

RELIGION AND POWER SERIES

REL-003 | OPEN DISTRIBUTION

GOD IN THE STADIUM

Religion Without God and the Universal Capture Architecture

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The stadium fills. Seventy thousand people wearing the same colours, moving together, singing together, weeping together, hating the same enemy together. The referee makes a call that goes against the home side. The crowd turns as one organism. In that moment, the referee is not a man doing a difficult job. He is the agent of cosmic injustice — the false priest who has betrayed the sacred. Tell me this is not religion.

PREFATORY NOTE

REL-001 established the exclusion engine as a universal mechanism: group identity combined with claims of special access to higher meaning, producing boundary, hierarchy, and violence as structural consequences. REL-002 went to the source — the African oral tradition that predated the fence and survived its construction.

REL-003 makes the move that unlocks the full scope of the argument: religion is not a category defined by God. It is a category defined by the mechanism. The moment that is understood, football becomes religion. Communism becomes religion. The political party, the nation, the market, the ideology — all become expressions of the same engine that REL-001 described in theological terms. The priests are everywhere. The fences are everywhere. The capture architecture is universal.

This document is not an argument that these things are bad because they resemble religion. It is an argument that they are subject to exactly the same structural analysis — and exactly the same structural failures — as the traditions that call themselves religious. The engine does not care what it runs on.

I. WHAT RELIGION ACTUALLY IS: THE STRUCTURAL DEFINITION

The standard definition of religion centres on God: a system of belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power. This definition is immediately inadequate. Buddhism in its original form has no God. Confucianism has no God. Certain forms of Judaism are effectively atheistic in their practice. The definition fails its own test cases within the traditions it is supposed to describe.

The sociological and anthropological definitions are more useful precisely because they are structural rather than content-based. Emile Durkheim defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things — things set apart and forbidden. William James described it as the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. Neither definition requires God. Both require: a distinction between the sacred and the profane, a community organised around that distinction, and practices that maintain the boundary between them.

RELIGIOUS ELEMENT	THEOLOGICAL RELIGION	FOOTBALL	COMMUNISM	POLITICAL PARTY	THE MARKET
Sacred object / text	Scripture — Torah, Bible, Quran	The club, its colours, its history	Das Kapital; the works of the founding leader	The party programme; the leader's speeches	The price mechanism; GDP; growth
Creation myth	Genesis; divine origin of the world	Club founding story; legendary first season	The revolution; the historical dialectic leading to this moment	The founding of the party; the defining struggle	Adam Smith's invisible hand; the natural emergence of markets
Priests / intermediaries	Clergy, rabbis, imams	Managers, commentators, club legends	Party officials; ideological commissars	Party leadership; spin doctors	Economists; central bankers; financial analysts
Rituals	Prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, sacraments	Match day, chants, scarves, pre-match rituals	May Day parades, party meetings, self-criticism sessions	Party conferences, canvassing, rallies	Trading hours, quarterly earnings, budget announcements
In-group / out-group	Believers vs. unbelievers / infidels	Our club vs. the enemy; the rival supporter as corrupted	The proletariat vs. the class enemy; the deviationist	Party members vs. opponents; the traitor within	Market participants vs. those outside; the irrational actor
Heresy / excommunication	Apostasy; excommunication; takfir	Supporter who switches clubs; the traitor fan	Deviation; Trotskyism; revisionism; purge	Crossing the floor; deselection; expulsion	Heterodox economics; regulation; questioning growth

Promised land / end state	Heaven; the Kingdom of God; paradise	The championship; glory; the perfect season	The classless society; the withering of the state	Electoral victory; the just society; the manifesto delivered	Equilibrium; perfect markets; infinite growth
Martyrs / saints	Saints, prophets, holy figures	Legendary players; those who died for the club	Revolutionary martyrs; heroes of the struggle	Founding figures; those who sacrificed for the cause	Self-made entrepreneurs; market pioneers

The table is not a metaphor. It is a structural mapping. Each column deploys the same elements in domain-specific vocabulary. The function of each element — to define the sacred, maintain the boundary, identify the enemy, reward the faithful, punish the deviant, and point toward the promised end state — is identical across every column. The content differs. The architecture is the same.

