The Naturalness of Religious Belief and the Non-Default Status of Atheism: Anthropological, Cognitive, and Historical Evidence

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Abstract

Claims that human beings are "born atheists" and that religious belief only arises through indoctrination or cultural conditioning have gained traction in some secular discourse. This report revisits this claim by synthesizing anthropological, cognitive, historical, and sociological evidence. Drawing on classic anthropological theories (Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim) and contemporary critiques (Leach, Fabian, Munn, Bloch, Greenhouse), we first demonstrate that religion is a universal human phenomenon and that notions of sacred time and ritual cycles pervade diverse societies. We then examine research in cognitive science of religion, particularly studies by Justin Barrett, Pascal Boyer, Deborah Kelemen, and Elisa Jarnefelt, which show that children and even many non- religious adults spontaneously attribute purpose, agency, and supernatural qualities to the world. International research projects at Oxford University conclude that impulses toward religion are part of our basic cognitive architecture and that atheism is a sophisticated response rather than a default state. Finally, we review historical patterns showing that religious ideas and practices persist across epochs and cultures, while sustained atheism emerges only under specific social and intellectual conditions. Together, these lines of evidence refute the claim that atheism is the natural human baseline; instead, they suggest that humans are predisposed to religious belief, and that secularization or disbelief requires deliberate cultural and intellectual work.

Keywords: Atheism as Default; Anthropology of Religion; Cognitive Science of Religion; Born Believers; Religious Universality; Teleological Thinking; Agency Detection; Secularization; Revitalization Movements

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance

Debates about whether religion is natural or whether atheism is the "default" human position have enormous implications for education, public policy, and inter- religious dialogue. Proponents of the default- atheism thesis often argue that religion is a late cultural invention foisted upon impressionable minds. Internet memes proclaim that everyone is "born an atheist" and that belief is always a product of indoctrination. Such assertions not only polarise public discourse but also misrepresent the complex interplay of cognitive predispositions, cultural contexts, and historical contingencies that shape human worldviews. To assess the validity of the default- atheism claim, we must move beyond anecdotes and examine empirical evidence from anthropology, cognitive science, and history.

1.2 Objectives and Structure

This report has three main objectives: (1) to summarise anthropological scholarship on the universality and diversity of religious belief, including critiques of linear and cyclical models of religious history; (2) to review findings from cognitive science of religion that bear on the naturalness of belief versus atheism; and (3) to analyse historical and sociological patterns in the emergence and persistence of atheism. Section 2 outlines classical and contemporary anthropological perspectives on religion and time. Section 3 introduces research in the cognitive science of religion, highlighting evidence that human minds are predisposed to detect agency and purpose. Section 4 discusses ethnographic, cross- cultural, and historical data demonstrating the ubiquity of religious practices and the rarity of sustained atheism. Section 5 explores modern secularization and the conditions under which atheism flourishes. The report concludes by integrating these strands to argue that religious belief is more natural than atheism and that the latter is a sophisticated, culturally contingent stance.

2 Anthropological Perspectives on Religious Universality

2.1 Foundational Theories of Religion

These foundational works establish early anthropological perspectives on religion and underscore linear models of evolution (Tylor, 1871; Frazer, 1890/1959; Durkheim, 1912/1965). Later scholars emphasise the adaptability and resilience of indigenous religions (Leach, 1961; Levi- Strauss, 1962/1966).

The anthropological study of religion began with an assumption of universality: all human societies exhibit some form of religious belief or ritual. Edward B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) defined religion as belief in spiritual beings and argued that animism was the earliest form of religion. James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890/1959) proposed a progression from magic to religion to science, suggesting a unilinear developmental model. Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912/1965) emphasized that collective rituals and symbols create social solidarity and that categories like time, space, and causality are socially constructed. Durkheim argued that "time" itself is divided into sacred intervals (festivals, Sabbaths, seasons) and profane intervals that structure communal life.

