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<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/04/160422-atheism-agnostic-secular-nones-rising-religion.html>

FEATURE

# The World's Newest Major Religion: No Religion

As secularism grows, atheists and agnostics are trying to expand and diversify their ranks.

More people than ever before are identifying as atheist, agnostic, or otherwise nonreligious, with potentially world-changing effects.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS BERGIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

By **Gabe Bullard**

PUBLISHED APRIL 22, 2016

You don't usually think of churches as going out of business, but it happens. In March, driven by parishioner deaths and lack of interest, the U.K. Mennonites held their last collective service.

It might seem easy to predict that plain-dressing Anabaptists—who follow a faith related to the Amish—would become irrelevant in the age of smartphones, but this is part of a larger trend. Around the world, when asked about their feelings on religion, more and more people are responding with a *meh*.

The religiously unaffiliated, called "nones," are growing significantly. They're the second largest religious group in North America and most of Europe. In the United States, nones make up almost a quarter of the population. In the past decade, U.S. nones have overtaken Catholics, mainline protestants, and all followers of non-Christian faiths.

A lack of religious affiliation has profound effects on how people think about death, how they teach their kids, and even how they vote. (Watch *The Story of God With Morgan Freeman* for more about how different religions understand God and creation.)

There have long been predictions that religion would fade from relevancy as the world modernizes, but all the recent surveys are finding that it's happening startlingly fast. France will have a majority secular population soon. So will the Netherlands and New Zealand. The United Kingdom and Australia will soon lose Christian majorities. Religion is rapidly becoming less important than it's ever been, even to people who live in countries where faith

has affected everything from rulers to borders to architecture.

But nones aren't inheriting the Earth just yet. In many parts of the world—sub-Saharan Africa in particular—religion is growing so fast that nones' share of the global population will actually shrink in 25 years as the world turns into what one researcher has described as “the secularizing West and the rapidly growing rest.” (The other highly secular part of the world is China, where the Cultural Revolution tamped down religion for decades, while in some former Communist countries, religion is on the increase.)

And even in the secularizing West, the rash of “religious freedom bills”—which essentially decriminalize discrimination—are the latest front in a faith-tinged culture war in the United States that shows no signs of abetting anytime soon.

Within the ranks of the unaffiliated, divisions run deep. Some are avowed atheists. Others are agnostic. And many more simply don't care to state a preference. Organized around skepticism toward organizations and united by a common belief that they do not believe, nones as a group are just as internally complex as many religions. And as with religions, these internal contradictions could keep new followers away.

## **Millennials to God: No Thanks**

If the world is at a religious precipice, then we've been moving slowly toward it for decades. Fifty years ago, *Time* asked in a famous headline, “Is God Dead?” The magazine wondered whether religion was relevant to modern life in the post-atomic age when communism was spreading and science was explaining more about our natural world than ever before.

We're still asking the same question. But the response isn't limited to yes or no. A chunk of the population born after the article was printed may

respond to the provocative question with, “God who?” In Europe and North America, the unaffiliated tend to be several years younger than the population average. And 11 percent of Americans born after 1970 were raised in secular homes.

Scientific advancement isn't just making people question God, it's also connecting those who question. It's easy to find atheist and agnostic discussion groups online, even if you come from a religious family or community. And anyone who wants the companionship that might otherwise come from church can attend a secular Sunday Assembly or one of a plethora of Meetups for humanists, atheists, agnostics, or skeptics.

The groups behind the web forums and meetings do more than give skeptics witty rejoinders for religious relatives who pressure them to go to church—they let budding agnostics know they aren't alone.

But it's not easy to unite people around not believing in something. “Organizing atheists is like herding cats,” says Stephanie Guttormson, the operations director of the Richard Dawkins Foundation, which is merging with the Center for Inquiry. “But lots of cats have found their way into the 'meowry.'”

*The Story of God* with Morgan Freeman, continues Sunday, April 24, at 9/8c, and will take viewers on a trip around the world to explore different cultures and religions on the ultimate quest to uncover the meaning of life, God, and all the questions in between.

