



THE GOSPEL FOR THE POSTMODERN WORLD VII:

## Reflections on “The Gift Abused” II<sup>1-3</sup>

“RELIGION” ASSUMES that humanity has been alienated from God and must be “bound back” (“Latin, *religio*, bond between man and the gods, perhaps from *religare*, to bind back”<sup>4</sup>). For thousands of years, world religions — and particularly religio-political power structures — have used “rebinding” to the god(s) to control human beings, not only in this life but supposedly in the afterlife, by claiming to determine human destiny after death.

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### Religion and the Afterlife

Some religions have contended that humanity is restricted to this life and that the afterlife applies only to the subsequent earthly life of one’s descendants. Therefore, for the sake of the offspring, this life must be lived in religious obedience and submission.

Other religions have claimed that human beings have an ultimate life after death. For those who have been “elected” by God and his power structure(s) and/or have lived submissive lives on earth, there is the prospect of (1) eternal life on a new earth, (2) a divinized/angelic life as soul/spirit in a cosmic heaven, or (3) a state of absolute blessedness attained through the extinction of the self (“nirvana”).<sup>5</sup>

Various religions also have declared that, for those who have been “elected to sin” and/or have lived evil lives on earth, there is the doom of eternal torment in an underworld of hell.

Still other religions have proposed intermediate existence(s) before the final destiny of human beings is decided. This “between-life” may be sleep in the grave or in the arms of God. It also may involve the rapture of living beings into heaven or the ascension of the soul/spirit to heaven at death. For the wicked it may involve torment in purgatory. For infants and other innocents, it may mean rest in “limbo” (“border”).<sup>6</sup> In these religions the intermediate life will end by resurrection, a final judgment, and the assignment of human beings — embodied or as soul/spirit — to eternal blissful afterlife in heaven/new earth or to unending torment in hell.

Finally, in Eastern religions intermediate existence means repeated reincarnations as humans, animals or plants to atone for sinfulness in this life.

## Religion and Power Structures

It has long been assumed that achieving an appropriate afterlife involves (1) moral and ethical conduct throughout life on earth, (2) the acquisition of heavenly knowledge to liberate the divine soul from the fallen earthly body, or (3) faithful

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trust in a divine redeemer. Of course, these achievements supposedly require the obedience of human beings to the appropriate religious power structure(s).

Basically, therefore, religious power structures claim the right to decide the destiny of human beings — not only in this life but also in the afterlife. Furthermore, at least some religio-political hierarchies believe that they have the absolute right to plunder, terrorize, torture and massacre all those who fail to submit to their hierarchical rules and conditions. This power concept involves the determination to achieve absolute control over all humanity, irrespective of the intentions and purposes of God himself.

Tragically, religio-political power plays are wholly contrary to the self-emptying love of the One-and-Only True God. To their astonishment, these power structures will soon see that “the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

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## Endnotes

1. See “The Gospel for the Postmodern World V: The Gift Abused,” *Outlook* (March 2008); “The Gospel for the Postmodern World VI: Reflections on ‘The Gift Abused’ I,” *Outlook* (April 2008).
2. See *Encyclopedia of Afterlife Beliefs and Phenomena* (Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press, 1995).
3. See Alan F. Segal, *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).
4. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1976), s.v. “religion.”
5. See *ibid.*, s.v. “nirvana.”
6. See *ibid.*, s.v. “limbo.”