, regardless of economic hardship or human cost. Utilising proxy forces like Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and regional influence, as in Iraq, and unconventional methods to impose costs on enemies is portrayed as success by the religious regime. Now, much of this, of course, in the Middle East is directed

against Israel. The arguments in favour of the state for the Jewish people, where they could have a sense of belonging, have in the past been centred around self-determination, but nowadays those arguments are increasingly religious. Asked, "Where is the green line between Israel and the occupied West Bank?" The answer came, "There is no green line. God gave us this land, all of it." Asked why Palestinians were being evicted from East Jerusalem, the answer came, "The Palestinians will tell you it's their land. They're lying. It's our land. It says it in the Bible." Asking a Jewish settler in the West Bank why he was taking land belonging to Palestinians in defiance of international law, he just shrugged and said, "God gave us this land. It says it in the Bible, that's my law." There are five references in the book of Genesis where God says He will give this land to Abraham and his descendants, but it's no use asking who eavesdropped on these conversations, who wrote them down or how do we know they ever took place? Because it's dogma. It's in the Bible. It can't be challenged. That's religion. Jewish settler organisations view the Western Wall of Temple Mount, that is the remains of the Second Temple which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, but they have always dreamed of building the Third Temple. But to do that, they would have to demolish the Muslim holy sites of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which are on top of Temple Mount. That would send shockwaves through 57 Muslim countries throughout the world who would demand a holy war, and that is what the Muslim Arab states fear most: Israel demolishing their holy sites. Now, evangelical Christians also believe in the Bible as infallible, and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 as fulfilment of a biblical prophecy. Many believe that the return of Jews to Israel is necessary for the second coming of Christ. For these Christian Zionists, who have, incidentally, significant clout within the Republican Party in the United States, Jesus's return to Earth presages a bloody final battle at Armageddon, which they want to happen, because those who accept Jesus as their Saviour will be raised up to God in Rapture, and all others, including Jews and Muslims, will not survive. Now that belief is anti-Semitic, but they support Israel, so it's okay. Now, if you find this hard to believe, just listen to John Hagee, an American televangelist and founder of Christians United for Israel. And he's very influential. He has the ear of Trump. Now, no one is going to deny that religion is a comfort to many people, and that it gives them a sense that they are not alone, and that whatever happens is God's will. That is personal belief, but organised religion distorts the original message. Jesus's Sermon on the Mount becomes, "We must establish a Christian kingdom in the land where Jesus walked." Islam's "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet" becomes, "Anyone disrespecting the prophet is committing blasphemy and must be killed." And the 10 Commandments carved in stone by Moses on Mount Sinai becomes "God gave us this land. It says it in the Bible, that's my law." Religion states belief as fact. That fact then becomes dogma, which can't be challenged if you want to be part of that religion. That dogma leads to fanaticism and intolerance of other religions, and that ultimately leads to war, upheaval and suffering. Religion does not bring unity, it brings division. The world would be a safer place without it.

Thank you, the speaker, very much. Could you just keep the Red Book going around, please? And now it's over to the speaker to oppose the motion.

Thank you. I stand firmly with the opposing view that the world would not be a safer place without religion. Let me begin with a concession. Religion, particularly in its organised form, can be and at times has been abused. It can provide a framework through which individuals justify and maintain power, and in the wrong hands, that can contribute to making the world less safe.

However, removing religion does not remove the motivating factors which drive its misuse. The causes of violence, competition for power, scarcity of resources, fear, grievance and questions of identity persist irrespective of religion. If religion were removed, these same forces would not disappear. They would simply attach themselves to something else. So the question before us is not whether religion can contribute towards making the world a less safe place. It obviously can. The question is whether removing religion would meaningfully reduce that harm. My contention is that it would not.

Before turning to my arguments, I too would like to briefly clarify what I mean by religion. There's two senses. First, as internal faith, religion or belief, a personal, spiritual search for meaning. And second, as organised religion, a structured, institutional framework that shapes belief and directs behaviour. When we consider issues of safety, conflict, extremism and persecution, it is largely this organised dimension that's operative. It is here that authority, hierarchy and mobilisation tend to emerge. Accordingly, my argument mainly focuses on this organised aspect of religion, and I'll make three points. First, that if religion were to disappear, other mechanisms would take its place as tools for power. Second, extremism is not unique to religion. Remove religion, and it's likely to manifest elsewhere. And third, without religion, we would see less large-scale social cohesion and greater fragmentation.

First, if organised religion were to disappear, something else would take its place. There's a common assumption that religion is a primary justification for unsafe behaviour, that if we remove it, we remove the justification for actions which cause harm. I think this mischaracterises the motivations of those who wield it for power. It is helpful to distinguish between two groups here: those who use religion instrumentally to gain and maintain power, and those who are genuine extremists, to whom I'll return shortly. For the first group, religion is not the root cause. It is a means to an end. If that means were no longer available, it is entirely plausible that another would be found. Both historical and contemporary politics suggest that people are highly responsive to charismatic leadership, particularly in periods of uncertainty. Religion is not most required to mobilise large groups. Identity, grievance and narrative are often sufficient. This can be seen in modern populist movements. For example, Trump uses the evangelical Christians to help build political support, but the majority of his supporters are motivated by narratives of economic insecurity, institutional failure and cultural threat. Those narratives proved highly effective in mobilising support, generating strong emotional responses and consolidating influence without relying centrally on religion. Similarly, in Hungary, Viktor Orbán has maintained power through appeals to national identity and concerns about migration, again, drawing on shared grievances rather than exclusively religious justification. The structure in both cases is broadly similar. Identify a grievance, delineate an 'us' and 'them' and build authority upon that basis. So long as inequality, insecurity and dissatisfaction persist, and it's difficult to imagine a world in which they don't, there will remain opportunities for individuals to mobilise others in ways that reduce safety. Removing religion does not eliminate that dynamic. It alters the form it takes.

Second, religious extremism is not an inherent feature of religion itself. The proposition seems to treat extremism as a central indictment of religion, highlighting the risks of absolute beliefs justified by reference to a higher authority. There is some force to that concern, but it's incomplete. The underlying issue is not religion as such, but a particular mindset, a tendency towards absolutism, certainty and a reluctance to compromise. That tendency exists

independently of religion. We can observe similar patterns in non-religious contexts, for instance, the psychological phenomenon of confirmation bias or in certain forms of political extremism or conspiracy-driven movements where beliefs may be held with comparable rigidity and conviction. Individuals drawn to such certainty are likely to find an outlet for it, whether religious or otherwise. It's also worth noting that many religious individuals are capable of holding both religious and secular justifications for moral values. For example, one might believe that murder is wrong, both on religious grounds and on the basis of secular ethical reasoning. It would therefore be inaccurate to suggest that religion is inherently incompatible with compromise or coexistence. The difficulty lies with a subset of individuals inclined towards extreme forms of belief. If religion were removed, these individuals would not cease to exist. Rather, their views would likely be redirected into other ideological frameworks, and the underlying issue would remain.

Third, without organised religion, we may see a reduction in large-scale social cohesion and an increase in fragmentation. Religion is one of the relatively few systems of belief capable of reuniting people across significant geographical and cultural boundaries. It can provide shared values, shared practices and a sense of belonging that extends beyond the nation-state. And this has implications for safety. Safety is not simply the absence of conflict. It also depends on the presence of trust, cooperation and a degree of mutual recognition between groups. Without religion, we lose one such framework that facilitates this type of cohesion. What may replace it are more localised and narrower forms of identity, whether ethnic, national or ideological. And in short, there's an increased risk of tribalism. The proposition may point quite reasonably to instances of religious conflict, and these do exist. However, a world characterised by smaller, less interconnected identity groups may be more prone to friction and not less. As shared frameworks diminish, the distance between groups widens, misunderstanding can increase, empathy diminish and the potential for conflict may grow. In that sense, removing religion could plausibly increase the number of divisions along which conflict might arise.

