The Tunnel

On Religion as Survival, and Its Corruption into Control

Tacx

> *"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world."*
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> — Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1844

I. The Dungeon

Imagine you are born into a vast dungeon. There are no windows, no map, no memory of how you arrived. The walls give nothing away. There is no light at the point of origin, and there is no visible exit — only a tunnel that opens at one end of the enclosure, disappearing into darkness.

You are not the first prisoner. Others came before you, and before entering the tunnel, they left you something: a note.

The note says there is an end to the tunnel. It says there is a rescue team waiting somewhere in the dark. It says they have left supplies along the way, and signs on the walls to guide you. It says if you follow the signs faithfully, the rescue team will find you.

How do they know? Because the note before theirs said the same thing.

You enter. In the darkness, you find that there are indeed supplies — enough to

keep moving. There are signs carved into the walls. You cannot determine with certainty whether they were left by a rescue team or by the prisoners themselves, by hope or by institution, by God or by need. You find the remains of those who came before you. They kept going too.

You follow the tunnel for the length of your life. You may find genuine comfort in the supplies. You may feel guided by the signs. You may call out into the dark and believe, with something approaching conviction, that something calls back. And then, one day, still travelling, you die.

No one who has entered the tunnel has ever returned to confirm what lies at its end. And yet, the notes keep getting written.

II. Why the Note Was Necessary

It would be a serious error to read this analogy as a simple indictment. The note was not born from deception. It was born from the dungeon.

Consider the conditions of early human existence: unpredictable death, disease without explanation, violence without justice, seasons that could kill entire communities, the terrifying silence of a universe that offered no account of itself. In this context, the question was never *is the rescue team real?* The question was *what keeps a person walking?*

Hope is not a luxury. In conditions of extreme uncertainty and suffering, hope is load-bearing infrastructure. A community that cannot generate a shared reason to continue will not continue. This is not a spiritual claim — it is an organisational and psychological one. Ã‰mile Durkheim, studying the social function of religion, recognised that its primary achievement was not theological but cohesive: it bound people together under a shared symbolic framework, giving collective meaning to suffering that would otherwise be intolerable in isolation.

Yuval Noah Harari, working in a different register, arrives at a compatible conclusion: large-scale human cooperation became possible through shared fictions — stories, myths, and beliefs that exist not in material reality but in the collective imagination. Religion was among the most powerful of these fictions, not because it was false, but because it *worked*. It coordinated behaviour, sustained hope, made death meaningful, and gave suffering a narrative structure that raw experience cannot provide on its own.

Ernest Becker, in *The Denial of Death*, goes further inward. He argues that awareness of mortality is the central crisis of human consciousness, and that every cultural system — religion above all — is an elaborate mechanism for managing that terror. The tunnel, in Becker's terms, is not metaphor. It is the fundamental condition of being human. We are creatures who know we are going to die, and we need a story about it. Religion was the first and most durable story our species produced.

The note, then, was not a lie told to the weak. It was the most rational technology available for surviving a situation that offered no rational resolution. In a dungeon with no visible exit, hope is not irrationality. It is the only executable strategy.

III. The Need That Did Not Disappear

One of the more intellectually lazy moves in contemporary secular discourse is to treat religion as a problem that modernity has solved — an artefact of ignorance that science has rendered obsolete. This is wrong, and it is worth being precise about why.

Science resolves epistemic uncertainty. It cannot resolve existential uncertainty. Knowing the molecular mechanism of cancer does not tell the dying person how to face death. Knowing the evolutionary origins of grief does not make grief easier to carry. The tunnel is still dark. The dungeon is still real. The supplies still matter even if their origin is contested.

Wherever humans face suffering without explanation — in grief, in illness, in the collapse of meaning, in the experience of watching someone you love deteriorate and being unable to do anything — the functional need that religion addresses does not disappear. It migrates. It finds new containers: therapy, philosophy, community, art, ideology. Sometimes it finds no container at all, and the person is left standing at the entrance to the tunnel with no note and no sense of direction.

This is not an argument for the literal truth of any religious claim. It is an argument for epistemic honesty. The supplies in the tunnel are real. The comfort is measurable. The community is documented. The moral framework, however imperfect, is functional. These things exist whether or not the rescue team sent them. Dismissing religion entirely, rather than critiquing its corruptions, is the same error as accepting it uncritically — both positions fail to engage with what it actually *does*.

