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Reports of God's death may have been greatly exaggerated. Even hardened atheists instinctively believe that supernatural forces fashioned the world, according to a study.

Psychologists claim to have found a "naked intuition" among religious believers and determined freethinkers alike, that natural objects such as rabbits and volcanoes are created by a higher power.

People who reject the idea of God are more prone to personify the workings of random chance and the laws of science when they are given less than a second to assess them, the researchers found.

A group of 148 members of atheist and secularist organisations in the US and Canada were shown pictures of living and inanimate features of the natural world such as a giraffe, a stalagmite and a tiger's paw, and asked to say whether they had been deliberately created by some "being" or not. The photographs were mixed up with geometrical shapes and images of man-made objects such as scissors and balloons.

Half of the atheists had several seconds to think about their answers, and typically said only 3 per cent of the natural phenomena had been purposefully created. The other half, who had just 0.87 seconds to choose, said so 16 per cent of the time, a fourfold increase.

Similar but less dramatic effects were found in a mixed group of 352 religious, agnostic and non-religious Americans and another set of 151 atheists in Finland, where there is much less of an entrenched Christian culture.

The academics said their experiments suggested that there was “a deep-seated automatic tendency to see intentional causation in nature”. Most people could be hard-wired to think the natural world was put there by some greater force, they argued.

“The results show that the increased tendency to see creation in nature is not simply reduced to Abrahamic god beliefs,” they wrote in the journal *Cognition*.

“Beliefs in nature’s and the Earth’s intrinsic agency, which are generally overlooked, also play a significant and independent role. Notably, this was the case even among US atheists.”

Elisa Järnefelt, who led the research while she was at Boston University but who is now based at Newman University in Birmingham, said her team was now investigating whether the same held true in China.

“Although China is often dubbed as the most atheistic country in the world, we are finding adults have a variety of beliefs in supernatural agents,” she said. Dr Järnefelt and her colleagues suggested that the effect could help to explain why non-religious people often described evolution as shaping different species for a purpose.

“It has long been known that most people misunderstand natural selection, absorbing newly learnt scientific information into existing intuitive and scientifically inaccurate explanatory belief systems,” they wrote.

“Natural selection is often understood as a quasi-intentional designing force that gives animals the functional traits they need in order to survive.”

*Article was copied from the [Times of London](#).