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Religious antinatalism: a rare breed

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between religion and antinatalism – the view that it is wrong to create new sentient beings. Many people reject antinatalism on religious grounds. In this paper, I respond to such a rejection. First, I argue that antinatalism is not logically incompatible with theism. Second, I consider the pronatalist features of some religious traditions – those of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. These include religious injunctions to procreate, *imitatio Dei*, and preservation of the religious community. I also show the limits of these pronatalist features. Third, I provide some examples of religious antinatalist thinking in the four surveyed religions. Finally, I say something about why many religions should be more antinatalist than they are. I do this by showing how central concepts – such as reducing suffering in Buddhism and original sin and hell in Christianity – provide compelling support for antinatalism.

Keywords: antinatalism; theism; atheism; religion; procreation

Antinatalism is the view that it is morally wrong to bring new sentient beings into existence. The scope of this view requires clarification. Because the actions of those animals who are not moral agents are not liable to moral judgement, the reproduction of such animals cannot be judged to be morally wrong. Animal reproduction could still be viewed as regrettable and, under certain circumstances, even prevent-worthy.[1] Indeed, some of the arguments in support of antinatalism do lead to the conclusion that animals are harmed by being brought into existence even when their animal parents' reproductive actions cannot be deemed to be morally wrong.

However, because adult humans usually are moral agents, human reproduction does clearly fall within the scope of antinatalism. So too does human breeding of other animals. In these cases, humans are the agents responsible for non-human animals coming into existence. According to antinatalism, breeding is morally wrong.

Some religious people are tempted to respond impetuously to antinatalism, dismissing it as 'ungodly', or as an abject illustration of atheism's moral unmooring. Given strong (pro)natalist tendencies in much religious thinking, especially in the Abrahamic religions, this response is not surprising. However, it is too quick a response. There are at least two reasons for this.

First, religions could be in error for being as pronatalist as they are. Saying this could be seen as a heretical view, but it need not be. Instead, it could be argued that just as religious texts supporting slavery, child marriage, and cruel punishments should not lead religious

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people to embrace these practices, so pronatalism in religious traditions should not lead them to reject antinatalism if, as I have argued elsewhere (Benatar 2006), there are strong moral considerations against procreation. Religions may require reinterpretation, and that need be no more heretical than earlier reinterpretations are now seen to be.

Second, religions may not be as unequivocally pronatalist as is generally assumed. The impulsive religious rejection of antinatalism ignores significant antinatalist threads in the thought of various religions. It must be conceded that these are sometimes only threads – occasionally increasing to the level of themes – in the thinking of various religions. They are clearly not the dominant view in the Abrahamic religions. However, even as minority religious views, they are significant. They show that somebody could embrace one of the religions *and* still be an antinatalist. They also provide a path for the reinterpretation of religion, to which I referred in the previous paragraph.

In this paper, I plan to unsettle the idea that religious people must reject antinatalism. I begin by showing that antinatalism is not incompatible with theism. I then consider the pronatalist features of some religious traditions, and I also show the limits of that pronatalism. I then provide some examples of religious antinatalist thinking. Finally, I say something about why many religions should be more antinatalist than they are. Throughout, I make no pretence of comprehensiveness. Instead, I provide a primer.[2]

Antinatalism and (a)theism

Among the easiest questions to answer is whether antinatalism (logically) presupposes atheism. The answer to that question is clearly negative. This is because there is no logical inconsistency between these two views:

1. God exists. (Theism)
2. Creating new sentient beings is wrong. (Antinatalism)

Those who think that there is an incompatibility between these two claims do so because they think that the first claim is associated with *other* claims that *are* incompatible with antinatalism. I shall examine such considerations later, but the important point to note here is that even if some manifestations of theism are associated with claims that are inconsistent with antinatalism, these are no more than associations.

To see this more clearly, it is important to distinguish between theism, on the one hand, and religion or specific religious denominations, on the other. For example, Judaism (at least in its Orthodox and Conservative forms) and Islam prohibit the consumption of pork (among other products), but Christianity does not. Some Christians prohibit the consumption of some kinds of meat (which they distinguish from fish) on Fridays, but there is no such prohibition in Judaism and Islam. There is a great variety of dietary practices among Hindus. Islam requires daytime fasting throughout the month of Ramadan, and Judaism requires a twenty-five-hour fast on Yom Kippur. These are but a few examples of thousands of practices, dietary and otherwise, that vary from religion to religion and even between denominations of a single religion. Despite being theistic, they are far from united on what actions are prescribed and proscribed.

There is no contradiction between antinatalism and theism itself, even if one thinks that certain instantiations of theism – specific religions or religious denominations – are inconsistent with antinatalism. Put another way, there is no logical contradiction in believing in God and believing that it is wrong to create new sentient beings. One might even believe that bringing new sentient beings into existence is prohibited *because* God prohibits it.

This is not to deny the *possibility* that there could be a particular argument for antinatalism that is inconsistent with theism. Antinatalism is a view. There are various ways of arriving at that view – various arguments that might lead one to an antinatalist conclusion.

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In principle, there could be an essentially atheistic argument for antinatalism – that is to say, an argument in which atheism is a premise. Here is one example:

Premise 1: If God does not exist, then procreation is morally wrong.
Premise 2: God does not exist.
Conclusion: Therefore, procreation is morally wrong.