To summarise, the opposition's position is that the world would not be a safer place without religion. This is because removing religion does not remove the underlying drivers of harm. First, those who seek power would continue to do so through other means. Religion is one tool among many, not the root cause. Second, extremism is not unique to religion. It reflects a broader tendency within certain individuals that would likely persist in other forms. Third, religion can facilitate large-scale social cohesion. Its absence may lead to greater fragmentation and potentially increased instability. In short, the proposition addresses a symptom rather than the cause, and in doing so, it risks overlooking the possibility that removing religion might not resolve these issues, and in some respects, could exacerbate them. Thank you.

Thank you very much, the speaker. We've had two excellent openings. There's a lot of material there. On the other hand, it's going to be hard to follow them. We will move to the floor speeches. Just a couple of notes on those. They're five minutes each. You've seen me flashing little blue cards up here. When you have two minutes remaining, I'll give you a two-minute card, and then we have a finish card, and at that point, you need to finish. We might go down to four minutes after the break, depending on how many people want to speak, because we have a lot of people here tonight. We got one or two people online who might want to jump in as well. Is anyone interested to come up first? Yes, and I'm forgetting your name.

The speaker, speaking. I do have a few points I wanted to share. I think ultimately, when you look at the human heart, we are not inherently good. And if you look at that with telling a lie, stealing something from someone, coveting, there are so many sins. And I'm using the word sin for a particular reason, that none of us are inherently good. So therefore, whether you remove religion, there will always be wickedness in the world. And when you look at religion as a whole, I'm going to talk about the Bible. I am a Christian, so I will be looking through a Christian perspective. But you look at the teachings of Jesus. He does not encourage you to be violent. Some religions do. He actually doesn't. He says, when someone slaps your cheek, turn the other cheek. He says to love your neighbour as yourself. He calls you to deny your flesh. He actually calls you to do everything that you naturally don't want to do. He calls you to be the salt and the light of the earth, and Jesus in particular is set apart from everyone else. And I know that sounds biased, obviously, because I am a Christian, but He does declare to be the Way and the Truth and the Life. That's a very bold statement and a very bold claim. And also, if we look at, you know, it was Wilberforce who abolished slavery. He was a Christian. And you know, I will not deny that in the name of religion there have been evil atrocities, especially under the guise of Christianity. But what I will say is people who profess the name of Christ are not necessarily true followers of Christ, and that shouldn't deter you from Jesus. That should never. And ultimately, I think also, Christianity and other religions as well, it encourages you to help your neighbour, help the poor. All of these things are through religion, whether that's having proper priorities back in the day, and helping the sick. All of these things come from religion. And again, my claim is not that religion is not used for harm. My claim is that removing it doesn't remove wickedness and evil in the world. And ultimately, depending on what doctrine you believe in, what religion you believe, it will bring you into leading a better life overall. And everyone has, you know, their own opinion on what a better life is. But I would say it's one where you live sacrificially and you love sacrificially, and Jesus was the perfect example of that. And yeah, I don't really have much more to say, but I just wanted to share that, because ultimately, I just want to say that Jesus genuinely loves every single person in this room. And you can laugh at me, and you can say that's ridiculous, but I'm here to say He died for every single one of you, and He loves you fiercely. And I say that because I came to faith three years ago. I didn't believe and I mocked Christianity, thought it was dumb, and He radically changed my life. So I just want to share that the Scripture, the Bible, is a powerful force. The word is alive. It's active. Jesus came and died for you, and whether you believe it or not, you will stand before Him on judgement day. You will, and I pray that you will know Him, and He will love you, and He will accept you on this side of Earth before you have to respond to Him. And you can smirk and you can make faces, but I'm being deadly serious, you will have to stand before Him. So I just wanted to share that.

Yes, I have stolen the menu. No, I'm not sorry. Lovely to see you all again. Thank you very much for having me up. So my point is simple, and I very much agree with an earlier speaker. Religion is not the issue. People are the issue. It is people's interpretation, and I think, as you phrased it, people's abuse of religion. That is the problem. The proposer mentioned religion is stated as fact and as dogma and encourages fanaticism. That is people's interpretation of religion. It's their assumptions, and if I may be so bold as to say, it's people's inability to think critically about what they are hearing that has led to that fanaticism and that dogma. People have used religion as a proxy for their own bigoted, at times, violent and hateful views. But religion itself is not the

issue. The fact that there are multiple beliefs, multiple faiths in this room, not least in the world, shows that people have choices. There are lots of Christians who don't shun gay people. There are lots of Muslim women who don't wear the hijab right there. It shows that these religions can be interpreted in different ways. People can choose to interpret these beliefs, these scriptures, and these faiths in a peaceful way. And they can choose to interpret it in a way that makes this an unsafe world for all of us. People make choices to make the world an unsafe place, not religion. And the second point I would like to make, that just sort of came to me while an earlier speaker was speaking, was, let's say we did get rid of religion. Aside from making the world a so-called less safe place, what are we left with if we get rid of religion? What are we left with? For most of us living in probably the biggest metropolitan city in Europe, there's lots of distractions. We've got the West End just there. We've got Spotify, we've got Netflix, we've got media, we've got a 24-hour news cycle to distract us. What if you don't have that? What if you're in a place in the world where you don't have all of these wonderful distractions? What if the worst thing in your life happens and there's nothing else to cling on to? There's nothing else to distract you? There are billions of people on this planet where what gets them through day after day when the absolute worst happens is religion. And I don't think that is something that makes the world an unsafe place. I think for some people in this world, religion is what makes this world worth living for. Thanks very much.

Thank you, the speaker. And I should just say sorry, it is possible to ask the floor speakers questions. If you raise your hand, if they recognise you, you can ask a question. You can't make long statements. Apologies for interrupting you. The speaker?

Thank you all very much. This is indeed a very interesting topic to debate. People tend to blame the interpretation of the word of God, whatever it be, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and any other. But have anybody asked these people, "Oh, you interpreted it wrong." But they will come back to you and say, "No, I interpreted it right." For example, I'll take it upon the three religions. Deuteronomy 22, it tells you if your son blasphemes against God, you go and stone him. Give me another interpretation of that. Anyway, Christianity, put your head down, ignore it. Then you have Christianity. Now, of course, people will, you know, I have to say, maybe Christ has a better of a lift there. However, he did say himself in Matthew, "I did not come here to bring peace, but I came here to bring a sword, to separate between a father and a son and a mother and her daughter." So try and interpret that. Of course, you will try and interpret it, except for the obvious, that's absolutely fine. In Islam, it is a doctrine to go out, and it is in the Quran, Surah Tawbah, Surah 9, it does say go out and kill and fight those who don't believe in Allah and the end of days, and his books and his prophets, Christians and Jews, until they pay money for their religion. What is it? Humiliated? There is actually a word for it. So again, there is that distance from us from the actual scripture. People will want to interpret it while it is saying something else. So I always tell people to go and read it, read it from cover to cover. I think it was slavery that was mentioned, while indeed Christ Himself did not say anything about slavery. He did not abolish the Old Testament. He said, "I did not come to abolish it. I came to complete it." Hence that was a good excuse to have slaves. Israelites themselves have owned slaves. In Islam, it is also allowed to have slaves. It tells you what to do with the business or scripture interpretation. That's fantastic. That's what the word says. So there is a lot of violence built into it. People tend to go for the cute part of it, for the sweet part of it, but they tend to sweetly and nicely and neatly forget a violent part of it. So go and read it, not from a perspective of a believer, but from a