Guttormson says the goal of her group is to organize itself out of existence. They want to normalize atheism to a point where it's so common

that atheists no longer need a group to tell them it's okay not to believe, or to defend their morals in the face of religious lawmakers.

But it's not there yet.

## **Atheism's Diversity Problem**

The Center for Inquiry in Washington, D.C., hosts a regular happy hour called Drinking Sceptically. On a Wednesday in late March, about a dozen people showed up to faithlessly imbibe, and all but one were white.

“Most of the groups I've seen have been predominantly white, but I'm not sure what to attribute that to,” says Kevin Douglas, the lone African-American drinker, shrugging at the demographics. He came from a religious family in New York and struggled internally with his skepticism until shortly after college. The only time he mentions having difficulty with others accepting his atheism was when he worked in Dallas, Texas, and race, he says, had little to do with it.

But more typically, “there is pressure from our [African-American] community,” says Mandisa Thomas, the founder and president of the Atlanta-based Black Nonbelievers, Inc. This pressure stems from the place religion—Christianity in particular—holds in African-American history.

In the abolition movement churches “became a support system for blacks. It became almost the end-all be-all for the black community for a number of years,” Thomas says, adding that the Civil Rights movement was dominated—she says “hijacked”—by religious leaders.

“If you either reject or identify as a nonbeliever, you're seen as betraying your race,” she says.

Thomas is an outlier among nonbelievers for another reason. She's a woman.

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There’s some evidence that official state religions drive people away from faith entirely, which could help explain why the U.S. is more religious than most Western nations that technically have a state religion, even if it is rarely observed. The U.S. is also home to a number of homegrown churches—Scientology, Mormonism—that might scoop up those who are disenchanted with older faiths.

The social factors that promote atheism—financial security and education—have long been harder to attain for women and people of color in the United States.

Around the world, the [Pew Research Center finds that women tend to be more likely to affiliate with a religion](#) and more likely to pray and find religion important in their lives. That changes when women have more

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The leaders of Atheist Alliance International, Dawkins Foundation, and Center for Inquiry who I talked to were all well aware of the demographic shortcomings, and they’re working on it: All of the leaders I spoke to were women.

Even people who are white, male, and educated may fear the stigma of being labeled a nonbeliever. A white dentist at the CFI’s Drinking Sceptically event didn’t want to go on the record out of a fear that patients wouldn’t want an atheist working on their teeth.

“We have this stigma that we’re combative, that we’re arrogant, that we just want to provoke religious people,” Thomas with Black Nonbelievers, Inc. says. She’s working on changing that, and increasing the visibility of

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l up in the mid-

2000s. These were years of war, when Islam was painted as a threat and Christianity infused U.S. policy, abroad and domestically, most visibly in faith-based ballot initiatives against same-sex marriage.

In the U.S., many state legislators are still using a narrow interpretation of Christian morals to deny services to gay people and appropriate restrooms to people who are transgender.

But the national backlash to religious legislation has become faster and fiercer than ever before. Europeans seem set on addressing Islamophobia and the forces that could create tension with the “rapidly growing rest.”

And compared to past campaign seasons, religion is taking a backseat in this year’s U.S. presidential election. Donald Trump is not outwardly religious (and his attraction of evangelical voters has raised questions about

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nonbelievers, perhaps nothing will be as effective as apathy plus time. As the

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**Jason Lewis**

May 16, 2016

Linking to a Salon article as verification to dubious assertions of misogyny is not the level of writing you would expect from the National Geographic.

**Keith Jones**

May 11, 2016

Watch a documentary called "12th and Delaware" . It really shows the difference between a religious and non-religious human being. You can see how religion divides and spreads hatred. The same kind of hatred that starts wars.

### **These Photos Transport You to a Muslim Wedding in Europe**

**Todd Dishara**

May 9, 2016

The rise of atheism has absolutely nothing to do with gender, race, nationality, class, or privilege.

It has everything to do with increasing scientific knowledge. Religion can only prosper with ignorance and propaganda. Thankfully, more and more people can recognize when they are being lied to.