FINDING 1

Religion is not defined by God. It is defined by the mechanism: a community organised around a distinction between the sacred and the profane, with rituals that maintain the boundary, priests who mediate access to the sacred, and an in-group/out-group structure that produces the exclusion engine of REL-001. Football, communism, political parties, and market ideology all meet this definition structurally. The engine runs on all of them.

II. FOOTBALL: THE MOST HONEST RELIGION

Football is the most useful case study precisely because it makes no pretence of being about ultimate truth. It does not claim to explain the cosmos, to offer salvation, or to provide ethical guidance for living. It is about a ball going into a net more often than the other team puts it in your net. The nakedness of the purpose makes the religious structure around it more visible, not less. When you can see the mechanism operating on something this trivial, you can no longer pretend the mechanism is about the content.

The sacred and the profane

The club's colours are not clothing. They are identity markers of the most absolute kind — to wear them is to declare membership, to desecrate them is to commit an act that supporters experience as genuine violation. The stadium on match day is sacred space: behaviour is prescribed, certain acts are permitted that are not permitted elsewhere, and the collective emotional register is elevated beyond what ordinary social interaction produces. The away supporter in the home end is not merely someone in the wrong seat. They are a profane presence in sacred space — and the violence that sometimes follows is experienced by its perpetrators as something like righteous defence of the sacred.

The enemy as cosmic force

The rival club is not a sports organisation that plays the same game. It is the representative of everything wrong, everything corrupt, everything opposed to what is good and true. In Glasgow, Celtic and Rangers have served for a century as proxies for Catholic and Protestant identity, Irish and British national feeling, working-class and establishment positioning. The football is the surface. Underneath it is a religious war that predates the clubs and would

continue without them. In Sarajevo, in Buenos Aires, in Istanbul, in every city where football tribalism has produced serious violence, the pattern is the same: the opponent is not merely a competitor. They are a moral enemy.

The referee as fallen priest

The referee is the most theologically interesting figure in football. He is supposed to be the neutral arbiter — the representative of the law, standing outside both tribes. In practice, he is experienced by both sides as secretly aligned with the other. Every decision that goes against the home side is not merely wrong. It is evidence of corruption, bias, or malice. The referee who costs the home side a match is not a man who made a mistake. He is a traitor to the sacred trust placed in him by the laws of the game. The violence directed at referees — physical in the lower leagues, sustained abuse at the highest level — is the violence of a congregation toward a priest who has betrayed the faith.

The FIFA priesthood and its capture

FIFA is the Vatican of football: the institutional body that claims to govern the sacred in the interests of all believers while operating primarily in the interests of the institutional class that controls it. The corruption scandals that have periodically engulfed FIFA — the bribery, the vote-buying, the allocation of World Cups to states that used them as sportswashing operations — are not aberrations from an otherwise functional institution. They are the capture architecture operating exactly as the REL-001 analysis predicts: the priests control access to the sacred, and they extract material benefit from that control. The fans — the actual practitioners of the religion — have no meaningful governance role in the institution that governs their sacred.

Football is the most honest religion because it admits its purpose is a ball in a net. Everything it builds around that admission — the identity, the enemy, the priest, the sacred space, the promised glory — is pure mechanism, visible to anyone who looks. Which is why it is the best mirror for understanding what the mechanisms are doing in traditions that claim to be about something more.

FINDING 2

Football deploys every element of the religious mechanism — sacred object, creation myth, priests, rituals, in-group/out-group, heresy, promised end state — around a purpose so transparently trivial that the mechanism is visible without disguise. The FIFA capture architecture replicates the institutional capture of theological religion precisely: the priestly class controls access to the sacred and extracts material benefit from that control, while the actual practitioners — the fans — have no governance role. Football is religion. It is also the clearest available illustration of how religion works.

III. COMMUNISM AND THE POLITICAL PARTY: THE SECULAR SCRIPTURE

Communism is the most theologically complete of the secular religions. It has a creation narrative (the history of class struggle), a sacred text (Das Kapital, the Communist Manifesto, and the works of whichever founding father the particular movement follows), a priesthood (the party vanguard, the ideological commissars), a promised end state (the classless society, the withering of the state), and a heresy tradition more elaborate and more brutal than most theological religions have managed.

