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## *Redemption and Release*

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*  
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*"Publish glad tidings, tidings of peace;  
Tidings of Jesus, redemption and release."  
(Mary Thomson, 1894)*

This past Sunday, I heard Jesus speak about his mission relative to "the law and the prophets." He said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). Then, he proceeded to change, and re-define, some of the great pieces of the law! "You have heard it said (for instance) "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," but I say to you "do not resist an evildoer."

What is the relationship between Jesus and the law? Does Jesus come to give us another law, or does he come to release us from the law? Is religion about law or grace?

Those are continuing Christian questions. But I love them, because I think Christianity says "Yes" to both law and grace. Of course, I do not mean "law" in its oppressive and impersonal sense. But I do mean "law" as a necessary form or structure to the spiritual life.

For me, the two great movements of the spiritual life are restriction and release (or, as Mary Thompson wrote, "redemption and release"). They are the breath of the spiritual life: to restrict and to release. Religious institutions, at their best, have provided the means by which humanity breathes in and breathes out the soul of life.

On the one hand, the religious life causes us to cling. We are attracted to God because we need some sort of anchor and foundation. We want concepts that provide meaning and structure for us. Indeed, the root meaning of "religion" is "to hold together," or "to bind." Religion enables us to hold life together. Religion provides the structures and myths and rites that enable us to hold together in the midst of uncertainty, confusion, and even death. This is an old use of religion.

It is said that Sigmund Freud once posed this question, "Why does the man wear a hat?" "Because," he answered himself, "he has to keep his head together." Humanity gathers around religious structure in order to hold together, to keep our collective head together. We could also say in order to hold our collective soul together.

But religion has also provided humanity an opposite opportunity. Religion also provides humanity the exact reverse action. That is to say, that religion also releases people. It is in religious structures that humanity has often discovered freedom, sometimes freedom from the very structures that religion provided in the first place! Thus, it is religion that has provided the spirit and energy for peoples to throw off shackles of bondage and oppression, whether that bondage was physical or emotional or spiritual.

Indeed, religious belief and religious institution have been the places where humanity has learned of forgiveness. Often, religious institutions have been the reservoirs and keepers of forgiveness for culture. In Greek, the word for forgive is "*aphiami*", which means "*to release*", or "*to let go*." In this usage, the meaning of religion is exactly the opposite of our first

meaning, "to hold on to." In forgiveness, religion is about letting go and releasing. Often, this releasing provides the freedom of the spirit which explodes in the human condition throughout history.

Restriction and release, then, are the twin movements of breathing in the spiritual life. We breathe in structure and attachment and foundation. Then, we let it go. We exhale it, and release it, all so that we can repeat the process again and again. The healthy spiritual life knows the difference between these two movements, and the moments when one of those movements is the right one.

I believe Jesus knew about this sort of breathing. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets," he said, "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Those are the tidings of Jesus: redemption and release.

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