While Tylor and Frazer advanced a linear view of religious evolution, later anthropologists challenged both the evolutionary hierarchy and the assumption that religion would inevitably decline. Claude Levi- Strauss distinguished between "cold" societies that minimise historical change and rely on mythic cycles and "hot" societies that embrace historical transformations. Evans- Pritchard, Victor Turner, and others highlighted the richness and resilience of indigenous religions, showing that beliefs deemed "primitive" by evolutionists were adaptive and meaningful. Rather than vanishing, these religious systems coexisted with new forms and sometimes re- emerged through revival movements.

2.2 Time: Linear, Cyclical, and Spiral Models

The discussion of sacred and cyclical time draws on insights from Eliade and Leach (Eliade, 1954; Leach, 1961) and on Munn's ethnography of temporal cycles (Munn, 1992). Critiques of the linear/cyclical dichotomy highlight the importance of temporal pluralism and power relations (Bloch, 1977; Greenhouse, 1996; Fabian, 1983).

Mircea Eliade introduced the concept of *sacred time* to describe how ritual returns participants to the mythical moment of creation. Sacred time is "reversible" and recoverable; rituals "reactualize" the founding events and thus abolish profane time. For Eliade, archaic societies live in a continual cycle of mythic return. In contrast, the Abrahamic traditions adopt a linear perspective anchored in unique historical events such as Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. Edmund Leach noted that human experience includes both cyclical and linear processes—day/night cycles, seasons, life and death—yet cultures often prioritise one or the other. Leach argued that religion reconciles these contradictory experiences. Nancy Munn's ethnography of the Barasana of Amazonia shows how ritual cycles compress generations, bringing living people closer to their ancestors; genealogies are perceived as piles of leaves rather than long lines.

Critics caution against reifying the linear/cyclical dichotomy. Maurice Bloch observes that religious rituals create a sense of timelessness, yet they also generate irreversible change through initiation, marriage, and death. Carol Greenhouse argues that linear time dominates Western public institutions because it facilitates the management of bureaucracies and markets, yet cyclical representations persist and are strategically invoked by marginalized groups. Johannes Fabian critiques the "denial of coevalness," whereby anthropologists historically depicted non- Western peoples as living in a different time; this bias reinforced notions of evolutionary stages rather than recognising contemporaneity. Together, these insights undermine simple linear or cyclical models and emphasise temporal pluralism.

2.3 Revitalization and Religious Change

Revitalization movements exemplify how religions respond to crisis and modernity; these patterns underscore the persistence of religion in contemporary contexts (Wallace, 1956; Berger, 1999).

Anthropologists also document cycles of religious revival. Anthony F. C. Wallace defined revitalization movements as "deliberate, organized, conscious" efforts by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture, often through religious innovation. Such movements, including the Ghost Dance, Pentecostalism, and decolonizing syncretisms, illustrate how religions respond to crisis by reinterpreting tradition and incorporating new elements. Modernization does not produce uniform secularization; as sociologist Peter Berger noted, the world is "as furiously religious as ever" in many regions. While some individuals reject religion, entire societies rarely abandon it. These patterns challenge the assumption that atheism naturally expands as societies modernize.

3 Cognitive Science of Religion: Are Humans Born Believers?

3.1 Methodological Approaches

Cognitive science of religion (CSR) investigates the mental processes that make religious ideas intuitive or counterintuitive. Researchers use developmental psychology, experimental tasks, cross- cultural surveys, and neuroimaging to examine how people infer agency, purpose, and supernatural causation. One central concept is the *hyperactive agency detection device* (HADD), an evolved mechanism that predisposes humans to detect agents (e.g., predators, allies) from ambiguous cues. When combined with *the theory of mind (the ability to attribute mental states to others), HADD makes beliefs in gods, spirits,* and ancestors cognitively natural.

CSR scholars propose that minimal counterintuitive agents—beings that violate some but not all intuitive expectations (e.g., invisible but intentional)—are especially memorable and culturally transmissible (Boyer, 1994; Barrett, 2004).