human construct that can be changed, that can be ignored, all of these bits. The Christians who went to Civil War during America, ignored all those bits and went out and then abolished slavery. Indeed. Now I'm trying to say yes. And here's the thing, besides religion itself, othering others. Because I am a Christian, you're not, but you need to come to me, to my religion. That's what it says. It doesn't give you that individualism as a human being to choose or not. Because here's the thing, if you choose wrongly, it depends, of course, if you choose Christianity or Islam, depends on hell at any point. Great. What a loving religion that these are. Religions that will send you to hell, and it's awful, awful hell. I definitely recommend the Islamic hell to all you Christians. But then, of course, if you are a Muslim, you will be in the Christian hell because you're not believing in the right God. There is already violence. There is a lot of othering in there. It's already involved in it. Now I may not say that it will stop violence, but it will certainly reduce it. All you need to do is to look at the ages of enlightenment, not saying people weren't disbelievers. Maybe they did believe, but they put the religion to the side, and then we were able to know that the Earth is not the centre of our solar system. Thank you.

Thank you, the speaker. And I say the next speaker next.

Good evening, everyone. I think the opposition speech was fabulous, so was the proposition's, but I'm an atheist. An earlier speaker seems to want to establish their position. I'm going to take a different stance. I generally agree with these speakers that, you know, religion is good for moral guidance, norms and values, community, all of that, but also can be misused. You can choose the Old Testament where God was horrific, versus the New Testament, where He's not. So you can weaponise it whichever way you want. But the point that I really want to address the proposition's point is, if we did away with it, would the world be a safer place? The proposition was suggesting, would all of these wars not happen? Would we be living in, you know, a wonderful, utopian paradise? We wouldn't. And I'm glad you brought up the whole geopolitical concept. Not yet. Let me finish my point. So, okay, let's start with modern geopolitics, right? I mean, what's happening, which has been brought up: so Cuba, right? The US is sanctioning Cuba. There's a population of about 12 million there that are literally being starved of energy, without oil. The hospitals aren't functioning. There's no medicine, etc. People are dying. Is that a religious war? It's not, right? That's happening with or without religion. We've got Venezuela, right, which is clearly a stated, admitted resource extraction, right? We've got this whole thing about regime change at the moment, right? What's the phrase they're using? Decapitation strike. Replacing a dictator with a more manageable dictator. So it's done for resource extraction. We've got the Middle East right now. Of course, we can use religion to divide sides and use that as an excuse as to what's happening, but that's really just an excuse. What's happening is resource extraction, hegemony, economic gain, trying to choke, use energy as a choke point to contain peer competitors, like China, etc. So all these things are happening, right, without religion really being involved. You've got, and we can go back to... All of these things are happening, and would the Second World War have not happened, right, if we didn't have religion? I think the argument is that it would have happened again. It was a territorial resource, hegemony, competition between empires, right? So the gist of my point is that religion is misused. It obviously has good sides to it. I was in the Cotswolds a few weeks ago, and I went with some friends into a church, and the feeling of community that you get of the difference between what's right and wrong, you could feel that. And I felt that in all places of worship, in Buddhist temples, in mosques and synagogues in my travelled. I like to go into all domains. So

yeah, there are the good aspects of it, and it is weaponised. But without it, would all of these wars and atrocities not have happened? I think no, they would have happened, and they will continue to happen.

Your time is up. The speaker is first, and then we'll do the next speaker and then the speaker in the back.

You see, my religion is I don't stand in front of the speakers, because that's how we roll at Sylvans and colleagues. In actual fact, I was late today because of a religion. And I'm gonna try and do it from memory. Religion is mostly about beliefs, values, your convictions, and things, you know, an order of doing things, okay? Well, mine was Netflix, right? So I pay my subscription every month. You know, you go to church, you do that, you get variety. I believe in it. It gives me relief. And I'm not going to say necessarily spiritual, but you know what? It keeps me calm, right? But I'm actually going to say there's something I put into the computer, and I wish now I've actually written out what it was I actually put down. But anyway, Christian faith, this is what they say: "Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm," which suggests that wise companions can guide you towards righteousness. Quran, explanation of the verse, okay: "If an unrighteous person comes to you with information, basically, don't believe them." Okay? And then in Buddhism, "Clinging to a religious sense of self can limit growth and hinder the process of letting go." Now I used to be religious. I used to go to church every Sunday with my mum, the local church down the road, and then when we moved, we even took a bus there. And then when I left home, I tried to go to church on a Sunday because I was brought up that way. And I'm in line because you shake hands with the vicar, or the priest, because this is the first time I've been to his church. He's shaking my hand, but he's looking to the next person. And that happened at two Methodist Churches in the area. I never went back to church again on a Sunday, ever again. I even stopped going on Christmas Day because I'd been out the night before, and I used to go because of my mum. And I was always thinking about, "Oh, I had so much fun." And I thought, you know what? I'm sorry, Mum. I know you want me here, but I can't be in this church and be thinking that. And as far as I'm concerned now, I'm an atheist, right? But the other day, I remember I said something, and I went, the Jamaican phrase, "Jesus, peace," right? When something annoys you, right? I just said it. And I have apologised to an earlier speaker because I find, personally, for me, people who are religious are the most hypocritical. That's what I have found with the people who are around me that are religious, to say that they're religious. And I look at things like, and I know this is me going off piste, but I don't care. I look at things like the far right, Tommy Robinson and this country as a country, right? Really think, you know, we are second after some Norway country about how many churches are no longer churches, right? Whether they become banks, nightclubs, or as someone just told me, some of them become mosques. So this country is not religious. Yes? So therefore we cannot understand other people. And when I say this country, I mean the Christian faith, right? And if you also think about the Christian faith, right? Because most times when people think of Christians, they think of everyone, but there's the Catholic Church right now. If that Catholic Church was a business, considering how many scandals and the things that they have done to women and to young children, it should be cancelled, right? So maybe that's why this country is not religious, and therefore we find it very hard maybe to accept other religions. And then maybe the men are jealous of the Muslim faith, because they can have four wives. Isn't it nice that they don't have to worry about cheating and telling the

wife? So, you know, all these things wrong now. Well, by the way, both the two speakers were very good, but I was a bit sad that it seemed to focus mostly around Muslim and Jewish. I mean, the Christian faith did get mentioned. Now, I did hear about slavery being mentioned. A mixed-race person who was brought up in Wales, so basically he was the only black in the village. Okay, he said to me that it's actually quite funny to see black people being so religious. Because the Bible was used in slavery to tell black people that they were useless, right? The Bible was. So therefore, when they took them from their country, spread them all around different places so they couldn't speak the same language, they were only allowed to speak English. If you think about it, religion is used to beat into people, "Oh, this is allowed to be done because the Bible says it," right? But it's about your interpretation of it. So yes, even though I may sound agnostic, there are odd times I might pray, and I'm not going to berate myself for that. But I really don't know. No, we're not safer to have no religions. What we need to do is think about ourselves, because we're not going to change. Whether it's racism, sexism, whatever it is, people are people.