**Liza Smith**

May 4, 2016

The rise of atheism in the US has been accompanied with a rise in suicide, depression, overdoses, anxiety and unhappiness. Research shows there is a connection. Is the the "enlightened" future we want? More people medicating themselves into oblivion and, when that doesn't work, eating a bullet? GREAT data and discussion in this new article: <http://www.mbird.com/2016/05/everybody-elses-biggest-problem-the-rise-of-the-nones/>

If you deny the connection, based on what evidence?

**Anni Bennett**

May 4, 2016

**@Liza Smith** scandinavian countries such as denmark, switzerland, and sweden have consistently been listed amongst the happiest countries in the world, and they are mostly secular. how do you explain that?

---

**Doug Chivers**

May 5, 2016

**@Anni B. @Liza Smith** How about North and South Korea? North Korea, an evolutionist and Athiest dominated region, and South Korea, a mostly Christian region with a rise in Buddhists, but a people of faith. Look North and you see a region that is dominated with suicides, spousal abuse, drug epidemics, etc. Look South and you will see a vibrant, flourishing, family oriented region with a prosperous society. The reason why is obvious.

---

**Anni Bennett**

May 7, 2016

**@Doug Chivers @Anni Bennett @Liza Smith** You obviously know nothing about South Korea, or you wouldn't have used it as an example. South Korea has the second highest suicide rate in the world, and the highest suicide rate among industrialized nations. High school students in South Korea have to spend all of their time studying, and many students commit suicide if they do badly on tests. There was once a teenage boy who lit himself on fire because he did badly on a test and didn't want to disappoint his parents. Here is a New York Times article about suicide in South Korea. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/03/opinion/south-koreas-struggle-with-suicide.html>

As for North Korea, it is a dictatorship without free speech and most of the people are starving. I would say those are likely the reasons people are unhappy, not the lack of religion. And you still offered no explanation as to how secular Scandinavian countries are so happy, so your reply was pointless.

---

**'Rob Veltman**

May 8, 2016

**@Liza Smith** Correlation does not mean causation. Suicide is more related to long nights in winter which you find far to the north. Where btw accidentally are also the most atheistist people.. Relating suicide to non religiousness is false, what really correlates is how far north you are living

---

**Marc O'Brien**

May 3, 2016

It is literally immoral to be religious.

Why?

Everything is theory - even anyone's belief that they do not live in a matrix-like simulation or any other kind of simulated universe - all are theory.

All moral judgements are theories too. Any moral judgement made today can be overturned in seconds tomorrow in the light of new facts.

All theories have evidence - evidence is cheap - all false theories had evidence and still have evidence.

Given that all true and false theories have evidence the only way to choose between competing theories then is not to look at evidence but instead to find which one covers all the facts, without remainder and without contradiction.

Since good moral judgements can only be made with all the facts available and since religions and the religious ignore all the facts it is much less likely that any religion or the religious will make good moral judgements.

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**Doug Chivers**

May 5, 2016

[@Marc O'Brien](#) Really? You may be getting evolution and creation confused here. The bible is full of scientific facts and no contradictions. Whereas evolution is full of falsehoods and assumptions and even lies, and its name says it all. The "Theory" of evolution.

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**Busting the Myth of Friday the 13th and the Knights Templar**  
[Leslie Goudy](#)

May 2, 2016

I find it interesting the atheist comments use the evil of reactionary Muslim and Christian terrorists as examples and leave out the reactionary atheists and their militant styles such as Marx and Lenin

---

**Marc O'Brien**

May 3, 2016

[@Leslie Goudy](#)

What might be the difference or differences between Mosesism, Jesusism, Mohammedism, Stalinism and Nazism?

They all seem to share in at least dogmatism?

Since all judgements about the universe, life and everything, both epistemic and moral, are theories and no theory can be proved it so happens, with certainty, that this universe has no place for dogmatism.

---

**Emmanuel Cabahug**

May 1, 2016

From the article: Thomas says, adding that the Civil Rights movement was dominated—she says “hijacked”—by religious leaders.

Hijacked? I swear Mandisa Thomas doesn't know what she is talking about. Baptist Ministers took a large role by being active in the Civil Rights Movement like Martin Luther King Jr. Name one secularist non-believer who took an active role in the Civil Rights Movement. I can't find none.