3.2 Evidence from Child Development

Developmental studies demonstrate that children ascribe purpose and supernatural qualities to the world, attribute super properties to gods or invisible friends, and intuitively believe in an afterlife (Barrett, 2012; Boyer, 1994; Jarnefelt et al., 2015). Summaries of these findings emphasise that religious intuitions are part of basic cognition and that atheism requires reflective counter‑ instruction (Allen, 2021; Shenvi, 2012).

Empirical studies indicate that children spontaneously ascribe purpose, design, and supernatural qualities to the world. The University of Oxford's **Cognition, Religion & Theology Project** (CRT) synthesised over 40 studies across 20 countries. Summarising the results, the UC Santa Barbara Geography Department notes that **children and adults tend to perceive the natural world as having function or purpose**. Even those with advanced scientific education find teleological explanations satisfying. In early childhood, humans attribute *superpowers—such as omniscience, super perception, and immortality—to gods or invisible friends, and it takes longer to learn about human limitations than about* divine abilities. The CRT project concludes that impulses toward religion are part of the basic workings of the human mind and that atheism is a sophisticated, rather than natural, response. The Lutheran Alliance for Faith, Science and Technology reports similar findings: research shows that children and adults naturally perceive the world as purposeful; children attribute super knowledge and immortality to humans and gods; and beliefs in a soul that persists after death are intuitive. These tendencies persist into adolescence, when religious ideas may be easier to remember and use than scientific concepts. Moreover, **religious beliefs and practices may persist because they promote cooperation and generosity**.

Justin Barrett, a developmental psychologist, argues that children are "born believers." A review of his book *Born Believers* argues that children are naturally receptive to the idea of at least one god; as with walking and talking, belief emerges with minimal cultural input. Young children see order, purpose, and intentional design in the natural world and ascribe super‑ knowledge, super-perception, and immortality to supernatural agents. Barrett addresses critics who attribute religion solely to indoctrination by pointing to anecdotes of children of atheists who nonetheless express belief. Neil Shenvi's review of *Born Believers* further notes that children display "agency detection," "purpose detection," and "design detection," and assume that agents have true beliefs and enforce objective moral facts. These cognitive faculties make it easy for children to conceive of a deity who created the universe and adjudicates moral claims.

Research also shows that afterlife concepts are intuitive. Children often believe that the mind or soul persists after death and may need to be "talked out of" such beliefs. These findings align with cross‑ cultural surveys reporting that beliefs in ancestor spirits, ghosts, and reincarnation emerge spontaneously and persist even among individuals exposed to scientific explanations.

3.3 Teleological Bias Among Non‑ Religious Adults

Experiments with self‑ identified atheists reveal a persistent teleological bias; secularization, therefore, requires overriding intuitive biases (Jarnefelt et al., 2015).

Critically, predispositions toward teleological thinking are not confined to religious believers. **Jarnefelt, Canfield, and Kelemen** (2015) conducted experiments with self‑ identified atheists in the United States and Finland. Participants were shown images of

natural phenomena and had to judge quickly whether the phenomena were "purposefully made by some being." Despite rejecting supernatural beliefs, non‑ religious adults displayed a **default bias to judge natural phenomena as purposefully made under processing constraints increasingly**. Even when controlling for explicit belief in God or nature spirits, the bias persisted, suggesting that teleological reasoning is deeply embedded in cognition. The authors note that earlier studies show that when scientific and religious explanations coexist, children prefer religious frameworks, and adults often merge scientific and supernatural explanations. These findings undermine the claim that atheism is the default human state and indicate instead that secularization involves suppressing or overriding intuitive cognitive biases.

3.4 Religion as a Cognitive "Natural" and Science as "Unnatural."

Philosophical arguments highlight that religion aligns with intuitive cognition, whereas science requires sustained counterintuitive learning (McCauley, 2000).