Thank you, the speaker. I saw the next speaker next. We've got a backlog, but we'll get through everyone after the break, probably. The speaker.

So when I first saw the motion, I instinctively, for a very short time, thought for everybody that if there were no religion, there wouldn't be so many wars. It's very easy to think that, and I've heard people say it. But actually, so although I might have started off on this side of the debate, and an earlier speaker made some really fantastic points by the way, I kind of drifted over to the other side of this argument, because I think there are a couple of things we're not taking into account. First of all, the motion says the world would be a safer place without religion. It's talking about now. So yes, there have been times in history when the world might have been safer without religion, because we might not have had the Crusades or some of the religious wars in the Middle Ages, the 30 Years' War, the 80 Years' War, or whatever. But actually, we're talking about now. So if you talk about right now in modern history, actually, there may be a few things on the margins where religion has been either the cause of or part of the cause of a war. I think that you have to take into account that there is a counterbalancing effect on the positive side of religion, of the values that it places on people, and the way in which people conform to those values. So yes, around the edges, you might say there's a religious flavour to the war in Sudan, although actually, I would argue it's more ethnic than actually religious. Or you can say, as an earlier speaker's pointed out, that there are religious aspects to the problems on the West Bank, but actually that is also about ethnicity, and it's about land. I mean, in the Middle East, it's always been about land, right? And in modern history, the First World War, a clash of empires. Second World War, German expansionism, Hitler's megalomania. The Vietnam War, American fear of the spread of communism. The Korean War, the same. The war between Iraq and Iran had elements of religion in it, that's for sure. But I think that fits into my marginal bit I've mentioned. And then the war in Iraq, that wasn't really a religious war, or about weapons of mass destruction, or maybe it was actually about oil. Even the Iran war is not about religion. It's about Iran's export of terror and the existential threat that it poses to Israel. So that's really my main point, is that if you take away religion, you're also taking away the positive aspects that it imprints upon the world in different forms and different religions, which actually potentiate peace. So I think all in all, I would vote that taking away religion will not make the world a safer place.

We had the next speaker up next, and then it's free hands after that.

Thanks, Mr Chair, it's always a pleasure being here. So before I start with what I kind of prepared, a couple of rebuttals on what I heard before, and clearly based on my own personal opinion. First, there's been arguments against and pro selective interpretation of the Bible. I personally believe neither should be used to defend or attack a position. Again, a personal point. I think if one selectively takes certain parts of the Bible, that doesn't make it necessarily less religious. At the same time, taking everything at face value probably is not powerful for the same logic, because there are elements of, say, the Bible that contain things that are not necessarily agreeable too. So the first point is, I think that point should not be used on either side of the argument. The second point that was made is, you know, what will happen if we take religion away? And you know, earlier speakers used this argument. My personal view is that we genuinely don't know, right? But at the same time, we do know what happened in the past in the name of religion. So I personally would rather take the bargain and live with half of the problem with religion gone and then see what happens. Right? I hope common sense will happen. I don't know whether it will, but I know that a lot of common sense has been lacking in the name of religion in the past, and that, for me, is an indicator I would judge my decision on. That said, the proposition tonight speaks about the world and speaks about it being safer. So I tend to agree that religion does wonderful things for a single individual in their pursuit of a purpose, but I want the room to focus on the collective, because that's the proposition tonight, and then safer. What does safer mean? Safer in terms of more secure, so less subject to harm and damage. And I think we've heard tonight arguments that tend to support the fact that religion both divides people, is a force of division, and at the same time unites people, right? Is a force of unity. In a purely theoretical world, if we had only one religion in the world, there probably wouldn't be such a problem, right? But we don't. That leads me to believe that religion per se is not the problem, it is what certain religions tend to teach. Any religion, in my view, that promotes tribal ideas cannot be, per se, a force for common good. And a lot of the biggest monotheistic religions, Islam, Christianity, tend to take the moral high ground, right? And I agree, people can interpret it in different ways and take bits and pieces. But you know, I think it's indisputable that say Christianity or Islam believe that their truth is the only truth. Sorry, but that is their only truth. And on that basis alone, I believe it is a source of division more than it is of unity. But as I said before, right? What if, hypothetically, there was a religion that says you should love everyone? That wouldn't be necessarily bad. So back to my point before, probably it's not religion as a set of beliefs that is the problem, but it's what certain religions actually teach in form of certain beliefs, right? I mean, everything is a set of beliefs. Our society is a set of beliefs. Every single law that we created is just based on pragmatism, which is in itself what the majority believes makes sense. It's an invention. It's a convention. Society is a convention, right? There's no universal power that dictates that you should not kill people. It just comes from the fact that society itself imposed that on themselves as a rule because it just made sense. We don't need religion to tell you that. And this is where I'm going to conclude. If I look at the world today, as an earlier speaker said, I believe that certain beliefs in the biggest religions, Christianity and Islam together account for more than 55% of the population worldwide, do contain some form of moral high ground in their dogmas. They can be interpreted or they cannot, but they do. And on that basis, I believe that, yes, in current society, we would be safer without religion, as it stands today.

Nice to meet you all. I have never done this before, and my English is not the best. So have some mercy on me. But I recognise some logical questions here that I would address to you. And I've heard from now a lot of arguments here for back and forth about safer with religion or without religion. And the interesting one for me was, so for context, I don't believe in any god. There will be no day in my life I would believe in anything, right? But to address the first one, what we heard a lot here is, without religion, would we not lose something? And you can turn this around. The argument we heard before is we can live without religion, as if we cannot live without religion, we would lose something. With religion, there's something bad. You can be happy without religion. You can believe in skateboarding, punk music, a lot of other values, philosophy, belief systems, who exist beside religion. This is not an argument, because this is just wrong from itself. And the other one, what was interesting for me was, yeah, I mean, beside this, we had a long history of fighting against religion, right? It's pretty impressive how we have arguments here for suppressing half of humanity because they're women, and find it hard to get rid of this. And now we hear something, what we can lose? And I don't think so. But on the other one is the problem of religion. Beside a lot of other things, if you go to war for, let's say, land or whatever, there is an argument you can claim, right? We get more land. We get a bigger country. We make more whatever, oil. But fighting for religion is just a belief system in itself. It doesn't bring you any more than just believing in something, right? It doesn't help you to satisfy you more. You can believe in the other religion too. You may be satisfied even more. So this has no logic in it, right? So there's something that doesn't make sense.