---

## STUART HOLLOWAY

May 15, 2016

Bayard Rustin was one. Both atheist and gay, and he predated King and the others by over 20 years yet was still around when they ascended. The 1963 March on Washington was originally his idea, in part, but he couldn't speak once the preachers took over. He was too much of a liability because insiders knew of his lifestyle.

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## John Morehead

Apr 28, 2016

The Nones are indeed an important phenomenon in American and Western religious demographic shifts. However, it is a mistake to identify the Nones as largely comprised of atheists and agnostics. Instead, a large number retain some kind of spiritual beliefs and practices, and in my view this is better understood as part of a shift we've been undergoing for a while away from spiritualities of dwelling (to use Robert Wuthnow's terminology) in institutions to individualized spiritual seeking.

---

## Richard Feldman

Apr 28, 2016

**@John Morehead** Actually, most "nones" are atheists. Scientific knowledge inevitably leads to atheism. The god hypothesis is a failed scientific hypothesis. There's never been a single scientific observation in support of the juvenile concept of supernatural deities.

---

## Philip Schienbein

Apr 28, 2016

## **@Richard Feldman**

Most of the "nones" are atheistic? How euphoric.

But seriously, no, they're not.

Most of them have given no thought to the question, and answered in kind. Unlike previous generations where the local church functioned as a sort of social club/group identity, they have no

such affiliation and answered as such.

If pressed to consider sacerdotal matters, most would be somewhat agnostic or vaguely "spiritual", but very few would identify with the self-congratulatory atheist faithful.

**Richard Feldman**

Apr 29, 2016

**@Philip Schienbein @Richard Feldman** In reality, religion is on the decline in all industrialized nations and on the verge of extinction. The majority of "nones" are in fact atheists whether a religiously retarded idiot like you comprehends or not is totally irrelevant.

**Doug Chivers**

May 5, 2016

**@Richard Feldman @John Morehead** Yet the bible is Full of scientific facts, with No contradictions. The bible has proven science wrong more than once, which scientists will admit.

**Anni Bennett**

May 7, 2016

**@Doug Chivers** Funny how you say all these things with no proof to back it up.

**'Rob Veltman**

May 8, 2016

**@Doug Chivers @Richard Feldman @John Morehead** Woohahahaha that is the most ridiculous claim I ever have seen.. NO contradictions in the bible, man your minister did a excellent job of brain washing you.. OK here a few contradictions collected for you. With claims like this you have officially disqualified yourself as a person that can be believed to be a honest defender of his case.

[http://infidels.org/library/modern/jim\\_meritt/bible-contradictions.html](http://infidels.org/library/modern/jim_meritt/bible-contradictions.html)

[http://www.answering-christianity.com/101\\_bible\\_contradictions.htm](http://www.answering-christianity.com/101_bible_contradictions.htm)

[http://skepticsannotatedbible.com/contra/by\\_name.html](http://skepticsannotatedbible.com/contra/by_name.html)

<http://bibviz.com/> excellent scientific graphical representation of searchable contradictions in the bible.

If you want more examples just look google will give you a ton of links

**'Rob Veltman**

May 8, 2016



**@John Morehead** It's more than reasonable to assume that most of the nones in the USA are atheists who are afraid to label themselves as such due to the enormous religious harassment they receive by the redneck Christians on the country side that figuratively immediately reach for their pitchforks and willing to apply the social equivalence of the tar and feathers treatment trying to run the in their eyes satan worshippers out of town. Religious people hardly know enough of their own religion to understand any different ideological viewpoints then their own churches dogma. Defining as nones will easily avoid a lot of bigoted harassment. Other nones just lost interest in religious matters.. Thinking too little about it to realise they are atheist

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**Ormond Otvos**

Apr 28, 2016

"Nones"? All you need to know.

---

**Alexandra Prince**

Apr 27, 2016

this article makes me shake my head for many reasons. it assumes a very narrow Western Christianity-derived definition of religion and doesn't even touch on the growing populations of "nones" who identify themselves as "spiritual," or who regularly engage in or identify with moral-driven activities (thinking of veganism and yoga here actually). i don't think it's useful to focus on what's relevant to a small minority of mostly white men amidst an ever-expanding world religious landscape. and suggesting that if women and people of color were better educated or wealthier they too would be atheists is just blatantly Dawkinsian offensive garbage.