The parallel was observed early. Bertrand Russell wrote in 1920 that Bolshevism combined the characteristics of the French Revolution with those of the rise of Islam. The god is Marx, the messiah is Lenin, the Holy Book is Das Kapital. The resemblance is not superficial. It is structural — and it explains why communist movements have reproduced the persecution dynamics of religious institutions with such fidelity.

Heresy and the purge

The history of communist movements is, in large part, a history of heresy prosecution. Trotskyism, Titoism, revisionism, deviationism — the vocabulary of communist internal conflict is the vocabulary of theological schism. The Stalinist purges were not merely political power struggles. They were theologically structured: the accused were charged with betrayal of the sacred truth, forced to confess their deviation in public self-criticism sessions that replicate the structure of religious confession, and then punished with an intensity that made sense only in the framework of sacred violation. You do not purge a competitor. You purge a heretic.

The political party as congregation

The political party — not only communist parties but parties of all ideological tendencies — replicates the congregational structure of religious community. The party has its doctrine (the programme), its founding figures (treated with the reverence of saints or prophets), its rituals (conferences, rallies, canvassing sessions), its boundary (membership, the whipping system, the expectation of loyalty), and its heresy mechanism (crossing the floor, speaking against the leadership, the traitor narrative). The Labour Party member who votes with the Conservatives is not merely making a different political judgment. They have committed apostasy. The language used — betrayal, traitor, sell-out — is the language of religious violation.

The leader as prophet

Every mass political movement that has produced a dominant leader has produced a quasi-religious relationship between leader and followers. Mao, Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Chavez, Trump — the political spectrum is irrelevant to the structural pattern. The leader embodies the sacred narrative of the movement. Their words are scripture. Their judgment supersedes the collective judgment of the institution. Criticism of the leader is experienced by followers as an attack on the movement's sacred identity, not as normal political disagreement. The personality cult is not a manipulation technique grafted onto a political movement. It is the natural product of the religious mechanism operating in a political context.

The promised end state as the engine

Every mass political religion requires a promised end state that justifies present sacrifice: the classless society, the thousand-year Reich, the great again nation, the socialist paradise. The end state is never arrived at — structurally cannot be arrived at, because the movement's identity depends on the journey rather than the destination. A communist party that achieved the classless society would have nothing left to be. The promised end state is the theological heaven of the secular religion: always approaching, never arrived at, justifying everything done in its pursuit, and maintained as the horizon precisely because achieving it would dissolve the structure that makes the priests necessary.

FINDING 3

Communism is the most complete secular religion, with a creation narrative, sacred text, priesthood, heresy tradition, and promised end state that replicate theological religion in structural detail. The political party — across all ideological tendencies — replicates the congregational structure with its

doctrine, founding saints, rituals, boundary, and apostasy mechanism. The promised end state is theologically necessary as a horizon, not as a destination — achieving it would dissolve the structure that makes the institution necessary.

IV. THE MARKET AS SECULAR THEOLOGY

The market is the most powerful and most successfully disguised secular religion of the current era. It is disguised as science — as the neutral description of how human exchange actually works — which makes its religious character harder to see and its priestly class harder to identify as such. But the structure is unmistakable once the disguise is removed.

The invisible hand as God

Adam Smith's invisible hand — the metaphor by which individual self-interest, operating through the price mechanism, produces collective outcomes that no individual planned — functions in market theology as God functions in theistic religion: as the higher intelligence that makes sense of apparent chaos, that converts the self-interested actions of individuals into something that serves a larger good, and whose workings are beyond human comprehension or interference. To interfere with the market is to interfere with the divine order. The economist who argues for regulation is the heretic who claims to know better than God.

GDP as sacred number

Gross Domestic Product is not a neutral measurement. It is a sacred number — the primary index by which the health of the collective is judged, to which all other values are ultimately subordinated, and whose growth is understood as the purpose toward which policy should be directed. A society whose GDP grows is succeeding. A society whose GDP contracts is failing. That GDP growth is compatible with the destruction of ecosystems, the concentration of wealth, the deterioration of public health, and the collapse of social cohesion — none of this dislodges it from its sacred status. The number is the truth. Other truths are subordinated to it.