This is not a good argument for antinatalism. This is not because it is formally invalid or even because either of the premises is technically untrue. Instead, it is because either the conditional in the first premise is a non-sequitur or the relevance of the antecedent to the consequent is, at the very least, not stated. If the conditional is a non-sequitur, then the argument fails for the same reason that this 'apterous (wingless) porcine argument' for antinatalism fails:

Premise 1: If pigs cannot fly, then procreation is morally wrong.
Premise 2: Pigs cannot fly.
Conclusion: Therefore, procreation is morally wrong.

However, unlike the apterous porcine argument, there is a possible explanation for why God's non-existence is relevant to the moral wrongfulness of procreation. Perhaps, for example, somebody thinks that absent the existence of God, procreation is morally wrong, but that God's existence and his commandment to procreate are the sole possible defeaters of the case against procreation; then God's existence would become relevant. However, even if that is the case, the atheistic argument for antinatalism presented above would not be sufficient to make the case. An extensive background argument would be required in addition.

Thus, pronatalists can easily reject the first premise, whether they are theists or atheists. The weakness of this argument is probably why antinatalists have not actually advanced this argument. Thus, while this particular argument for antinatalism presupposes atheism, antinatalism itself does not presuppose atheism. Moreover, none of the arguments that have actually been advanced for antinatalism presupposes atheism.[3]

The absence of a logical incompatibility of antinatalism and atheism does not demonstrate that antinatalism is compatible with religious thinking beyond the mere commitment to theism. Psychologically and sociologically, antinatalism seems to be more common among atheists than among theists.[4] This is very likely because pronatalism predominates over antinatalism in much religious thinking. This creates, at the very least, a tension between antinatalism and much religious thinking.

In what follows I plan, first, to enumerate and discuss some religious grounds for pronatalism. This discussion will also include an indication of religious *limits* of those grounds. I shall then turn to theistic and religious manifestations of, and arguments for, antinatalism.

Theistic and religious (pro)natalism

'Be fruitful and multiply':

Perhaps the most obvious basis for pronatalism in Judaism and Christianity is the divine injunction to 'be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and conquer it' (Genesis 1:28).[5] This may seem like an unequivocally pronatalist commandment, one that settles the question of where religious Jews and Christians, at least, should settle on the question of procreation.

However, one should be cautious about leaping to this conclusion. One general reason for this is that there is often a gap between the literal reading of a text and a religion's actual

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view. This is not true of fundamentalists, who *do* (claim to) adopt a literal interpretation. However, whenever religions allow scope for textual interpretation, we cannot determine a religion's views from a literal interpretation of its sacred texts.

As it happens, not all the Abrahamic religions accept an explicit duty to procreate, even when they are broadly pronatalist. Catholicism, for example, has been more concerned with sexual ethics than with procreation *per se* (Swaner 2024, 136). The Catholic view on sexual ethics includes conditions, such as the prohibition on contraception, that have strong pronatalist implications. However, sex is permitted only within marriage, and there is no duty to get married. One way in which Christians can reconcile the absence of a duty to procreate with the explicit commandment to be 'fruitful and multiply' is by claiming that the procreative command applied at the earlier, pre-Christian, time but ceased to apply later. This is the view explicitly advanced by John Chrysostom (Chrysostom 1983, 23–27). In Islam too, there is no explicit duty to procreate, and contraception is permitted (Mu'īnīfar 2022, 221–233).

Of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism is arguably the most pronatalist.[6] It *does* recognize the injunction to 'be fruitful and multiply' as an explicit positive commandment.[7] However, even Judaism regards this commandment as incumbent only on males, and not also on females.[8] This is despite the (Hebrew) plural formulation of the commandment.[9]

One rationale for thinking that the commandment applies only to males is that because procreation can be life-threatening to females, women cannot be obligated to reproduce. Moreover, the wording of the Jewish marriage contract, the Ketubah, explicitly states the husband has a duty to satisfy his wife's conjugal needs, but no reciprocal duty by a wife towards her husband is stated. Even when they do choose to have sex with their husbands, they are permitted to use contraception.

Thus, wives have neither a duty to reproduce nor a duty to have sex with their husbands. This puts the fulfilment of males' purported religious duty to reproduce within the control of female discretion (given that rape, whether marital or otherwise, is prohibited). Males require willing females to fulfil their obligation. In other words, the commandment to be fruitful and multiply applies to only half of the fertile adult population, and not to the other half, without whom there can be no reproduction.

In Catholicism, priests and monastics are required to be celibate.[10] When this is combined, as it is in Catholicism, with a prohibition on those forms of assisted reproduction that separate reproduction from marital sex, the consequence is a prohibition on the clergy reproducing. In other words, priests, monks, and nuns are not merely released from an obligation to reproduce. They are *prohibited* from reproducing. For them, the scriptural commandment is turned on its head.

Of course, there is a difference between a restricted antinatalism, which applies only to the clergy, and a generalized antinatalism that applies to everybody. Nevertheless, it is significant that some strands of Christianity are suspicious of human sexuality, and view abstinence and celibacy as an ideal (Swaner 2024, 137). For those Christians, universalized non-procreation is the ideal, even if not strictly required of everybody.[11]

There have been Christian denominations that have extended the scope of celibacy even to the laity. The Shakers are a notable example. The very first principle of their faith was 'Abstinence from all carnal and sensual passions, and a strict life of virgin purity …' (Green and Wells 1830, 4). There is a logical difference between being opposed to sex and being opposed to reproduction. However, Shakers have not shied away from recognizing the implications of their view for procreation. Nor have they been oblivious to the 'consequences of living continent lives if *universally* adopted' (Pelham 1874, 1). Their response is that they 'fail to see that bringing an end of this wicked world would be "a great wrong"' (Pelham 1874, 2). This is a thoroughgoing antinatalism of a religious group that accepts the scripture in which humans are enjoined to be fruitful and multiply.

