

We are built to believe, say scientists

Do humans need spirituality? An intriguing study has found that 71% of atheists believe in the supernatural. Why is belief so pervasive, even as we abandon traditional religion?



The hand of fate: London bookshop Treadwells reports a 50% increase in sales of tarot decks since 2017.

For its “Understanding Unbelief” project, researchers from the University of Kent questioned thousands of self-described **atheists** and **agnostics** across six countries (Britain, the US, Brazil, China, Denmark and Japan) about their beliefs.

What they found surprised them. Just under 20% of atheists say they believe in life after death — a belief shared by 55% of the general population. In total, 71% of atheists and 92% of agnostics held at least one supernatural belief, such as **astrology**.

Why is belief so pervasive, even when we reject traditional religion?

Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg thinks it

might be down to our brains, and one region in particular.

The parietal lobe is where our sense of self is formed. During **rituals**, this area of the brain becomes less active.

“Since it normally helps to create a sense of self, that sense of self starts to blur, and the boundaries between self and other — God, the universe, whatever it is you feel connected to — begins to **dissipate** and you feel one with it,” he explains.

Other studies have found that those with injuries to the right parietal lobe showed an increased feeling of closeness to a higher power.

Something else?

Do humans need the supernatural? Our most important principles — of justice, compassion and love — have been closely linked to religions. Thanks to a god or evolution, our brains are shaped to look for something bigger. Spirituality is the most powerful force we have.

But what exactly is spirituality? Any belief that isn't grounded in the material world? Does practising yoga count as a spiritual activity? We all have **irrational** beliefs and coping mechanisms. That's all this study shows.

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: The “Understanding Unbelief” study was

produced for a major atheism conference hosted by the Vatican last month.

Q: What do we not know?

A: If the parts of our brain that link to spiritual

beliefs are that way because the supernatural is real, or because our brain has evolved like that through chance. Or that belief has helped us to survive in some way.

YOU DECIDE

Do you have any supernatural beliefs?

ACTIVITIES

As a class, think of as many common superstitions as you can. For example, don't walk under a ladder.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“A little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion.”
 Francis Bacon, English philosopher and a Lord Chancellor (1561-1626)

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



WORD WATCH

Atheists – In the study, atheists were defined as people who don't believe in God.

Agnostics – Defined by the researchers as people who “don't know whether there is a

God, and [...] don't believe there is a way to find out”.

Astrology – Studying the movement and relative positions of the planets and stars to try to tell the future of a person's life. Horoscope signs are the most popular type of astrology in the UK.

Rituals – A religious or spiritual ceremony, like a church service.

Dissipate – Disappear or make disappear.

Irrational – Not logical or scientific.



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