The economist as priest

The economist occupies the same structural position as the theological priest: the trained intermediary between the layperson and the sacred knowledge, whose years of formation in the discipline have equipped them to read the sacred texts (mathematical models, econometric studies, the canon of economic theory) and to pronounce on what the sacred order requires. The layperson who questions the economist's judgment is not disagreeing with an expert. They are questioning someone who has access to truth they cannot access. The response — you don't understand economics — is structurally identical to the theological response to the layperson who questions the priest: you don't understand scripture.

Poverty as sin

The market theology has a doctrine of poverty that functions as a doctrine of sin: poverty is, in its deepest logic, the consequence of individual failure — of insufficient effort, insufficient skill, insufficient willingness to participate in the market on its terms. The poor are not the victims of a system. They are the individuals who have not made the right choices. This doctrine is maintained in the face of overwhelming evidence that poverty is structurally produced — by the distribution of ownership, by the wage-setting power of employers, by the inheritance architecture, by the monetary system. The evidence does not dislodge the

doctrine. Doctrines are not dislodged by evidence. They are maintained by faith and enforced by the priestly class.

FINDING 4

The market is a secular religion disguised as science. The invisible hand functions as God. GDP is the sacred number to which all values are subordinated. The economist is the priest who mediates access to sacred knowledge. Poverty is the doctrine of sin — individual failure rather than structural consequence. The disguise as neutral description makes the market theology more powerful than most theological religions: it is harder to identify as a belief system, and therefore harder to argue with on equal terms.

V. THE UNIVERSAL CAPTURE ARCHITECTURE: THE PRIESTS ARE ALWAYS THERE

Across every domain where the religious mechanism operates — theological, sporting, political, economic — the same institutional capture architecture emerges. The pattern is sufficiently consistent to be treated as a structural law rather than a repeated coincidence: wherever a community organises itself around a sacred narrative, a priestly class emerges that claims special access to that narrative, controls its interpretation, and extracts material benefit from that control.

DOMAIN	THE SACRED	THE PRIESTLY CLASS	ACCESS CONTROL MECHANISM	MATERIAL EXTRACTION
Theological religion	God; scripture; salvation	Clergy, rabbis, imams, bishops	Canonical interpretation; sacramental gatekeeping	Tithes; property; institutional endowments; political influence
Football	The club; its glory; its history	FIFA; national federations; club owners; agents	Licensing; broadcast rights; transfer system; ticket allocation	Broadcasting revenue; transfer fees; sponsorship; sportswashing contracts
Communism	The revolution; the classless society	The party vanguard; ideological commissars; the nomenklatura	Party membership; ideological conformity; access to publication	Nomenklatura privileges; state resources; political power immune from democratic removal
Political parties	The programme; the movement; the leader	Party leadership; donors; the parliamentary group	Candidacy selection; whipping system; media access; party funding	Ministerial positions; consultancy; lobbying access; honours
The market	The price mechanism; growth; the invisible hand	Economists; central bankers; financial sector leadership	Credentialing; access to capital; regulatory capture; rating agencies	Management fees; interest; carried interest; the financialisation premium

Nationalism	The nation; its special mission; its history	Political class; military leadership; media establishment	Citizenship; security apparatus; narrative control of history	State contracts; military spending; land; rents on national resources
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The table reveals a structural consistency that goes beyond metaphor. In every domain, the priestly class performs the same functions: it claims special access to the sacred narrative, it controls the mechanism by which others access that narrative, and it extracts material benefit from that control. The benefit takes different forms — tithes, transfer fees, management fees, ministerial positions — but the structure of the extraction is identical.

And in every domain, the capture produces the same distortion: the institution that was created to serve the practitioners — the congregation, the fans, the workers, the citizens, the market participants — is progressively oriented toward serving the priestly class instead. The church serves the clergy. FIFA serves the federation officials. The party serves the leadership. The central bank serves the financial sector. The capture is not a corruption of the institution. It is the natural endpoint of the mechanism, operating over time without external check.

The priests are always there. They arrive early, before the institution has hardened, and they build themselves in. By the time the practitioners notice, the institution exists to serve the priests, and the priests control the narrative that explains why this is correct.