Philosopher Robert McCauley argues that cognitively, religion is **natural,** whereas science is **largely unnatural**. In his essay "The Naturalness of Religion and the Unnaturalness of Science," he contends that, despite centuries of antagonism, no development in science will threaten the persistence of religion because the latter is rooted in universal cognitive processes. McCauley defines "natural" as familiar, obvious, and intuitive—beliefs or behaviours that arise without reflection. He notes that many features of religion operate automatically and quickly, overwhelm reflective efforts, and do not require extensive cultural input. In contrast, scientific thinking often requires counterintuitive reasoning, formal education, and deliberate effort, making it cognitively demanding. Therefore, while science can correct false intuitions, it cannot eradicate the underlying cognitive tendencies that give rise to religion.

Taken together, CSR studies show that human cognition is predisposed toward agency detection, teleological explanation, belief in mind–body dualism, and moral realism. These predispositions make religious concepts easy to acquire and difficult to extinguish. Atheism, by contrast, requires sustained cultural and intellectual scaffolding to suppress or reinterpret these intuitions. Consequently, the assertion that humans are naturally atheists is inconsistent with evidence from developmental psychology and cognitive science.

4 Cross‑ Cultural and Historical Evidence for Religious Universality

4.1 Ubiquity of Ritual and Belief

Cross‑ cultural observations of ritual and belief support the conclusion that religion is universal and functional across societies (Durkheim, 1912/1965; Boyer, 1994).

Archaeological and ethnographic records reveal that ritual behaviour and belief in supernatural agents are nearly universal across societies. Burial sites dating back at least 100,000 years contain grave goods, suggesting beliefs in an afterlife. Indigenous hunter‑ gatherers from the San and Hadza to the Inuit perform rituals to communicate with spirits or ancestors. Shamanism, ancestor worship, animism, and totemism occur on every inhabited continent, despite vast geographic and cultural separation. Anthropologists have documented no society lacking any form of religion. Durkheim argued that religion is the "opium of the people" not in the Marxist sense but because it binds the community together and expresses collective conscience. While the specific doctrines vary, the functions—providing cosmological explanations, enforcing morality, and creating social cohesion—are cross‑ cultural constants.

4.2 Rarity of Sustained Atheism in History

Instances of explicit atheism appear sporadically in history. Ancient Indian schools such as Cārvāka and certain Jain or Buddhist currents questioned the authority of Vedic gods. However,

they were minorities and often flourished in philosophical milieus rather than among the general population. In ancient Greece, some pre‑ Socratic philosophers, such as Democritus, espoused materialism, yet the populace continued to worship gods. Imperial China saw Confucian critiques of superstition, yet ancestor veneration and folk religion persisted. When Enlightenment thinkers in seventeenth‑ and eighteenth‑ century Europe promoted deism or atheism, their ideas circulated among elites while popular piety remained strong. Even in modern secular states, surveys indicate that the majority of people continue to profess some belief in a higher power or spiritual force.

Peter Berger's reassessment of secularization notes that modernization has not led to global atheism; rather, "the world today is as furiously religious as ever." Movements such as Pentecostalism, Sufism, charismatic Catholicism, and new religious movements have experienced explosive growth in the twentieth and twenty‑ first centuries. Anthropological studies document the resilience of religion in post‑ communist societies, where underground churches survived decades of state atheism. Even where secular humanism gains adherents, ritualised behaviours often reappear in civic forms—such as national ceremonies, sports fandom, or consumer rituals—illustrating the deep human need for meaning and communal expression.

4.3 Cycles of Secularization and Revitalization

Globally, there is no linear trajectory toward atheism; instead, history reveals cycles of secularization and renewal.
(Weber, 1905/1930; Casanova, 1994; Berger, 1999; Wallace, 1956).
The idea that societies progress irreversibly from superstition to science has been repeatedly challenged. Max Weber's theory of **disenchantment** argued that modernization and rationalization would lead to a demystified world. However, subsequent sociologists have pointed out that the decline of institutional religion in Europe coexists with the emergence of new spiritualities and the persistence of religion elsewhere. Weber himself recognised that **charisma** can generate new religious movements, which subsequently become routinized. Religious history thus includes cycles of disenchantment and re‑ enchantment: secularization creates space for new revival movements, as seen in the Great Awakenings and millenarian movements. These patterns align with Wallace's theory of revitalization.