IV. The Gatekeepers

Here is where the account becomes uncomfortable.

Over time, some prisoners chose not to enter the tunnel. Instead, they remained at the entrance and became keepers of the notes. They studied the old notes, copied them, interpreted them, decided which versions were authoritative and which were heretical. They developed elaborate systems for understanding what the rescue team wanted, what it demanded, what it would punish.

And then they began charging for the better supplies.

They reserved certain signs for those who obeyed them. They used the darkness — the same darkness that made the tunnel terrifying — as their primary instrument of control. Fear of what lay in the tunnel became as powerful as hope for what lay at its end. The rescue team, if it existed, acquired preferences: it preferred certain

kinds of people, certain behaviours, certain forms of submission. Those who did not conform would not be found. Those who questioned the note would be left in the dark.

The tunnel had not changed. The supplies had not changed. The rescue team, if real, had not changed. But the entrance had become an institution.

This is not a hypothetical. The Catholic Church sold indulgences — literal payments for reduced punishment after death, a commodification of the afterlife so naked that it triggered the Reformation. Caste systems across South Asia were theologically enforced for centuries, scripture deployed to naturalise the social immobility of millions. The Inquisition used the architecture of salvation to justify torture. Colonial missionaries carried both the Bible and the tools of cultural erasure, offering one hand the note and using the other to dismantle everything that made the prisoner who they were before the note arrived.

In each case, the mechanism is identical: the genuine human need for hope and meaning — the need that built the note in the first place — is captured by an institution, and the institution uses that need as leverage. The dungeon becomes a resource. The darkness becomes a tool. The rescue team becomes a police force.

Thomas RÃ¶mer's historical scholarship on the origins of monotheism makes this concrete at the level of textual archaeology. The God of the Hebrew Bible did not arrive fully formed. Yahweh began as a regional deity, competing with others in a polytheistic landscape. Monotheism was not an original revelation but a late development, forged in the crucible of political catastrophe — the Assyrian conquest, the Babylonian exile. Priests and scribes, losing the temple and the homeland, radically reimagined God as universal, singular, and invisible. They were not simply recording divine truth. They were doing political theology under conditions of crisis, constructing a God whose authority could survive the collapse of the state that had previously housed him.

The note was being rewritten. And those doing the rewriting had interests.

V. What This Leaves Us With

The problem was never God. The problem is whoever claims to speak for him.

Religion as a survival mechanism is among the most significant achievements of human civilisation. The capacity to generate collective meaning in the face of suffering, to sustain hope under conditions that rationally warrant despair, to build communities around shared symbolic frameworks — these are not primitive errors to be corrected. They are profound adaptations, and they remain relevant wherever the tunnel is dark, which is to say, always.

But an institution that has learned to weaponise hope is among the most dangerous things a society can produce. Because hope, once institutional, reaches into the deepest register of human psychology — the terror of death, the need for meaning, the desire to matter — and it does so with structural power. It can mobilise populations, suppress dissent, naturalise injustice, and make the suffering of the present world feel like a feature rather than a bug.

The question this leaves open is genuinely hard, and it would be dishonest to resolve it too quickly. If the hope is functionally necessary but the rescue team is unverifiable, is manufactured hope ethical? Is the note, even rewritten and institutionalised, better than no note at all? The tunnel is dark. The corpses of those who entered without supplies are real.

There is no clean answer. What there is, instead, is the obligation to distinguish: between the note that was written out of genuine need and the note that was rewritten out of institutional interest; between the supplies that were left for the traveller and the supplies that were rationed for compliance; between the signs that point toward something and the signs that point back toward the gatekeeper.

We are all in the dungeon. We are all, at some point, handed the note. The question worth asking is not only *is the rescue team real* — but *who wrote this version of the note, and what did they want from you in return?*

This essay draws on the historical scholarship of Thomas RÃ¶mer (The Invention of God), the sociological framework of Ã‰mile Durkheim, the existential psychology of Ernest Becker (The Denial of Death), the cognitive history of Yuval Noah Harari (Sapiens), and the historical theology of Karen Armstrong (A History of God).