For my notes, as an earlier speaker and several of the other speakers have indicated, wars are about land, resources and power. Well, if those wars are the wars you're thinking of, if they're the Crusades, if it's Zionism, if it's slavery, and even the sad narrative of child abuse by priests, it's always about resources, power, land. Religion is used by cynical rulers to mobilise their citizens, their people, to fight in wars that hold no value for those citizens or people and are actually antithetical to the ethical beliefs of those religions which are being used to mobilise people. The speaker, thank you very much for your contribution, but I believe that you fall into the trap of characterising the worst excesses of cynical rulers as somehow representing the essence of the views of a people of that same actual faith. You neglected to look at the good things. And other people have mentioned these things: education, the university system invented by religious people in this country, hospitals and medicine as I understand it started by Ibn Sina, an Islamic medic. The end of slavery in the UK has already been mentioned. To an earlier speaker, your point regarding that quote from Matthew, I can't speak to Zionist theology, I can't speak to Islamic theology, but the sword that is mentioned there in Matthew 10, Jesus says, "I come not to bring peace, but a sword." That sword is the Sword of Truth, which separates good from evil. We all wish for evil to be gone and for there to be only good, and Jesus is the person who brings that sword, according to those teachings. Somebody also talked about hell and how terrible Hell was. The point of Hell is, that's where the evil people go, so that they can no longer affect the good people. And from my perspective, that sounds like a really good thing. But what about lack of religion? What would it be like if there was no religion? No religion means no ethical barriers to murder, genocide, child abuse, whatever else you want to think of that all the world religions teach against. We've seen what that looks like. We've seen it in the Soviet Union. We've seen it in the Cultural Revolution in China. We've seen it with the Khmer Rouge. Once the people ruling a country have no religion and suppress religion, there is

no ethical barrier to mass murder, genocide, doing whatever they want. If you're sitting here thinking, "Oh, well, actually, you know, I'm a humanist, this is all fine." You need to understand that humanism is a sect of Christianity and could not exist without it. Somehow, humanists get exactly the same ethical principles as Christianity, but we don't do the god bit because, you know, science or something. Without religion, our ethics become self-determined. There is nothing to prevent us choosing an ethics which is just selfish. Many of you may have come across Dawkins's book *The Selfish Gene*, where he proposes that survival of the genes is what drives everybody and everything. And without any kind of religious thing to temper that, survival is what matters. Survival of the fittest. Might becomes right. And as I said, we saw it in the Soviet Union. We've seen it in China. We've seen it in the Khmer Rouge. Lack of religion makes everybody unsafe, because the most ruthless people will control everything.

Hello everyone. First time here. I would like to touch on a topic only briefly mentioned by a couple of people here. There seems to be a common sentiment that, without religion, what is there? What do we base our moral compass on? Well, in part, I can answer that. I was raised in a Muslim household, and since when I was much younger, I left that religion, in part because I viewed the teachings in the Quran personally and the Hadith to be deeply immoral to my senses. I left because I sat and contemplated. I questioned what was right and what was wrong. Religion would not allow me to do so on my own. Now I'm certainly no angel, but I like to think I lead a decent, honourable life without any holy books telling me what. Now, what is the problem I find? For any devout Christian or Muslim or Jew or any other religious person, by definition, you cannot contest any problematic sections of your religion. Religion claims a monopoly on morality, and it cannot be argued with, because a religious text stems from a supposed divine authority, and that can't be argued against. And belief that cannot be questioned or reasoned with is dangerous. At best, it leads to questionable opinions. At worst, it leads to unspeakable violence and suffering.

I'll make this quite quick, but it's been amazing listening to both speakers. I agree that they've been amazing, and so many good comments that I've enjoyed listening to from the floor. And when I looked up the word religion, it does say that it has rituals and has, kind of, can't remember the other word right now, but no, it wasn't doctrine. But anyway, it's basically saying that it has a sort of a method or a way about it. And I really like what you were just saying then, but ironically, it's kind of interesting that having that shelter, if you like, or that type of institution, is providing people with permission, perhaps, to reflect and become more spiritual and to have a higher thinking, or reach for a higher thinking. Now, it's easy for us to say that that's been dictated to you, but the actual act of worship and the actual act of prayer is reaching towards something that is more intellectual than what is around us in our everyday lives. And to me, that's something that's an intellectual pursuit. Now we might argue, and I'd argue as well with many things that might not appeal to me about a religious doctrine, and then I might choose to leave that umbrella. But I will say that I would never want it destroyed, because I think that for so many good reasons, it's important to have them, and that if we can be inspired to be more intellectual and to discuss things, then I think we're going to come out with some pretty good wisdom. For example, what Pope Leo has just said to Trump has challenged him on a very simple level. But that's the wonderful thing about prayer, spirituality, when you just take each day by day and you have to make a job of it, and it's not easy. But you're not seeking ego or power, but you're trying to maybe be inspired by some of those deities. Not deities, but the

imitation of man and every different religion right around the world, Japan, China, all the gods that originated through... not all of them, because Allah didn't, but you know what I'm saying anyway. Thank you.

Hello, everybody. I would be speaking this, this is my belief, and being on this matter, that I think if you discontinue religion, I don't think one would be faithful inherently. Also, I think that disruption can make it much more unsafe. And as I see, this issue is religion has been part of humanity for a very long time, and humans have neurobiological needs, and we won't like supposed to be like this or any other way for that matter. It's just an epistemic process that happens to be like this. The thing is, because now religion is a big part of that psycho-sociological infrastructure which exists in the society, it's going to be really disruptive to break it, which could lead to chaos. The majority of the world, even as of today, takes religion really seriously. It gives them faith, gives them hope. And why it does is because you know that there are hormones in your body. There is an amygdala, which is your limbic brain, and which is really configured to survive any challenge. And one core feature which animals have is to look for fat, and because of intelligence, we could misappropriate. So what I think is all of these problems, they are not inherently good or bad, or in terms of context, if you define it, so yes, it is right, like if you put it from an ethical lens or moral lens, yes, they are. But if we look at a layer much more unbounded, what I think is there is a lot of noise, which just comes from misappropriation of the underlying reasons of your emotions. Could be hormones, could be your alertness like this. Why did crusades happen? Or why did any conflict in history, for that matter, happen? Is that there was a group and there was another group, and both of the groups called the other group as the enemy. And this is a very simple semantic structure, but mostly it's because you have misappropriated your feelings. As a society, you feel a threat, and then you couldn't pinpoint where the threat is coming from, so it could be pinpointed to anything, right? And then you will try to make sense of it, because as humans, we don't like uncertainty. But there is a lot of uncertainty, and if you can't make a sense of it, you put narratives on it. That's why we have stories. We have mythologies, and we have so many things. So if we just break religion as of right now today, a lot of people will not have anything to do to make sense of how they are dealing with this sensitivity. What will that lead to? I can't read it. So what I think, if we see humanity as a big system, which it is, and there is a lot of incoherence because of these errors, focus on the errors, not on the people, not what people believe in, and try to align them with something which is important and beneficial for the common of humanity. That could be a better way to do it. Thank you.

Hi everyone. So I think there's been lots of interesting points tonight, and each religion has a lot of positive and negative things about it, and it's very complex, and it's not as straightforward as just religion is good or bad. I do tend to think that some religions, if not all of them, can be... one of their issues is like they're not necessarily very inclusive and accepting of the people who aren't followers of that particular religion. And, you know, it's sort of teaching this is a set way of doing things, with not particularly open-mindedness, and evolution isn't particularly built into religion, because they're institutions of sometimes thousands of years old, and they don't really necessarily evolve with the times. However, there are definitely some really good, positive things about some of them. Particularly, I recently started to get into Buddhism. I'm very much in the beginning stages, but what I like about it is it teaches about spreading loving-kindness to all beings like humans and animals on this earth, and it's not so indoctrinated. I'm sure there are