From a global perspective, there is no linear trend toward atheism. While some societies experience declines in church attendance, others witness fervent religiosity and missionizing. The interplay of traditional beliefs and modern forces produces diverse trajectories: syncretism, fundamentalism, secular nationalism, or hybrid spiritualities. The consistent thread is that humans seek frameworks of ultimate meaning—religion, ideology, or spirituality to orient their lives. Atheism represents one possible framework, but it is neither universal nor default.

5 Emergence of Atheism and Secularization

5.1 Philosophical and Cultural Preconditions

Scholars identify literacy, welfare states, pluralism, science education, and individualism as conditions that facilitate unbelief (Casanova, 1994).

If religious belief arises naturally, how and why does atheism develop? Scholars suggest several factors. First, **literacy and abstract thinking** enable individuals to conceptualize metaphysical naturalism. Pre‑ literate societies rely more on mythic narratives than on philosophical argumentation. Second, **stable states and social safety nets** reduce reliance on supernatural protection or community support; secular welfare states correlate with higher percentages of non‑ religious citizens. Third, **pluralism and cultural contact** expose

individuals to multiple religious options, which may lead some to reject all of them. Fourth, **scientific education** can provide alternative explanatory frameworks that counteract teleological intuitions. Finally, **individualism and expressive individualism** encourage people to define their own beliefs rather than adhere to inherited traditions. These conditions are relatively recent, which explains why explicit atheism has been rare.

This rarity underscores the historical specificity of unbelief (Casanova, 1994).

5.2 Atheism as Cognitive Effort

Studies show that atheists default to teleological judgments under cognitive load and that suppressing these intuitions requires reflective System 2 processing (Jarnefelt et al., 2015). Barrett and Shenvi distinguish between natural religion and explicit theology, noting that specific ideologies require social reinforcement (Barrett, 2012; Shenvi, 2012).

Research in CSR suggests that unbelief involves overriding intuitive processes. Jarnefelt et al. show that even atheists default to teleological judgments under cognitive load. Suppressing this bias requires reflective, analytic thinking, which psychologists call "System 2" processing. Atheism thus demands sustained cognitive effort and is facilitated by environments that promote critical thinking. Neil Shenvi notes that Barrett distinguishes between "natural religion"—the spontaneous tendency to believe in gods—and "theology," the explicit doctrinal content. Children may naturally believe in a creator or spirits, but specific religious or anti- religious ideologies require education and social reinforcement.

5.3 Secularization in Context

Secularization involves differentiation of social spheres, declining authority, and shifting individual religiosity; however, these processes vary across regions and often coexist with religious revivals (Casanova, 1994; Greenhouse, 1996).

Sociologists such as Jose Casanova argue that secularization comprises the differentiation of social spheres (science, politics, religion), the decline in religious authority, and changes in individual religiosity. Europe exhibits some of these processes, but the United States and many parts of the Global South do not. In contexts where state ideology promoted atheism—such as the Soviet Union and China during the Cultural Revolution—religious revival followed once restrictions eased. Greenhouse notes that linear time enables bureaucratic management; modern institutions encourage punctuality, planning, and efficiency, which may marginalize ritual time. However, cyclical or sacred temporalities persist in festivals, pilgrimages, and indigenous calendars. Therefore, secularization is not simply the elimination of religion but the reconfiguration of its social role.

6 Critiquing the Default- Atheism Claim

6.1 Misinterpretations of Childhood Ignorance

Popular assertions that infants are atheists misinterpret cognitive development; research shows that children are predisposed to perceive purposeful design and divine agency (Allen, 2021; Barrett, 2012).