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Even those religious people who accept the commandment to procreate cannot cite that commandment to justify the *human* breeding of animals. Such breeding, I noted in the introduction, is inconsistent with antinatalism. Yet it clearly does not fall within the scope of a duty for *humans* to reproduce. Some might suggest that it does fall within the scope of conquering the earth, which is a continuation of the verse requiring human procreation. However, that is far from a straightforward interpretation of 'conquest'.

Imitatio Dei

Human breeding of animals might more plausibly be thought to follow from another religious consideration against antinatalism, namely the concept of *Imitatio Dei*, the imitation of God. If God created both humans and non-human animals, then *Imitatio Dei* might be thought to support not only human reproduction but also human breeding of animals.

However, the concept of imitating God is far less transparent than the explicit injunction to be fruitful and multiply. If a direct commandment is as liable to various interpretations as we have seen, then there is even more scope for interpretation about what constitutes *imitating* the divine, and what constitutes *impersonating* the deity – 'playing God'.

The Bible itself suggests that God considerably reversed his own creation of sentient life by wiping most of it out in the flood, sparing only a remnant of both humans and non-human animals on Noah's ark. However, in the immediate post-diluvian period, God, in an apparent triumph of hope over experience, reaffirms the instruction to humans to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 9:1). He also offers the projection that animals *will* (rather than that they ought to) be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 8:17).[12]

While most religions would not take the deluge as something for humans to imitate, it is not inconceivable that a religious tradition could see the world as having returned to an immediately pre-diluvian state of violence, warranting human extinction through non-procreation. Indeed, one Shaker noted that most Christians believe that the wicked world will end in 'a much less merciful way' (Pelham 1874, 2) than the extinction through non-procreation that is the implication of universal adherence to non-procreation.

A particularly Christian version of *Imitatio Dei*, namely *Imitatio Christi*, would suggest an antinatalist conclusion. Jesus neither married nor had children. By contrast, the Islamic principle of imitating the Prophet's example implies pronatalism, given that Muhammad is thought to have had as many as seven children.

Preservation of the religious community

Another potential religious impulse towards pronatalism is the preservation of the religious community. Islam, for example, sees continuation of the *ummah* – the worldwide Islamic community – as one basis for its pronatalism.[13]

There are religions and religious denominations with hundreds of millions or even a billion members, and are currently in no danger of extinction, but which see strength in numbers. Other religious groupings are the human equivalent of endangered species. Shakers have been indifferent to their own extreme endangered status. According to a recent reckoning, there are only two remaining Shakers (Kisner 2024). However, other religious groups that have historically placed a positive value on procreation are more alarmed by their declining numbers.

Jews, for example, as a result of centuries of persecution, forced conversions to other faiths, and strong pressures to assimilate, constitute only about 0.19% of the world's human population (World Population Review, n.d.). Although the numbers have been increasing since the *end* of the Second World War, the global Jewish population has not yet returned to the pre-Holocaust number of approximately eighteen million. Many Jews have felt a

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special duty to compensate for the Nazi-inflicted genocide by ensuring that they have Jewish progeny. Emil Fackenheim went so far as to suggest that after the Holocaust, there is a 614th commandment,[14] namely not to hand Hitler a posthumous victory (Fackenheim 1978).

The situation is even worse for Zoroastrians, of whom there are no more than about 128 000 globally. They too have been subject to centuries of persecution, and continue to be persecuted in Iran,[15] which still has the second-largest Zoroastrian population of any country. Zoroastrian numbers have also dwindled because of high rates of intermarriage and low fertility rates, despite Zoroastrianism putting a high value on reproduction.

The psychological force of these concerns is entirely understandable.[16] However, there is another possible response to histories of persecution that result in religious groups being endangered by dwindling numbers. This response, instead of denying a victory to past persecutors, is to deny potential victims to future ones. The continuity of perpetually persecuted groups, like the continuity of humanity more generally, comes at massive cost to those who are created to do the continuing (Benatar 2018).

This will not be satisfying to existing people who want to see their religious traditions continue. Such continuation is certainly in their interests. It can contribute some meaning to their lives – at least according to many conceptions of meaning in life.[17] The question, however, is whether those benefits can justify the harms done to new generations by creating them.

Religious antinatalism

Although pronatalism predominates over antinatalism in many religious traditions, there are at least threads of antinatalism in some of these religions, and even more substantial antinatalist themes in others.[18]

Biblical

In the Jewish Bible – the Old Testament for Christians – Job rues his birth:

> Oh that the day had perished wherein I was born, and the night which said, 'there is a man child conceived'. Let that day be darkness; … let that night be solitary, let no joyful cry be heard in it … because it did not shut up the doors of my mother's womb nor hide trouble from my eyes. Why did I not die from the womb? Why did I not perish when I came out of the belly? Why did the knees receive me, or why the breasts that I should suck? … Why is light given to him that is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul; who long for death, but it does not come; and dig for it more than for hidden treasures; who rejoice exceedingly, and are glad, when they can find a grave? (Job 3: 3, 4, 7, 10-12, 20-22).[19]

Jeremiah is another who regrets his existence:

> Cursed be the day on which I was born: let not the day on which my mother bore me be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought tidings to my father, saying, 'A man child is born to thee'; making him very glad. And let that man … hear a cry in the morning, and an alarm at noontide; because he slew me not from the womb; so that my mother might have been my grave, and her womb always great. Why did I come out of the womb to see labour and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?' (Jeremiah 20:14-18).