some negative things about it, which I will come to learn along the way, which I will probably just choose to ignore. Because actually, you can take the good bits and you can leave the bad bits. That's your choice. But I think in terms of the question, will it make the world a safer place if we get rid of it? Well, we can't get rid of it, because to get rid of it would be very hypocritical. It's like we're advocating for democracy in this world, and the freedom of expression and belief, and then you're saying, "No, you can't have religion." Well, religion is a form of expression and belief, so by getting rid of it, you're denying people that freedom. So that's hypocritical. And then I think if you do get rid of it, some points have been mentioned earlier on today that there'll be just a massive revolt from billions of people across the world, which is going to make the world way more dangerous. So it's going to have the opposite effect. And then if you also get rid of it, you're going to lose so much history, so much culture that's connected to literature and architecture and stories and the fabric of the culture and history of loads and loads of different civilisations. So you can't just wipe out history. So I think we need to learn to live more harmoniously with religion and be more open-minded to everyone's beliefs and viewpoints. I still can't make up my mind, so it'll be interesting to hear some more floor contributions and the closing arguments. But there are a couple of points that I would like to discuss or address. I think that was coming from one of the gentlemen here talking about what would you do in the world without religion, right? And it sounded like he painted the picture that we are going to be feeling such a meaningless life that there isn't anything else. Well, news for you, I've always been my life, you know, religion hasn't been a part of it, and I think I live a pretty meaningful life, and without religion, I still believe that I live a very moral life. So that's the question, that without religion, people still can live a very meaningful life, because there are so many other things. You know, books and philosophy and friends, you know, people you love. There's so many other things to keep us busy. And so that was one point. The second point that I wanted to bring up is actually going back to the motion itself. When we define safer, what is a safer life, right? And I think we need to think about being safer is number one, the risk of harms is less and it's less destruction, but also it is more stable. Stability is a very important part of it, and what gives us stability in this society today? I think religion has a lot of contribution to it, because it provides a network of support. People mentioned about the religious teaching that teaches you morality. I agree, but without religion, you still get morality. Now, you guys have heard of the guy Confucius, it's where I learn all my morality that has nothing to do with religion. So, just for your information, it doesn't have to come from religion, but I do look at organised religion, how it provides us with a support network, and it keeps communities together. When you have that sense of community, the sense of belonging, it does contribute something to our well-being. And so I was thinking with that, I think religion has done a lot of good. And by the way, many surveys have shown that people with religious faith are a little bit happier than people without. Just a little bit. But it does provide a little bit of happiness. So that's why I am in a quandary right now. One more point. It was an earlier speaker, I really liked what you said at the end, that religion provides the dogma, dogmatic teaching that might not be beneficial to us. And so I was going back and forth, and I said, which way should I vote? So I'm going to rely on the rest of the contributors and the closing arguments. They will help me make up my mind. As stated previously, I thought the two main speeches were excellent. Now, a crucial argument for the opposition was the notion that, well, religious people may do bad things, but the religion is a symptom rather than the cause of this badness. Extremists exist. Some people adopt

religion as the coat that cloaks and justifies the extremism. But if you got rid of religion, then there is not fewer extremism. Rather, they will don new coats to cloak and justify their actions. I disagree with this, because the reason that religion breeds extremism, now we all have ideologies, but ideologies are not the same. And ideologies change individuals. Religion changes individuals. And therefore it's important to consider, well, what is religion? In my mind, ultimately, it is that there are truths, sacred, ultimate truths, that are given by a God. Jesus told us how to live. There are 10 Commandments written in stone. And with this, I like to take a comparison between Jesus and Socrates, of which there are quite a lot of comparisons. They were both roaming thinkers, both questioned established moral norms, had followers and ultimately died due to their actions, due to the actions of secular authorities. Now one of them is not thought to be the Son of God. He's just some Greek. And therefore it's quite easy to discuss the ideas of Socrates, to challenge them, to poke at its weaknesses. However, the other is supposedly the Son of God, which makes it just quite a bit harder to say that Jesus is wrong. And I think this is the crucial part about religion. If you think what you're doing is justified and directed by God, you yourselves do not need to consider the moral worth of your actions. It has been determined for you by something that is supreme. Not only do you not need to consider for yourself what you are doing, you don't need to consider what the other person might think, because God itself has decided it. This, fundamentally, is a dangerous mindset that we'll be safer to do without. Humans are not means. Religion treats humans as means to God's ends, rather than ends in themselves. Now, at various points, people have made comparisons, saying, "Ah, well, if you didn't have religion, what would you have? Maybe you'd have the Soviet Union. And that would be terrible." Well, it's true. If this debate was, "Would the world be safer without Leninism," then I would be voting for saying that would be true, but that's not the debate. And people said, "Well, people kill each other for any such reasons, they'll find other ones." Rather, let me put forward a comparison that I think would lead us to safer and more fulfilling lives, and that is if we governed ourselves entirely through our world system, through liberal ideology and democracy. Now, what do I mean by this? Hear me out. Liberalism means that we each have individual rights. In the UK, this is enshrined by the European Convention of Human Rights, of which Article Two says we have the absolute right to life. This does not treat human life as a means to God. It is an end in itself. Likewise, we have other rights, such as the freedom of expression and the right to have property. Now these rights are prescribed. They are not absolute. Rather, they have to be balanced against other competing interests. Now, how do we do that? Well, we discuss, we debate, we make laws, and that goes on to my final point of democracy. If you don't really like a law that is on the statute books, we can change it, and we change it through debate and discussion as to what we think is good and bad. This is fundamentally different from religion, because you cannot amend the Bible. You can't amend what Jesus said. Therefore, I argue that we would be safer and more prosperous under a secular, liberal society than a religious society.

Your Eminence, fellow Sylvans, let me first acknowledge that this has been one of the best debates in history. I was most impressed with the speaker's account. So impressed that I almost thought he must have been there at the time. I want the carbon dating to prove it. I don't want to get into a theological seminar, because I think the motion is about authority and control, as some people have indicated. And I want to talk about modern-day religions. For example, football, psychotherapy, politics and the worst of all, economics. So are these religions? They

have their gurus. They have their set formulas, and they no doubt have their contribution in the inequality of our world today, with a third of the world starving, and yet some people who live not far from here have not got just one home or two homes, but many homes. And my suggestion is, when he goes to the USA, he claims refugee status, no name, no back room. Of course, he is the supreme governor of the Church of England, and they're in control. So that's one aspect, the control. Now, an earlier speaker made some points about dogma and what have you. He's been going to the wrong church. He should come and hear the right preacher, which is on a Sunday morning at Shepherd's Bush Unitarian Church. So a shameless plug for everybody else's. So you get humour, and I know God's got a sense of humour because I look in the mirror now. I can also prove that you can interpret the scriptures. For example, somebody mentioned Moses. He was the first pharmacist. Of course, he came down with the tablets, motorbikes. He came down on a Triumph. And of course, the first computer is from Genesis, because he gave Adam an Apple. So you can prove that you can manipulate any scripture, just as you can manipulate Shakespeare or any other literature, because what is the common denominator? Human beings. Now, I could get theological or biblical, but I'm not going to. I think it's more important to actually meet the issue head-on tonight. There's a revolution happened here today. Never been known before. I'm going to advocate with all my heart, with all my might, that you oppose the motion and you oppose it overwhelmingly, with no abstentions.

