

Religion Is a Mirror, Teleology Is the Lamp

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Citation: Ashkenazi, E. (2025). Religion Is a Mirror, Teleology Is the Lamp. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 1(1), 01-04.

Abstract

How our purpose-hungry minds keep remaking “religion” in new clothes Religion doesn’t cause societies to be what they are. It mostly reflects how people already think and feel, then packages that into a workable operating model for large groups. The hidden motor is our built-in teleological habit - reading purpose and intention into everything. Unless we consciously shift from teleology (“what is it for”?) to causality (“what cause it”?) we’ll keep rebuilding religion-like systems, under banners like science, liberalism, nationalism, parties, brands. Change the underlying conditions and the thought-mode, and the institutions will change with them.

The real direction of influence

When life is uncertain, people reach for stories and symbols that promise safety, meaning, and belonging. When many people must coordinate (share space, risks, resources) those stories get codified into rules, roles, and routines. That codified package is what we call religion. It’s a mirror of the crowd’s imagination and needs and a business-plan for running a big community: who leads, who follows, what’s permitted, what’s punished, how calendars sync bodies, how disputes end, how loyalty is maintained.

Because the package fits its people so well, it looks like the driver. But causality usually runs the other way: conditions • shared affects/ideas • institutional package. Religion is the packaging, not the factory.

The five functions that make any big group work

Across cultures and centuries, successful religions do the same five jobs. The beliefs can vary wildly, the functions don’t:

- Doctrine – compress complex myths into simple rules: do X, avoid Y.
- Ritual – put bodies in sync (weekly gatherings, fasts, festivals).
- Authority – settle disputes, allocate rank, define “orthodox”.
- Boundary – mark insiders vs. outsiders (names, dress, taboos).
- Sanction – reward compliance, penalize defection (now or hereafter).

These are the minimum parts any huge system needs to reduce chaos. That's why the essence of religion is generic: the same operating system, different wallpapers.

Teleology - the hidden engine that keeps recreating religion

Here is the pressure point: humans are teleology machines. Left alone, we default to reading purpose and intention into what exists ("it's for something", "someone meant this"). That bias is ancient and useful in daily life (and have his own causes) but it's fatal for clear social explanation.

Time-Reversal Error - Teleology runs time backward! Instead of asking "what produced this"? it smuggles a future intention into the past and calls it the cause. The downstream function becomes the upstream origin, and real causes are demoted to mere instruments of a supposed plan. This inversion makes nature look purpose-built, religious thinking then steps in to stabilize the flipped map with stories that keep our minds orderly when reality behaves indifferently - even absurdly.

- Teleology makes us treat institutions as agents with designs, rather than products of many causes.
- Teleology fuses with emotion - especially fear and hope - and the mix is explosive: we personify fortune, moralize randomness, invent cosmic intentions.
- Religion expertly channels this bias: it translates purpose-hungry thinking into doctrine, ritual, and authority that stabilize cooperation.

Key consequence: If we don't consciously shift from teleology to causal thinking, we will keep reproducing "religious-like" structures even when we think we're being secular or scientific. We'll get science-as-creed, liberalism-as-faith, party-as-church - same five functions, new brand guidelines.

Why it rises everywhere (and what would rise if it didn't)

- Human drive: persevere, protect, belong.
- Uncertainty: droughts, wars, plagues, recessions, randomness (are all caused by our limited and fragmented perceptions – we're aware of the effect but missing its full causality concatenation).
- Coordination problem: strangers can't run a city on personal favors; they need shared scripts.

Put that together and you'll get systems that channel hope and fear into predictable behavior. Religion is one proven way. Nationalism, party ideology, personality cults, and even brand-based tribes can do the same job. If religion vanished tomorrow but teleology stayed, a fresh religion-substitute would bloom by Monday.

"Business-plan" isn't cynical - it's operational clarity

Think like an operator:

- Value: certainty amid uncertainty (meaning, belonging, salvation).
- Segments: ordinary people, rulers seeking legitimacy, communities seeking order.

- Channels: rituals, schools, media, architecture, dress codes, holidays.
- Flows: tithes, time, attention, labor, votes, loyalty.
- Costs: clergy, buildings, administration, enforcement.
- Moat: taboos, heresy rules, identity markers hard to fake.
- Metric: compliance, cohesion, reproduction across generations.

Once you see the operations board, the mystery dissolves.

Why “religion caused X” is usually a category error

Take any charged example - a war with sacred slogans, censorship “in the name of faith”, a charity wave, a reform movement. If you trace the chain, you’ll find prior drivers: material interests, political strategies, tech shifts, and mass emotions. Religion supplies language, cohesion, and coordination. it amplifies an existing current.

- Wars: land, power, fear, resources, prestige - religion gives the flags and drumlines.
- Suppression: elite insecurity and fragile regimes; religion provides the costume.
- Charity/reform: when shared interests line up with reality, religious frames scale the work.

Religion is the amplifier, not the generator.

Why religious forms change when the world changes

Trade, technology, education, and law reset everyday life. New tools change risks, new media connect new tribes, family and work time reshuffle. Religions adjust to fit or fragment and lose out to alternatives that fit better.

- In disruption and fear, forms tighten (people want hard lines).
- In stable, high-trust settings, forms relax.
- In media upheaval, hybrid forms compete for attention and authority.

When the crowd’s imagination moves, the mirror moves.

The mode switch: from purpose to cause

Here’s the upgrade path that actually breaks the loop:

- Ask for chains, not intentions. Replace “What is it for”? with “By what causal sequence did this arise”?
- Name the drivers. Scarcity, incentives, technologies, enforcement, status games - map them explicitly.
- Design against teleology. Build transparency, feedback loops, and falsification into institutions so purpose-myths can’t harden unchecked.
- Lower background fear. Courts that work, basic security, public health, honest statistics, reduce the uncertainty that fuels teleological overreach.
- Protect free inquiry. Open critique lets causal accounts outcompete purpose-myths.

Do that, and you don’t need heavy myth to keep people in line. cooperation stands on shared reality.

The clean way to hold the whole picture

- Religion is an operator acting on what already exists in minds and conditions.
- Its essence is generic: the same five jobs recur because large groups need those jobs done.
- Treating it as a first cause confuses a coordination mechanism with the real sources, scarcity, ambition, fear, technology, and law.
- If we don't change our thinking mode (teleology · causality), we will keep reinventing religion under new names, even in labs and parliaments.

Fix conditions. Switch modes. Then let institutions - religious or otherwise - adapt to a calmer, clearer crowd.