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There is, of course, a difference between a single individual lamenting his having come into existence, and a more general opposition to human procreation. While Job was responding only to his personal predicament, Jeremiah regrets his own existence, and also responds to the plight of his people following the destruction of the first Temple in the sixth century BCE. He reports that:

> The word of the Lord came also to me, saying, Thou shalt not take thee a wife, neither shalt thou have sons or daughters in this place. For thus says the Lord concerning the sons and concerning the daughters that are born in this place, and concerning their mothers that bore them, and concerning their fathers that begot them in this land; they shall die of grievous deaths; they shall not be lamented; neither shall they be buried; but they shall be as dung upon the face of the earth: and they shall be consumed by the sword, and by famine; and their carcasses shall be food for the birds of the sky, and for the beasts of the earth (Jeremiah 16: 1-4).

These are strong antinatalist sentiments that go well beyond a personal preference. However, it is not a universalized antinatalism. Such antinatalism can be found in the book of Ecclesiastes, where its author says:

> So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter. So I praised the dead that are already dead more than the living that are yet alive; but better than both of them is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun (Ecclesiastes 4:1-3).

Nor are such sentiments restricted to the Hebrew Bible. The Apostle Paul says:

> It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband .... Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion (1 Corinthians 7:1, 2, 5-9).[20]

Later in the same chapter, he says 'Let those who have wives live as though they had none' (1 Corinthians 7:29).

Early Christian antinatalism

The quotations above from Paul are illustrative of a central theme rather than a mere strand in Christian thinking. This theme was more robust in Christianity's early history, even though a strong residue of it persists in those branches of Christianity today that still see 'permanent sexual renunciation' (Brown 1988, xiii) as the ideal. Many of the Church Fathers expressed virginity as an ideal.

It might be objected that the Church Fathers, like many later Christians and unlike Ecclesiastes, were fundamentally suspicious of sex rather than of procreation. Although

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sexual abstinence, combined with an opposition to non-sexual methods of reproducing, has anti-procreative implications, the latter are merely implications rather than the aim. There is an element of truth to this. However, it is also the case that antinatalist concerns are interwoven with the ideal of celibacy.

John Chrysostom, for example, argued that there was no need for marriage, sex, or reproduction before Adam and Eve disobeyed God (Chrysostom 1983, 19–23). He said that as long as Adam and Eve 'were uncorrupted by the devil and stood in awe of their master, virginity abided with them .... However when they shed the princely raiment of virginity ... they accepted the decay of death, ruin, pain, and a toilsome life' (Chrysostom 1983, 21–22). Of marriage he said that it 'springs from disobedience, from a curse, from death' (Chrysostom 1983, 22).

Here we see a recognition of the (postlapsarian) human condition as corrupted, replete with hardship, and culminating in death. Reflecting on the consequences for the human population of a universal virginity, John Chrysostom asks rhetorically:

> Why tremble at the thought of the end of marriage, and thus the end of the human race? An infinite number of angels are at the service of God, thousands upon thousands of archangels are beside him, and none of them have come into being from the succession of generations, none from childbirth, labor pains and conception. Could he not, then, have created many more men without marriage? Just as he created the first two from whom all men descend (Chrysostom 1983, 22).

It is true that here John Chrysostom allows the possibility that God could have created new generations of humans without the Fall. However, the human condition would then have been very different from the way it is following the Fall. It would, quite literally, have remained paradisiacal. Even antinatalists are not logically bound to oppose the creation of beings in a *guaranteed* paradise (which the biblical paradise, later developments show, was not). To the extent that a Christian embraces non-reproduction on account of the suffering of (postlapsarian) humans, he or she has moved beyond an opposition to sex into antinatalist sentiments – even if sex explains why humans suffer.

Augustine expresses similar ideas. He too sees marriage, sex, and procreation as arising only after the Fall, saying that it 'was only then that their bodies by sinning deserved to undergo the fate of death, and sexual intercourse can take place only between mortal bodies' (Augustine 2001, 3).

Like John Chrysostom, he considers the implications for the human population in the universal absence of procreation, although his response is different:

> But I know what people are murmuring: 'Suppose', they remark, 'that everyone sought to abstain from all intercourse? How would the human race survive?' I only wish that this was everyone's concern so long as it was uttered in charity 'from a pure heart, a good conscience, and faith unfeigned'; then the city of God would be filled much more speedily, and the end of the world would be hastened (Augustine 2001, 23).

This seems to be an even more antinatalist sentiment than John Chrysostom's. In embracing 'the end of the world' as we know it, it reaches extinctionist proportions. Indeed, the eschatological milieu within which Christianity was born and which influenced it also lends itself to antinatalist conclusions. If the end is (or could be) nigh, one will have less reason to invest in the future, and thus to create the children who would inhabit it.

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A Talmudic debate

The Talmud (Eruvin 13b)[21] briefly refers to a fascinating debate between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, two famous rabbinic schools. We are told that these two houses spent two and a half years debating whether it would have been preferable for humans to have been created or not to have been created. The Talmud relates that it was eventually concluded, in support of the House of Shammai, that it would have been better for humans if they had *not* been created.[22]

This conclusion is unusual in that the House of Hillel usually prevails over the House of Shammai. Religious pronatalists might have thought that the rabbis would have been even more likely to agree with the House of Hillel in this case, given that the view of the House of Shammai seems like a criticism of God for creating humans.