Well, Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, my problem is, will no religion make any difference? And can you ever get to a situation in which there is no religion? I shall pick up the last speaker, who was indicating there may be a number of activities that could be and should be viewed as religious behaviour. I've probably been spending the last dozen years looking at that problem. I don't know that I'll get very far in three minutes, but we'll have a shot. It's not normally understood that the Nazis were very religious. When they persuaded General Rommel to commit suicide, they agreed that his wife would be looked after and so on. And after he committed the act, they had a church service, and the head of the SS and the most evil man in the world, I would have thought, gave an annuity to Rommel's wife. Well, their religious behaviour didn't tone down their activities. I think that regime is one of the most evil that the world has produced. On the other hand, we have the Roman context. Probably the Romans were worse than the Nazis. If they got a province interested, people being uppity in it, they sent in the legions, a few legions anyway, and they just exterminated everyone, men, women, children, animals and then pulled out. Isn't that actually worse than what the Nazis did? The Romans have the best legal system that's probably ever been created, but that didn't do any good. Now, ladies and gentlemen, we haven't actually had a side remark, or we probably have had the side remark from our head of state, haven't we? William the Conqueror did exactly the same thing to parts of the country that were resisting his rule. He brought in mercenary troops from Europe and did exactly what the Romans did, to slaughter everything in that area. So we do have a head of state who is descended from what would be basically a war criminal. He, of course, would also be a Christian. It didn't make any difference. I think we have to look what would happen if you managed to subjugate religion and get rid of it. But can you? I have been spending the last dozen years looking at parts of my degree course. One was a degree in physics, of which a lot I disagreed with. But since I was too busy taking part in other activities in the university that eventually got me, not very long afterwards, working in Fleet Street, when it really was Fleet Street, I didn't really worry too much. But I didn't agree with something. I've now

gone back to have a look at it. And the problem is that subject is not sitting only on this rocky planet. It goes everywhere, out into space. And I've come to the conclusion that what has happened in astrophysics is largely religious behaviour. If you look at what used to be a very important encyclopedia, the Encyclopedia Britannica, and you put in heresy, you won't get things about putting Christians on bonfires, which, of course, a lot happened in Christian history, which is hardly really very favourable for them. But you will find that you get things about heresy in an academic subject. So maybe the whole of knowledge is a religious behaviour everywhere. And I'm not sure you can get rid of religion and make any difference.

So the motion is, the world would be safer without religion. Now I want to reword that and say I think the world would be safer without class and economic warfare. The thing is, the ruling elite use religion and sectarianism to divide and rule the population. I'll give you an example. After the First World War, when the British Empire drew the lines of Iraq, they created a country deliberately that had Shia, Sunni and Kurdish regions, deliberately to divide and rule the population so that they could actually exploit the natural resources. Other things, for example, the British Empire did after the partition of India and Pakistan. They deliberately created Pakistan so that they could use that as a proxy to prevent Stalin from getting access to the oil in the Gulf region. Certain things that are being actually said, for example, sometimes it's mentioned the lack of social order, you know, sort of lack of crime and deprivation, "Oh, this is all because people are not going to church." I would disagree with that. I think this is just generally economic decline. It's because more people are in poverty, there's more homelessness, the whole cost of living crisis etc. I think that is a large part of it. Another thing that I've heard quite a lot is that the IRA is a Catholic organisation. I would disagree with that. This is the Irish Republican Army. They don't mention Catholicism at all. It's a political ideology. It's about anti-monarchism and Irish nationalism. Islamist extremism, which is separate from Islam. So you've got Shia, which is Iran and their proxies, or Sunni, which is the likes of ISIS and so forth. They are actually the unintentional byproduct of the US in their fight against communism during the Cold War. And the thing is, a lot of religion actually has created good, you know, it creates community cohesion, helping others. In Sikhism, for example, there's something called sewa, which is about volunteering and helping other people. Eastern philosophies, for example, can promote things like meditation, well-being, karma, that sort of thing. So religion has actually created some good as well. So I'm actually going to vote against the motion on this one. Thank you.

Right, so I'll do what I usually do, which is remind people what the motion is. And the motion is, the world would be a safer place without religion. A lot of people stood up and said, you know, wars, and there've been a lot of religious wars. Lots of people have died. Hundreds of thousands of people have died. Probably millions of people have died. Now we can have some philosophical argument about whether or not the religious flag was really the flag that they were fighting under, and it was something underneath. But really, if that was the case, then you'd have potentially some of the Islamic people fighting with the Christian people, yeah, but they tend to just sit under a particular banner. Now, I'm an atheist. I was born a Catholic, but there are 4,000 odd religions in the world. So for all you religious people out here, I just want you to believe in one less God than I do. Yeah, just one less God. We have a situation where we've spoken about war, but we haven't spoken about the abuse the people who are in authority in religions have undertaken against small children. That's what they do. Yeah, they get into a

position of power and they abuse small children. So let me try to give you some information. Okay, for instance, in France, over the last 70 years, 330,000 children were the victims of sexual abuse by the Catholic Church. In the United States, between 2004 and 2023 the church has spent more than 5 million pounds on cases involving sexual abuse by the clergy. In Australia, a Royal Commission found that 7% of Catholic priests had been accused of abusing children between 1950 and 2010. Ireland estimates victims numbered nearly 15,000 between 1970 and 1990 alone. In Islamic institutions, a BBC investigation uncovered over 400 allegations of physical abuse at madrassas over just a three-year period, with experts suggesting that these represent a fraction of actual incidents. And the problem extends not only to that location, but across Bangladesh, India, Turkey and Indonesia. And the issue with it is that when these children try to speak up, they're told to be quiet because it gives Islam a bad name. That is disgusting. That is disgusting. And if you do not believe that the world would be a safer place without religion, then think about those children when you vote against the motion. Thank you. Thank you. I just want to remind all of you that maybe, in my opinion, the most dangerous from the religions is indoctrination in child ages. Because since that time, religion stops critical thinking. All of you can see here, it's science. We get everything from science. Maybe you know, I am sure that you know that only 5% which we can see now is the mass of the universe. 95% is dark matter and dark energy. We don't know nothing about it. We need to research it. We need to be interested in it. We need to do efforts to understand what is it. Lazy brain, lazy people say, "Oh yeah, this is a God." And stop thinking. This is the main danger from religion. And all other influence, yes, maybe is some kind of result that everybody stops thinking. Thank you. We have secular ethics. It's enough.

I'm not an expert on this topic. I swayed left and right, backwards and forwards, but I kind of came back to my banking, economical background. The Catholic Church seems to support removing money from their supporters, and is probably the richest single institution on the globe. Fight poverty, fight the way children have been treated. That resonates with me completely. Removing the Catholic Church as an example of removing religion frees up vast amounts of wealth to support looking after the people who need some help. So for me at the moment, that is my strongest belief of which way I'm going to vote: support the people who can't help themselves. That would happen by removing religion. I have researched the work the church is doing, but I still go back to the tenet that the Catholic Church is the richest institution in the world. Maybe Bezos is trying to beat them at the moment. So I'm going for the simple view from the capitalistic perspective: they have a vast, vast wealth they are yet to spend.

Is it the speaker who reminded me? The speaker. I was also brought up as a Catholic. There were nine of us, and my parents diligently made sure we did our homework to go to grammar school, and they chose the Catholic schools, until one of my brothers was at a Catholic boarding school, until the police came and asked my brother what was going on in the dormitory, and then my parents started sending us to secular schools. When I went to university, one of the subjects I studied was sociology, and the main thing I remember was about group pressure. Most people want to do what people in their group are advocating, and that's why othering happens, because you want to be in your own group, and you'll do anything to oppose the other people. And that's what causes racism and religious disputes. And look at what's going on, disputes between the Israelis who are in the country that belongs to them, even though it actually belongs to the other people and that were already living there. And yeah, of course,

religion is dangerous. If they didn't have this belief, they wouldn't be trying to destroy all the other people.