---

**Richard Feldman**

Apr 28, 2016

**@Alexandra Prince** There's no bigot comparable to the completely brainwashed self-righteous bigoted religious cultist. Scientific knowledge inevitably leads to atheism because there's never been a single scientific observation in support of the juvenile concept of supernatural deities. Religion is on the decline worldwide because it's "offensive garbage" for feeble-minded and weak-willed cretins like you!

---

**Doug Chivers**

May 5, 2016

**@Richard Feldman @Alexandra Prince** Your not much of a hypocrite are you!

---

**Tom Gibson**

Apr 26, 2016

Atheism is as bankrupt as theism. To claim much knowing is not knowing. Hints and guesses is all we get (T. S. Eliot) So to the Nones I say quiet yourselves if you have never participated in religion or if you are merely

reflecting on your childhood experiences of religion. To those who fight against the Nones you ought do your homework....Freud, Nietzsche, Marx and others have set up some pretty good arguments. Uncertainty is found in the best minds. Love somebody.

---

**Jamie Crick**

Apr 27, 2016

**@Tom Gibson** I disagree. Most atheists are very comfortable with the unknown. We just prefer not to fill in the gaps with fantasies. And for what we can't explain, empirical evidence is a pretty good substitute.

---

**Bahadur Karahin**

Apr 26, 2016

I thank those who have commented respectfully here, your opinions are valid on either side of the debate. On the other hand, the disrespect of some people is shocking. Can we all use facts, examples, logic, and respect in our arguments, instead of personal opinions with facts replaced by raw emotion?

---

**Ormond Otvos**

Apr 28, 2016

**@Bahadur Karahin** Respect for what? Fantasy, jihadism, inquisitions, control of women?  
Try to understand: religion is the CAUSE of many ills, and the result of many others.

---

**Elizabeth Blumenthal**

Apr 26, 2016

Bullard's misogynistic claims directed toward Harris and Dawkins only serve to discredit this entire piece. A pity and a journalistic travesty. For secular's sake, Gabe, dig in and do your homework!

---

**Bryan Mueller**

Apr 26, 2016

**@Elizabeth Blumenthal** Was about to make the same comment.

---

**Alex White**

Apr 26, 2016

This article was going so well then it decided to use a salon opinion piece to obliterate the work Dawkins and co

have done for people like me. Shame.

---

**Jeff Korum**

Apr 26, 2016

This article was not well researched. The "Yearbook of International Religious Demography 2015" (Brill) reaches the exact opposite conclusions.

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**Ebenezer Cockburn**

Apr 26, 2016

Go to <http://www.gabebullard.com/> and you will instantly understand why this article exists.

Believe me, I'm not exxagerating. 1 photo that explains it all.

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**Maria Petrova**

Apr 25, 2016

It's been 3 days since this article was published. Despite multiple responses of disbelief and protest, here and on Twitter, that Harris, Hitchens & Dawkins were summarily dismissed from a discussion of their field as misogynists, with at best puny evidence — there has been no response from the author or publisher of this article. The article has not been amended in any way.

It's useful for us readers to take stock of this and support instead publications that treat public intellectuals, current topics, and their readers with respect.

So long, Nat Geo. BuzzFeed's got you beat at your game of clickbait & sensationalism.

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**Truett Byrom**

Apr 25, 2016

**@Maria Petrova** It is objectively false to label Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens as misogynists, especially in the context of atheist thought. The major religions all contain doctrines and dogmas of female subordination. No such subordination is either advocated or countenanced by atheistic humanism. Dawkins, Harris et al. are attempting to break the chains of bronze age oppression for half of humanity. They deserve better than Bullard's baseless charges of misogyny, and the readers of this fine magazine deserve better from National Geographic.

---

**Sean Earl**

Apr 29, 2016

**@Truett Byrom @Maria Petrova** My thoughts exactly; that they are basing their accusations on an agenda-driven, churlish article written under the aegis of salon.com (originating from "altnet," an activist blog that does not even pretend to operate under the scrutiny or fact-checking mechanisms of proper journalism) does a disservice to National Geographic, from whom I have come to expect much

more.