Although such criticism of God may seem heretical, there is a long Jewish tradition of challenging God. For example, Abraham (unsuccessfully) challenged God's decision to destroy the city of Sodom (Genesis 18: 16–33). Jacob, after wrestling with an angel, was renamed Israel, which means 'struggles with God' (Genesis 32: 29). The Talmud relates that in response to various miracles and finally a heavenly voice supporting Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus' minority opinion about an obscure legal matter, Rabbi Joshua said that the Torah 'is not in heaven!' – a position that the Talmudic narrative endorses (Bava Metzia 59b). Another Talmudic story acknowledges that Rabbinic interpretations of the Torah deviated so far from the way it was presented to Moses that Moses himself would not understand them (Menachot 29b).

Islam

Although Judaism is more pronatalist than Islam in recognizing a commandment to procreate, Islam is more lacking in antinatalist threads than is Judaism. Like Judaism, it is also more 'sex-positive' than the Church Fathers were, with the consequence that antinatalism has not made its way into Islam via an antipathy to sex. Of course, both Judaism and Islam impose many restrictions on sex. Neither of these two religions is sexually libertine. Nevertheless, they embrace human sexuality and do not see lifelong sexual abstinence as an ideal.

At most, there are some wisps of antinatalist-*adjacent* thought in Islam. For example, there is a recognition of the world as a place of hardship (Quran 90:4). There were some early Sufis who, dwelling on this fact, adopted ascetic lifestyles, including sexual abstinence. However, this kind of practice is aberrational in Islam, as it is in Judaism, and it never gained the kind of currency that it did in Christianity.

The Muslim world *has* produced antinatalists, but these have typically been people who have eschewed Islam and religion more generally. Abu al-Ala al-Ma'arri, the tenth to eleventh century pessimistic Arab philosopher, may be the most notable example.

Buddhism and other Eastern religions

Antinatalism has featured much more strongly in Eastern religions than it has in the Abrahamic ones. While the Abrahamic religions recognize life's suffering, some Eastern religions put this fact at the centre of their worldview. This is true of Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, but I shall focus on the last of these as an exemplary case.[23] In doing so, I set aside the question whether (some versions of) Buddhism really should be understood as a religion. To facilitate this bracketing, my focus is not on Zen Buddhism but on Buddhism more generally.

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The first of the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism is that *dukkha* – suffering, pain, unease, unhappiness, or unsatisfactoriness – is an essential feature of existence. Buddhist pessimism is, in one way, deeper than that of naturalist (as distinct from supernaturalist) antinatalists. This is because, for Buddhists, the suffering does not end with death. Because of repeated reincarnations – *samsara* - the suffering continues over multiple embodiments.

The second Noble Truth is that the underlying cause of *dukkha* is desire. The third Noble Truth is that the way to escape *dukkha* is to extinguish desire. The fourth Noble Truth is that there is an eightfold path to extinguishing desire, and thus to the escape from suffering. The final goal is *nirvana*, a state of liberation from desire which blocks further rebirth and prevents any further suffering.[24]

This worldview lays a very sturdy foundation for antinatalism. However, it is not equivalent to antinatalism. This is because there is a difference between recognizing that suffering is an intrinsic feature of existence and claiming that bringing new sentient beings into existence is morally wrong.

It is true that extinguishing one kind of desire – sexual desire, and more specifically heterosexual desire – results in non-procreation. That is, unless one procreates via non-sexual means. However, if one extinguishes a second desire, namely the desire to rear children who are genetically one's offspring, then the non-procreative implication returns. Buddhism *does* require sexual abstinence for its monks. There is no such requirement for the Buddhist laity, and thus Buddhism does not advocate antinatalism – a universalized prohibition against procreation.

Why more religions should be antinatalist

This brings us to a distinction between whether particular religions or religious denominations (a) *are* antinatalist, and whether (b) following their own logic, they *ought* to be antinatalist. The first, at least in a sociological sense, is an empirical question: Does a particular religion or religious denomination prohibit procreation? The answer to that question is usually negative, although there are exceptions – such as that of the Shakers. The second question is a philosophical one. Here we are asking whether, given certain views that the religion holds, it ought to embrace antinatalism. There are strong reasons for thinking that, for some religions or denominations, there is a positive answer to this question.

Ending suffering

For example, one might plausibly argue that all religions believe in reducing or ending suffering (whether or not they conform to this in practice). Buddhism, in particular, given its foundational principles, ought to be antinatalist, and not only for its monastic members. If existence is as laden with suffering as Buddhism acknowledges, it should not be perpetuated through new incarnations.

However, here we quickly run into a fundamental difficulty for any argument that a religion that does not accept antinatalism ought to accept it. This is that it is in the nature of religious argumentation that it is open to the insertion of endless unproven claims or hypotheses that, if accepted, would block the logical inference.

For example, Masahiro Morioka, while not denying that Buddhism lends itself to an antinatalist interpretation, notes that 'we can also interpret ancient Buddhism as saying that being born into this human world is affirmed because there is a possibility of reaching *nirvana* here' (Morioka 2024, 10), in which case we cannot say that it ought to be antinatalist. In other words, if one assumes that *dukkha* persists between incarnations, and that attaining *nirvana* is only possible while incarnated, then in procreating, we are allowing those who are (re-)incarnated the possibility of attaining relief.