I just want to say thank you to everyone for your really thoughtful and interesting points. It's definitely been my favourite debate. Sometimes we come definitely... So let me return briefly to the central question. Would the world be a safer place without religion? The opposition's case is that it would not, because removing religion would not remove the underlying drivers of harm. Throughout this debate, we have argued that those causes—competition for power, fear, grievance and identity—are features of human society itself. They do not depend on religion, and they do not disappear in its absence. I have made three points. First, that religion is not the root of power. It is just one of several tools through which power can be exercised. Where individuals use religion to justify authority or mobilise others, they are typically motivated by something more fundamental: the pursuit of influence, control or security. We see similar dynamics in modern political movements where figures such as Trump and Viktor Orbán have mobilised support through identity and grievance, rather than relying centrally on religion. I argue again that if religion were removed, these dynamics would remain. The mechanism does not disappear. It adapts. My second argument was that extremism is not unique to religion. The concern is often framed in terms of absolute belief, belief that resists compromise. But that tendency is not confined to religion. It appears in political ideologies, conspiracy movements and other forms of radicalisation. Individuals inclined towards certainty and absolutism will find something to attach themselves to. My third argument is that religion can play a role in enabling large-scale social cohesion. It provides shared values and a sense of belonging that can extend across national and cultural boundaries. Without it, there is a risk that identity becomes more fragmented, more localised and more narrow. A more fragmented world is obviously not a safer one. In fact, it may be more prone to misunderstanding and conflict. I'd like to respond to just a few of the points heard earlier today. First, what the world would be like without religion. I think it would be a less human world. We are social animals. We tell stories, we learn from one another and we build communities. This is how we've evolved. Religion is a byproduct of this, and it seems impossible to me to conceive of a world without it entirely, at least without religious belief in the sense that we make communities from it. The second point that I'd like to address is the claim that religion creates in-groups and out-groups. Humans naturally form groups, regardless of religion. Removing religion likely shifts division to race, nation, class and in fact, religion can help cross these other more naturally occurring boundaries because religion can draw together people from different backgrounds into the same group. My third point is that there's a claim that religion gives people the superior moral complex, the belief that their views are better, supremely justified and therefore should be spread to educate the less enlightened world. Whilst there's some truth to this point historically, for example, in Christian missionary activity, this tendency is not unique to religion. We see similar behaviour in secular ideologies and political systems, where groups seek to export their values or reshape others in their own image. For example, in Western liberal interventionism, in many cases, religion was just one vehicle for broader power structures. Removing religion would not remove the underlying impulse that drives this. The fourth and final point I'd like to address is the claim that religion is uniquely irrational or immune to criticism, that religious belief resists evidence and makes compromising harder. I'd like to respond by saying that the problem isn't belief without evidence, it's belief and certainty in being right without challenge, an issue which isn't really unique to religion. It's an

issue of dogmatism. Many religious individuals do engage in compromising pluralism, as I discussed earlier. It's mainly an issue relating to literal interpretations of religious texts and ideals, which in modern day, if you think about it proportionally, doesn't include the majority of religious belief, as I'd like to contend. So my position has not been that religion is without fault. It is plainly not. Rather, the proposition that the world would be a safer place without religion misidentifies the cause of the problem. Religion is one expression of deeper dynamics within human societies. If those dynamics remain, and there is little reason to think that they would not, then removing religion does not resolve the issue. It simply displaces it. The question is not whether religion can contribute towards harm. It is whether its absence would make the world safer. I say that it would not. Thank you.

Mr President, fellow Sylvans, the gentleman I forget where gave an example of organisations that have been produced through Christianity which were beneficial, like libraries and hospitals and so on and so forth. Well, he might like to give a thought to the Magdalene laundries in Ireland, where unmarried mothers were sent, and how compassion so easily became self-righteous cruelty. And even in this country there's an investigation going on right now about Church of England homes for unmarried mothers, where their babies were taken away for adoption in such a self-righteous way that it became incredibly cruel. And there have been people on television recently. Now that is an example of Christianity where it becomes distorted. The message of Christianity becomes distorted, becomes self-righteous cruelty. And the gentleman over there talks about land being the important thing in wars. Why do you think the Zionists had to go to Palestine to create the State of Israel? They were offered Uganda. They were offered South America, but no, it had to be Palestine, because Solomon built a temple on Temple Mount to hold the Ark of the Covenant. And that temple was destroyed in 587 BC by the Babylonians. And then the second temple was built, and that was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, and the ruins of that are the most holy site for the Jews of today, the Western Wall. That is why they had to go to Palestine. And why do you think the Muslims are so uppity about it? They couldn't care less about the people who live there, the Palestinians. They care about their holy sites, the Dome of the Rock, which is also on Temple Mount, which is from where Muhammad ascended to heaven to talk to God and the angels. And they care about the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which is a few hundred yards away, which is where Muhammad came during the night journey and prayed with Moses and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That's why it's so valuable, that particular bit of land. That's why it's all happening there. And 500 yards away, you've got the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where Jesus was crucified. Here you can see the holes where the crosses were, and over here is the Aedicule, where you can see where his body was laid. That's why it's so important. So it's not about land, it's about religion. And one thing, God made a covenant with the Jews. It's in the book of Isaiah, chapter 42, to be a light unto the nations. And David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, referred to it in his writings that Israel would be a moral and social beacon to the whole world. And by that, in his view, it should implement the vision of the prophets. And Netanyahu, Israel's current prime minister, in 2017 to the UN, quoted the book of Isaiah again. "The State of Israel is a light unto the nations, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth." Does modern-day Israel seem to be a light unto the nations to you? That is how religion gets corrupted. So to say that the world would be a safer place without religion, there's a very good case that we'd have none of this nonsense in the Middle East if we didn't have religion, because it all comes down to Jerusalem and what

happened there thousands of years ago. And why do you think the United States supports Israel through thick and thin? And I'm talking about Christians now, Christian Zionists. Christian Zionists, because they believe, as I explained before, they believe that the Bible is infallible, that the more Jews going to Israel, the sooner the second coming of Christ will happen. And that's what they want to happen. And when the second coming of Christ happens, we'll have an Armageddon, a great big battle, and the Christians will be raised up in Rapture, and everybody else, including Muslims and Jews, will go to hell. That's what they believe. And if you don't believe me, as I say, listen to John Hagee, because he said the most extraordinary thing in one of his speeches. He said, "How does God get all the Jews to go to Israel? He sends a hunter," and he did this with his rifle, and he said, "Hitler was a hunter." That's the sort of thing that you get from Christian evangelists or Christian Zionists, and they're on television in the United States, and they influence American foreign policy. And this is why America supports Israel, through thick and thin, because the evangelical Christians or Christian Zionists are President Trump's base supporters. They'll support him through thick and thin, because he supports Israel, provides it with money, provides it with arms and all the rest of it. So that comes down to religion, their belief of religion in what should happen, in what's going to happen. I mean, for heaven's sake, Armageddon, second coming of Christ. But they believe it because they take quotations from the Bible and interpret them in particular ways. And that is why religion becomes it distorts the original message. It all gets gobbled up into some sort of nonsense. Religion, basically, is about power. It's not about salvation. That's personal. Organised religion is about power. It's about influence over people's lives. And it's a conduit. It becomes a conduit for extremism, and it relies on... what was the phrase? Divine authority. Oh yes, it claims divine authority, whether that exists or not, but that's what religion claims: divine authority. I mean, it's a confidence trick. It really is. We'd be better off without it.

Thank you very much to our main speakers. Apologies for getting the applause short, they both absolutely deserved it, both of them, and for everyone who contributed to the debate. This is a classic Sylvans main debate with great depth. We do have to do a vote now and decide which way the house stands. So let me reread the motion if I can dig it up: The world would be a safer place without religion. This was a razor-thin result. By a vote of 15 in favour, 18 opposed and no abstentions, the motion has not carried.