---

**'Rob Veltman**

May 8, 2016

**@Maria Petrova** What the author has done here is called the poisoning the well fallacy.. A staple tool out of the evangelical right and regressive left inter-sectional feminist toolboxes of dogmatic defamation. Well applied to those cases where intersectional marxist / feminist dogma looses out on logic and fact.

---

**John Phillip Pesebre**

Apr 25, 2016

Interesting always to read a white POV writing from the Mecca of whiteness.

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**τηλ ΚΩηϊδ**

Apr 25, 2016

Gabe Bullard, you are not being a good journalist. Alternet as a source? The proceeding 2 comments from Jason Eye and Truett Byrom are well said enough, but I wanted to add this:

Atheism is a right. It is our natural state. A Christian child does not know it is a christian until taught by others. All children are agnostic atheists from birth. This right has been taken away for much of human history by superstitious fools and those who would seek to control such fools with religion.

It is a privilege to live in a part of the world where the forces of religion have been weakened by rationality and humanism to the point where people can be open about not believing in sanctioned fairy-tales. It is not a privilege enjoyed in many other parts of the world, most notably in Bangladesh recently.

---

**A B**

Apr 26, 2016

**@τηλ ΚΩηϊδ** Your statement that children are agnostic/atheists from birth does not really have any basis by the way. You might want to do some research and go through some recent studies done in this regard before claiming something that you can't 'prove' using the standards of your own 'beliefs'.

---

**Richard Feldman**

Apr 26, 2016

**@A B @τηλ ΚΩηϊδ** Once again, atheism is a lack of belief in supernatural deities without evidence. All children are born atheist whether you have the intellectual capacity to understand this comment sense statement is totally irrelevant.

---

**Bahadur Karahin**

Apr 26, 2016

**@τσηλ ΚΩηϊδ**

That doesn't make sense. If we were all atheist from the start, how did religion begin? Humans have had religious beliefs since our species evolved.

---

**Richard Feldman**

Apr 26, 2016

**@Bahadur Karahin @τσηλ ΚΩηϊδ** It's not very complicated. Religions are cruel and dangerous hoaxes founded by nefarious opportunists as a means to gain power, accumulate wealth and instill prejudices. You personally are too feeble-minded and weak-willed to recognize the world's most successful con job.

---

**Bahadur Karahin**

Apr 26, 2016

**@Richard Feldman @Bahadur Karahin @τσηλ ΚΩηϊδ**

Well, religion can certainly be used as a way to gain power, such as ISIS. However, religion existed as a belief in spirits, nature gods, and a creator far before government caught up and took advantage, in SOME CASES.

Instead of bluntly forcing your opinions on the world, could you back them up with some facts, research, historical or modern examples, etc? This is National Geographic, not the U.S. presidential elections.

---

**Richard Feldman**

Apr 26, 2016

**@Bahadur Karahin @Richard Feldman @τσηλ ΚΩηϊδ** Once again, never refer to any dogma-based indoctrination system as beliefs because you don't have the guts to live without the inane delusions of imaginary friends and eternal life.

---

**Ormond Otvos**

Apr 28, 2016

**@Bahadur Karahin @τσηλ ΚΩηϊδ** You don't know that. Prehistory gives few clues. Ritualistic burial proves little. Religion is useful for group cohesion, but I am sure that hunter-gatherer children had to be taught about the moon god and sun god. Adults lie to children, to help them fit in to the pre-existing culture.

---

**Richard Feldman**

Apr 28, 2016

[@Ormond Otvos](#) [@Bahadur Karahin](#) [@τηηλ ΚΩηϊδ](#) Religions are cruel and dangerous hoaxes that are a means to gain power, accumulate wealth and instill prejudices.

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**Jason Eye**

Apr 25, 2016

Sam Harris and Dawkins do not have reputations for misogyny. They are routinely and quite deliberately misinterpreted and vilified for bits of philosophical discussions taken out of context by unscrupulous tabloid journalists.

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**GEORGATHC**

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