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It may well be the case that some religious denominations – or religious interpretations that precede engagement with antinatalism – provide reasons to reject antinatalism. However, even in such cases there is a difference between core beliefs and more peripheral ones. When a core belief leads in a particular direction, then, all things being equal, the less store adherents of the relevant religion should put on a peripheral one that blocks an implication of the core belief.[25]

In other words, the internal logic of the religion might provide a reason to alter or reject peripheral beliefs when those are at odds with a core belief. This kind of religious reinterpretation is not uncommon. As noted earlier, it explains why many contemporary adherents of the Abrahamic religions – unlike some earlier adherents of these religions – do not approve of slavery, executing Sabbath violators, and child marriage.

In other cases, the peripheral belief does not precede engagement with antinatalism, and is introduced specifically in order to ward off the antinatalist conclusion. The problem with this kind of move to save a religious view from antinatalist conclusions, is that it involves wild assertions, and one could at least as easily assert the opposite. In response, it might be objected that this is an odd objection to advance against a religious view, given that religious views are frequently articles of faith rather than demonstrable claims. Once we enter the realm of religious argument, we can hardly complain if one indemonstrable claim is added to another.

There is some truth to this response. However, not all religious claims are created equal. Some are more demonstrable than others. There is *very* good reason for accepting the claims made by the first and second noble truths – the inextricability of existence and suffering, and postulating desire as the cause of suffering.[26] Other claims, such as those about reincarnation and the possibility, while still alive, of fully expunging all desire, are far more dubious.[27] The claim about *dukkha* continuing in the periods between purported incarnations is another highly dubious claim. We ought to put much more store on demonstrable claims than on indemonstrable ones.

That is true not only of those introducing beliefs to block antinatalist conclusions, but also of beliefs that precede engagement with antinatalism. It is not uncommon for religions, over time, to reject or alter beliefs, at least partly on the basis of their implausibility. For example, the Catholic Church once regarded the view that the earth moves around the sun as heretical. That is no longer the case.

Original sin

Buddhism is not the only religion with a core belief that should incline adherents towards antinatalism. Consider, for example, a number of doctrines that appear in Christianity. The first of these, aptly, is 'original sin', the state of sinfulness, perhaps inherited from Adam and Eve, and in which all humans find themselves. There are many interpretations of original sin, what possible impact it might have on free will, and what effect, if any, baptism might have. However, original sin is clearly not a desirable state, and thus to the extent that everybody, or even most people, are brought into an existence thus characterized, there is reason not to bring people into such an existence. How strong the reason is would depend on how bad a condition original sin is, and how easily and extensively it can be ameliorated. This is especially so if one thinks that there is no divine commandment to procreate that could serve as a counterweight to the reason that original sin provides against procreation.

Once again, it is possible to add assumptions to sidestep the antinatalist implications. For example, one could claim that procreation does not involve bringing somebody into a state of original sin, perhaps because the soul already exists in an unembodied state of original sin. I am not suggesting that any Christians *would* seek to avoid antinatalism in this

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way, but only that it is a possible line of argument. However, as with the Buddhist example, this would rescue Christianity from antinatalism at the cost of adding a highly implausible claim to the claim about original sin.

In its metaphysical form, the concept of original sin is open to many challenges. However, there is a naturalistic interpretation of it that is highly compelling. So interpreted, it refers to the fundamentally morally flawed nature of humanity. We come into existence as deeply defective beings and then do plenty of damage. This fact about humans lies at the heart of what I have called misanthropic arguments for antinatalism (Benatar 2015). There is plenty of evidence for the harm that humans do (Benatar 2015). Original sin, thus interpreted, is highly plausible. Disembodied souls existing in a state of original sin (or even merely in a state of moral corruption) is the opposite – highly implausible or, at the very least, indemonstrable.

Hell

Another religious concept that lends significant support to antinatalism is hell. If a child whom one creates will go to hell – or will merely stand a (non-trivial)[28] chance of doing so – then the *philanthropic* arguments for antinatalism receive a massive booster effect. For example, in determining whether to create a child, we would need to factor in not only all the suffering that that child will experience, and will be at risk of experiencing, during his or her life, but also all the suffering that this person will experience, or risk experiencing, in hell.

How much further religious support hell provides for antinatalism depends on (a) the magnitude of the risk of going to hell; (b) how bad the suffering in hell is; and (c) how long it endures. Given how bad many religious people take hell to be, even finite sojourns would add significant weight to antinatalism. If damnation is, or could be, *eternal*, then the additional weight is off the charts.

The magnitude of the risk of going to hell depends on how wide-reaching the sufficient conditions are for being sent to hell. Religions and religious denominations differ on this. Some have more relaxed 'admission criteria' than others. So-called exclusivist religions – those with the view that only believers of that religion will be spared the torments of hell – believe that *everybody* else will be consigned to hell.

Those who hold such a view should think, at the very least, that adherents of all the other religions – along with the atheists – should desist from procreation because any children those people create very likely will not adhere to the religion that (purportedly) prevents them from going to hell. We might call this 'antinatalism for the hell-bent'.

The believers in an exclusivist religion might think this is not a bar to their own procreation. This, they might reason, is because their own children, given the way they will be raised, are very likely to follow the parental religion and be spared an eternity in hell. However, there are at least two problems with this line of thinking.

First, the chances of a child abandoning the religion of their parents are not negligible. Children can and do reject their parents' religion, sometimes by adopting another religion, but perhaps more commonly by simply discarding religion entirely. The chances of this do vary, and are lower in more insular religious communities, but even then it sometimes happens.