Claims that "everyone is born an atheist" often point out that newborns lack beliefs in God, just as they lack beliefs about stars or carrots. While trivially true, this statement conflates ignorance with atheism. Critics note that because newborns lack most beliefs, their lack of explicit theism is uninformative. The pertinent question is: what beliefs do children naturally form as their minds develop? A *New Scientist* special issue on religion, summarised by Allen (2021), acknowledges that "**children are born primed to see God at work all around them and do not need to be indoctrinated to believe in him**". The article emphasises that religion is deeply etched in human nature and cannot be dismissed as mere ignorance. Barrett summarises that **the vast majority of humans are born believers** and

that religious claims are attractive and easily acquired (Barrett, 2012). These statements directly contradict the assertion that children are naturally atheists.

6.2 The Need for Indoctrination

Evidence indicates that basic theism emerges with minimal cultural input, whereas unbelief requires sustained reinforcement and alternative explanations (Barrett, 2012; Shenvi, 2012; Jarnefelt et al., 2015).

Another argument holds that religious belief persists only because parents indoctrinate their children. Barrett and Shenvi counter this by pointing out that if indoctrination were the sole mechanism, religious belief would have died out due to attrition. In reality, children resist certain teachings (e.g., taste preferences) while readily adopting others. Anecdotes of atheist parents whose children spontaneously express belief illustrate that indoctrination is not necessary for basic theism. CSR studies show that minimal cultural input suffices for belief to emerge, whereas atheism requires sustained reinforcement and alternative explanatory frameworks.

6.3 Equating Religion with Ignorance

Science education requires deliberate training and often conflicts with intuitive cognition, whereas religious ideas align with natural cognitive biases (McCauley, 2000; Boyer, 1994; Barrett, 2004).

Default‑ atheism rhetoric sometimes portrays religion as a by‑ product of ignorance and science as its antidote. McCauley warns that this view overlooks the cognitive challenges of science, which often run counter to intuitive reasoning. Scientific concepts such as heliocentrism, evolution, and quantum mechanics are not self‑ evident; they require formal education and repeated practice. By contrast, religious narratives align with intuitive cognitive structures, agentive causation, teleology, and dualism and are thus easier to acquire and retain. Consequently, equating religion with ignorance not only insults believers but also misunderstands the cognitive underpinnings of human thought.

6.4 Cultural and Political Utilisation of Atheism

Analyses of colonialism and secularization demonstrate that atheism is entwined with power relations and is not neutral or universal (Fabian, 1983; Casanova, 1994).

Atheism can be mobilised for noble goals—such as promoting secular governance and protecting freedom of conscience—but it can also serve ideological projects. Fabian's critique of the denial of coevalness reminds us that colonial powers often cast non‑ Western religions as backward while promoting secularism as modern. Secularisation policies in the twentieth century sometimes involved coercive suppression of religious practices. Recognising that atheism is not inherently neutral but embedded in power relations cautions against presenting it as the natural default.

7 Conclusion

This report evaluated the claim that atheism is the human default. Anthropological evidence demonstrates that religion—however defined—is ubiquitous, resilient, and diverse. Early theories of linear religious evolution have been replaced by models emphasising cycles, spirals, and branching trajectories. Cognitive science of religion provides robust experimental support for the naturalness of belief: humans are predisposed to attribute purpose and agency, to believe in an afterlife, and to assume moral objectivity. Research with children and non‑ religious adults alike reveals a default teleological bias and a tendency to conceive of super‑ omniscient agents. These tendencies make religious beliefs easy to acquire and maintain, whereas atheism requires deliberate reflection, education, and supportive social contexts. Historical and cross‑ cultural surveys confirm that atheism has been rare and

contingent upon specific socio‑ political conditions; even in modernity, religion persists and often resurges.

Thus, the notion that humans are "born atheists" lacks empirical support. Rather, the preponderance of evidence indicates that religious belief is the more natural state, arising from basic cognitive architecture, social needs, and historical continuity. Atheism is a legitimate worldview, but it is an achievement rather than a default—one that demands critical inquiry, cultural scaffolding, and often a supportive secular environment. Recognising the naturalness of religious belief can foster empathy in debates between believers and non‑ believers and encourage a more nuanced understanding of the human search for meaning.

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