

Cultural Universals and Adaptations

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Culture itself is an evolutionary adaptation that has allowed our species to dominate our planet. Our capability to maintain a cohesive culture allows humans to adapt as a group to changing conditions much faster than evolution ever could.

One place this stands out is when considering cultural universals – that is, core beliefs, behaviors, or symbols that are shared among every culture – since the only known explanation for such a phenomenon is that these constructs apply some benefit to the survival and propagation of the culture as a whole. They are adaptations.

When reviewing Murdock’s list of cultural universals, a couple items stuck out to me: the supernatural and the soul. I have long considered myself to be an Atheist (specifically of the American English-speaking variety) and I thought it would be interesting to examine the atheist rejection of these concepts through the lens of a cultural adaptation.

Of course, this puts me in dangerously ethnocentric waters, so I must navigate carefully. The atheist rejection of the soul and the supernatural has historically been in opposition to existing cultural constructs based around belief in these ideas. For most American atheists, this specifically means a rejection of the Abrahamic god and the afterlife. To claim this as a positive adaptation, therefore, is to implicitly claim the rejection of “religion” is a superior position for believing in one – which stands against the principle of cultural relativism. So, I will be careful to note when my biases are used to construct opinions on “value”.

First, however, it must be understood that while culture shapes the beliefs and behaviors of individual people, individual people shape the cultures around themselves. Atheism is itself a counterculture that arises when individuals who have turned away from a core cultural construct (religion) find each other and build a community amongst themselves. Thus, the first adaptive property of this belief (or lack thereof) is that the belief itself allows the creation of a supportive culture that gives atheists access to community that might have otherwise been lost. I think the positive nature of such a thing is not controversial.

The second and third adaptive properties are more debatable and will require much more justification. To start, when atheism expands within a society, it will naturally make that society as a whole more secular. Whether or not this is adaptive or maladaptive is a matter of opinion, but there is reason to believe that there is at least a correlation between overall quality of life in a country and how secular that country is – which suggests secularism is at least not strongly maladaptive. I, of course, am extremely biased here. Not only am I an atheist but I am also a westerner that puts weight into the cultural construct of “separation of church and state”, and so debate is warranted.

Finally, there is evidence to suggest (see sources) that lower religiosity correlates to an increased resistance to conspiratorial thinking, which may be especially relevant in the modern age. This could potentially be explained in part by the shared belief among atheists that people should only believe what can be proven – the rejection of faith. Of course, that’s not to say faith is a prerequisite for conspiracy by any means – but this phenomena could prove beneficial as time goes on and if religion continues to decline. Discussions on additional consequences of these trends is also warranted.

My goal, and the goal of any anthropologist, is to understand the naked truth of human experience. My perspective has pointed me towards an understanding that the rejection of the supernatural and the soul is a positive adaptation within the atheist community, and I have presented some evidence in support of my claim in the small amount of space available in this short essay in the hope I will continue to grow my understanding of these topics.

Sources

Marius F., Michał B., Roland I. (2022). [On the Relation Between Religiosity and the Endorsement of Conspiracy Theories: The Role of Political Orientation](#)

World Population Review (2024). [Secular Countries 2024](#)

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