Second, some exclusivist religions maintain that even some or many of their own adherents will also go to hell. In other words, not being a member of the approved religion is sufficient for admission to hell, but being a member of the religion is not sufficient to keep one out of hell. Either way, there are billions of people who, according to these religions, are headed for hell.

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It is very difficult to fathom how one could possibly be justified in creating a child who would run such a risk of enduring such suffering. This is not to deny that there are possible religious arguments that might be employed to ward off the antinatalist conclusion. However, they are inadequate.

For example, it might be argued that hell is avoidable through choices that the created person will make. If they fail to make the right choices, then they are morally responsible for that, and thus (purportedly) deserving of the fate that awaits them.

Such an argument would not be open to those who believe in predestination, or at least to those conceptions of predestination that either make free will impossible or that relegate some people to damnation irrespective of their free choices. However, the argument is problematic even for those religious people who reject predestination thus understood. This is, in part, because it exhibits a kind of moral callousness. Are there really no limits on how much somebody can deserve to suffer for even the most heinous moral crimes, let alone non-heinous ones such as happening to have the wrong beliefs? If there are not, why is placing somebody at the risk of such sin and such punishment not itself a great sin? One's offspring may be responsible for their damnable sin(s), but one is responsible for creating the damned sinner, which amounts to an enabling of damning sin.

Moreover, the desert argument loses sight of key antinatalist insights. Even if one thinks that some of the harms somebody will experience are those that they will deserve, it is still the case that if one does not create that person, they will neither exist nor deserve to suffer enormously. That is much better for that person than coming into existence and deserving to suffer.

Conclusion

Many religious people are hostile to antinatalism. Given the strong pronatalist orientations of many religions, this is not surprising. However, what that response overlooks are the antinatalist elements of various religions that exist alongside the (often) dominant pronatalist orientation. Even more important, religious antipathy to antinatalism ignores the strong antinatalist implications of central principles in at least some of the same religions.

The extent to which these various factors manifest varies from religion to religion, and also between different denominations of a single religion. Given the variations within each religion, any claim about what is true of a religion as a whole must be a massive generalization. Nevertheless, there is *some* value in providing such a generalization, if only to indicate the different combinations in which the factors can be found.

In Table 1, I summarize what I have said about each of the four religions I have discussed: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. For each religion, I consider how pronatalist it is, how prominent the antinatalist themes are within it, and finally, the extent to which its core beliefs dictate that it should be antinatalist. For each variable, I give the religion a ranking – from 1, which is the 'most' of the relevant variable, to 4, which is the 'least'. In some cases, more than one religion shares a particular position. In those cases, they have the same number.

In what follows, I summarize what I have said in this article, and thereby explain why I have given each of the rankings that are reflected in Table 1.

Judaism is the only of the religions that regards procreation as a commandment. Islam does not recognize an explicit commandment, but procreation is strongly encouraged. Christianity also generally encourages procreation, but to a lesser degree than Islam, not least because some denominations prohibit it for the clergy, and because sexual activity is a departure from an ideal.

For both Judaism and Islam, imitating God, and the Prophet in the case of Islam, has pronatalist implications. For Christianity, it is more complicated – God the Father created

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Table 1. Comparative Religious Antinatalism

	Pronatalist orientation				Antinatalist elements	Antinatalist implications of core beliefs				Final antinatalist ranking
	Commandment	*Imitatio Dei*	Community	Overall		Ending suffering	Original sin	Hell	Overall	
Judaism	1	1	1	1	3	2	-	3	3	2
Christianity	3	2	1	3	2	2	1	1	1	1
Islam	2	1	1	2	4	2	-	2	2	3
Buddhism	-	3/-	-	4	1	1	-	4	1	1

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both humans and animals, but Jesus did not procreate. Buddhism does not believe in a god, but it does accept something like a principle of *Imitatio Buddhae*.[29] The Buddha did have one child.

Preservation of community seems of equal importance to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, although the principle may have most urgency for the most endangered of these religions – Judaism. The principle does not apply in Buddhism.

Combining these pronatalist considerations, Judaism is arguably the most pronatalist, followed by Islam, and then Christianity, with Buddhism in a distant last place. Turning to the antinatalist elements of each religion, these are most pronounced in Buddhism, then in Christianity. Judaism takes third place. Islam is almost devoid of antinatalist threads.

In Table 1, I also consider three examples of core beliefs that have antinatalist implications, along with an overall score for such implications. The three Abrahamic religions all espouse a reduction or ending of suffering. However, it is a central principle of Buddhism. Of the religions considered, only Christianity has the concept of original sin.

The Abrahamic religions all have some concept of hell. However, it is least developed and least central in Judaism, which is also not at all religiously exclusivist. It does not see Judaism as the sole means to salvation, and it actively discourages conversion. Christianity and Islam both have more vivid conceptions of hell's torments. Christianity ranks higher than Islam on the hell-variable primarily because it is – overall, but not in every denomination – more exclusivist than Islam. Buddhism has no concept of hell – beyond the suffering of the natural (as distinct from the supernatural) world, that is.

Combining the antinatalist implications of core beliefs, Buddhism and Christianity tie for first place, albeit for slightly different reasons. Islam is next, with Judaism in last place.

If we aggregate all three major elements – pronatalism, antinatalist elements, and antinatalist implications – then Buddhism and Christianity both have the most *religious* reason to embrace antinatalism. They tie for first place but for different reasons. Christianity is more pronatalist than Buddhism and is second to Buddhism in its antinatalist elements but, given both original sin and hell, it has much stronger antinatalist implications resulting from its core beliefs. Judaism is probably in second place, with Islam having the least aggregative religious reason to embrace antinatalism.