FINDING 5

The capture architecture is universal. Wherever a community organises around a sacred narrative, a priestly class emerges, claims special access to the narrative, controls its interpretation, and extracts material benefit from that control. The extraction progressively orients the institution away from serving the practitioners and toward serving the priestly class. This is not corruption. It is the structural endpoint of the mechanism operating without external accountability. The priests are always there. The question is always: who holds them accountable, by what mechanism, and what happens when no such mechanism exists.

VI. WHAT THIS MEANS FOR HOW WE GET OUT

The universality of the mechanism is not cause for despair. It is a diagnostic clarification. If the exclusion engine and the capture architecture are structural features of how human communities organise around sacred narratives — not specific to any theology, not curable by replacing one ideology with another — then the solution is also structural, not theological or ideological.

The solution is not to abolish sacred narratives. Humans will organise around them regardless. The solution is to build accountability architectures that are external to the priestly class — that the priests cannot capture, because they were designed with the capture dynamic in mind. This is what the remaining documents in this series address: REL-004 through the secular mutations of the engine, and REL-005 through the concrete frameworks — Zion 3 and Aurora/Fractal Commons — that attempt to build institutions whose legitimacy does not depend on who is inside the fence.

WHAT DOES NOT WORK	WHY	WHAT MIGHT WORK
Replacing one sacred narrative with another	The new narrative will reproduce the engine; the new priests will reproduce the capture	Accountability architecture external to the priestly class, designed with capture resistance
Arguing against the sacred narrative on rational grounds	Doctrines are not held rationally; evidence does not dislodge them; the argument is experienced as heresy	Structural change to the access control mechanism — who can interpret the sacred, by what process, with what accountability
Appealing to the priests to reform themselves	The priests' material interest is in maintaining the capture; reform threatens their position; they will perform reform while preserving the structure	External enforcement with real sanctions — equivalent to what MED-004 proposed for journalism, applied to every captured institution
Waiting for the sacred narrative to exhaust itself	Sacred narratives do not exhaust themselves; they mutate; the engine moves to a new host narrative while the practitioners believe they have escaped it	Conscious identification of the mechanism wherever it operates, as a standing analytical practice — which is what this series is doing

The most important implication of REL-003's argument is this: the person who leaves the church and joins a political party has not escaped the mechanism. The person who abandons communism for market liberalism has not escaped the mechanism. The person who stops following football and devotes themselves to their nation has not escaped the mechanism. The engine moves with them. The only way to escape it is to see it — to recognise the sacred narrative, the priestly class, the capture architecture, and the exclusion engine for what they are, in every domain where they operate, including the domain of one's own most deeply held commitments.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

FINDING	CORE CLAIM
1 — The Structural Definition	Religion is defined by the mechanism, not by God. Any community organised around a distinction between the sacred and the profane, with priests, rituals, in-group/out-group structure, and a promised end state, is deploying the religious mechanism — regardless of whether God is involved.
2 — Football	Football is the most honest religion because it makes no claim to ultimate truth, making the mechanism visible without disguise. The FIFA capture architecture replicates theological institutional capture precisely. The fans have no governance role in the institution that governs their sacred.
3 — Communism and the Party	Communism is the most complete secular religion, with creation narrative, sacred texts, priesthood, heresy tradition, and promised end state. The political party replicates congregational structure. The promised end state is theologically necessary as a horizon — arriving at it would dissolve the institution.

4 — The Market	The market is a secular religion disguised as science. The invisible hand is God. The economist is the priest. GDP is the sacred number. Poverty is sin. The disguise as neutral description makes it the most powerful and hardest to argue with of the secular religions.
5 — Universal Capture	Wherever a community organises around a sacred narrative, a priestly class emerges, claims access control, and extracts material benefit. The capture is structural, not corrupt. The priests are always there. The question is always who holds them accountable.

The person who leaves the church and joins the party has not escaped the engine. The engine moved with them. The only exit is to see it — in every domain, including the domain of one's own most deeply held commitments. That is not comfortable. It is the beginning of something more honest than any sacred narrative has yet managed to produce.

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"Every religion that tells you God chose them is simultaneously telling you God did not choose you. That is not theology. That is the oldest political weapon in human history."
— Thierry Degreef

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