However, none of this should lead us to lose sight of the fact that how much *religious* reason one has for embracing antinatalism is different from how much *overall* reason that one has for accepting antinatalism. If the arguments for antinatalism are sufficiently powerful, then any incompatibility between antinatalism and religion gives one more reason either to reinterpret or reject the religion than to dismiss antinatalism.

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Notes

1. See, for example, du Toit and Benatar (2017). I shall say more about these matters in a forthcoming book.
2. Kirk Lougheed has written a monograph on the possibility of Christian antinatalism (Lougheed 2026). Perhaps, in time, comparable works, focusing on other religions, will also be written.
3. I shall not demonstrate this here. However, Kirk Lougheed has demonstrated that none of the standard arguments for antinatalism are incompatible with Christianity (Lougheed 2026).
4. I am not aware of any psychological or sociological research that supports this conclusion. However, note that my claim is only the modest one that 'antinatalism *seems* to be more common among atheists'. My next sentence in the text explains why we have reason to think this.
5. This is not the only pronatalist verse in the Bible. John McKeown provides a long list of what he calls the 'fruitful verses' in the Jewish Bible (McKeown 2014).
6. This is ironic, given that it is, by far, also the least populous of the Abrahamic religions. The explanation for its low numbers lies elsewhere, as I shall elaborate upon below.

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7. At least one Christian *denomination* – the Mormon church – also recognizes an explicit commandment to procreate.
8. Yevamot 65b (Babylonian Talmud); Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer 1:13; Maimonides Sefer HaMitzvot, Positive Commandments, 212.
9. Of course, the plural formulation is also ambiguous. If it does not refer to respective couples, it can refer to all males, who are then reliant on their wives, as noted below.
10. This is not true of some Eastern (non-Latin) Catholic churches.
11. More on this below.
12. By the current century, the non-human *vertebrates* who have been most 'successful' at multiplying are those who are bred by humans for their flesh and bodily products. By any reasonable standards, this is a massive harm to those animals.
13. For example, according to one hadith, one must 'Marry the one who is fertile and loving, for I will boast of your great numbers'. (Nasa'ī-3227).
14. According to Jewish tradition, there are 613 commandments (mitzvot).
15. This is true at the time of writing, March 2026. However, if the current Iranian regime falls, this may change.
16. Indeed, they are not restricted to religious groupings. Members of ethnicities with small populations may have the same worry. The Jews, who are arguably at least as much an ethnicity as a religion, show that threatened groups need not be either religious or cultural, but may be both.
17. There are many possible views about meaning in life, according to which it can be true that the continuation of one's religious community can contribute to the meaning of one's life. There is no need to explicate all of these here because my argument does not rest on the claim that religious continuity *must* contribute meaning to existing lives. Instead, my argument is that *even if* religious continuity adds meaning to existing lives, there is still a question whether this would justify procreation.
18. In what follows, I shall discuss only the Abrahamic religions, as well as Buddhism as an example of Eastern religions. There are – and have been – many other religious traditions, which I do not discuss here, mainly because I know even less about them than I do about the religions I do discuss. Kirk Lougheed has argued that any version of African communitarianism, which is grounded in African religion, ought to embrace my misanthropic argument for antinatalism (Lougheed 2022).
19. All Hebrew Bible quotations are from the Koren Jerusalem Bible translation.
20. All Christian Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
21. All Talmudic references are to the Babylonian Talmud.
22. The Midrash includes a story that when God was about to create Adam, the ministering angels were divided on whether he should do so. The angels of kindness and righteousness recommended that he be created, but the angels of truth and peace recommended that Adam not be created. According to the Midrash, God cast Truth to the earth and then created Adam (Bereishit Rabba 8:5).
23. For more on the antinatalism in both Hinduism and Buddhism, see Coates (2014).
24. This is not quite true of Zen Buddhism, which is less concerned with final goals. However, Zen Buddhists too seek an end to suffering by ending both attachment and delusion.
25. While the ending of suffering is arguably most central to Buddhism, other religions cannot be untroubled by the suffering that pervades earth. This is why the Abrahamic religions are concerned with theodicy – attempts to reconcile the existence of an omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipotent God, with the existence of vast amounts of suffering. In Christianity, for example, the Irenaean theodicy justifies the existence of suffering by claiming that it is necessary for human moral and spiritual growth. However, this kind of response is susceptible to the same kind of responses as I offered to Professor Morioka's argument. The intrinsic badness of suffering is obvious, while the justifications sound like desperate rationalizations. Do we need quite so much suffering? What about the suffering of animals? There are theodicean responses to these questions, but they involve further contortions.
26. I shall not explain here why we have very good reason for accepting these claims. However, without referring explicitly to these noble truths, I have elsewhere (Benatar 2006, 60–92) (Benatar 2017, 64–91) made the case that life is filled with suffering and, at least on desire satisfaction views, this is attributable to the frustration of desires.
27. We have no evidence for reincarnation. While some desires can be extinguished during life, continuing life for any significant period is incompatible with the extinction of all desires, not least because of the vast amount of effort it takes to stay alive. Expending that effort requires some desire.
28. Kirk Lougheed adds this condition, which certainly makes the claim even easier to accept (Lougheed 2026, 94, 114–119).
29. Some might respond by pointing to the Zen koan: 'When you meet the Buddha, kill him' and claim that, paradoxically, imitating the Buddha might involve not imitating him. However, the quoted words can be interpreted in alternative ways.

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