

legalism

## What is Religious Legalism?

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**Legalism**, in Christian theology, is a pejorative term referring to an improper fixation on law or codes of conduct, or legal ideas, usually implying an allegation of misguided rigor, pride, superficiality, the neglect of mercy, and ignorance of the grace of God or emphasizing the letter of law over the spirit. Legalism is alleged against any view that law, not faith in God's grace, is the pre-eminent principle of redemption. Its opposite error is antinomianism, which is alleged against a view that moral laws are not binding.

### In the New Testament

The difference between genuine obedience, as opposed to legalism, is a theme of the prophets (e.g. Amos 4:4-5; Isa. 1:11-16; Isa. 58; Malachi 1-3) and is a central focus of the New Testament. Jesus directed some of his harshest words at the Pharisees and their accompanying "scribes" and "lawyers," the guardians of the ritual law of Judaism. Matthew 23 is just one of the several sermons Jesus preached against them. The gravamen of Jesus' charge against the Pharisees was that they did, in fact, scrupulously follow the ritual laws of Judaism, but their scrupulousness did not make them more charitable or lead to inner repentance.

Jesus also said that "except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20 - part of the Antithesis of the Law - KJV translation) Jesus sought to call his followers to a more inward form of obedience, in which righteous acts stemmed from an inward love of God, rather than a desire to please others, to seem holy in their eyes, or for a fear of temporal or divine retribution. Some have said that this teaching resembles the teachings of some strains of Judaism from the period immediately preceding Jesus, and in particular the teachings of Hillel the Elder. The Talmud discusses the internal struggle humans feel when they decide between doing evil or doing good. It concludes that it is better to do good out of love for a heavenly master than out of fear of one. It also says that doing good for its own sake is better than doing good to seek heavenly reward or avoid heavenly punishment. In both instances the sages realized that no person can live up to the ideal all the time. As long as someone had good actions, the heavenly courts would forgive imperfect emotions.

The tension continues in the epistles of Paul of Tarsus. Paul also had to deal with issues regarding the acceptance of Gentiles into Christianity, and the extent to which Gentile converts were bound by the Torah or the traditional religious rules of Judaism. Many scholars hold that Paul generally rejected extension of the purity laws of Judaism to Gentile converts, citing Paul's statements such as that no one should "judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days." -(Colossians 2:16, KJV) Yet according to the Acts 15 Council of Jerusalem he accepted James' decree that new Gentile converts should follow what was later called the Noahide Law subset of the Torah, see also Covenant (biblical)#Noahic Covenant. In Galatians 2:14 (part of the "Incident at Antioch") he publicly accused the Apostle Peter of "judaizing", i.e. Legalism. On the other hand, his writings also contain frequent statements to the effect that those who commit a list of sins "shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (E.g. Galatians 5:19-21, 1 Cor 6:9-10), leading to conclusions like 2 Peter 3:16 . Paul, who called himself

"Apostle to the Gentiles", at times seems opposed to the Jerusalem Church of James, John and Peter which has led some to conclude that Pauline Christianity was different from the Christianity of the Jerusalem Church which is sometimes called Jewish Christianity. For example, see Acts 21:21.

### **In later Christian theology**

In Protestant, Evangelical, Christian theology, especially in popular versions of the same, the charge of legalism is an accusation of ignorance of the Christian Gospel, or of unbelief. In that context, that apply the criticism of legalism to a theological position or religious attitude, implies that the accused has over-turned the Gospel of salvation through faith and new life in Jesus Christ, and has substituted some principle of personal merit or ritual purity for the unearned grace of God.

The Eastern Orthodox, for another example, reject the satisfaction theory of the atonement as *legalistic*. The satisfaction theory states that mankind's Original Sin violated God's law, resulting in all men being born guilty: an idea prevalent in the writings of Tertullian and Augustine of Hippo. Anselm formally developed the theory that the legal problem of guilt before the Law, required the legal solution of retribution, in order to achieve a just salvation. The solution was for God's son Jesus to willingly die on the Cross in place of humanity, thus allowing the legal penalty to be fully carried out, satisfying the justice of God, and thus clearing the way for mercy to be shown to sinners. The Eastern Orthodox charge that this theory is too dependent upon Roman legal concepts of retribution and justice.

In Roman Catholicism, good works are done in service to God and one's neighbor by faith working through love. In contrast, an excess of severity in the imposition of, or overly-scrupulous conformity to any rule of piety, may be charged with legalism.

Throughout the history of Christianity, certain beliefs and practices have tended to draw charges of legalism. These include:

- Asceticism, such as fasting and other forms of self-denial.
- The keeping of the Sabbath, especially regarding prohibitions of various otherwise innocent activities on the day of worship.
- Various extra-biblical ordinances and customs that become associated not just with wisdom but with holiness, in the contemporary situation, such as prohibitions against theater, movies, dancing, playing cards or mixed bathing.
- Total abstinence from alcohol (See also Christianity and alcohol.)
- Ritualism, a superficial or superstitious use of customary prayers and liturgy.
- Similarly, certain exclusive ritual practices, such as rigorous insistence on the tetragrammaton as the only name by which God is honored, dietary laws, a Saturday Sabbath, Passover (Christian holiday), especially when practicing these rituals is held necessary for salvation.
- Sacraments, especially when the underlying theology allegedly views them as communicating God's grace automatically (compare *ex opere operato*).
- Various rigorous and restrictive beliefs, such as that, only the King James Version of the Bible constitutes God's word.
- Iconoclasm
- Circumcision
- Puritanism
- Judaizing
- Restorationism

Several underlying dynamics appear in these controversies. The permitted scope of veneration of material objects, versus claims that such veneration is idolatry, affects the perceived sanctity of ritual spaces and objects, and therefore of the rituals and customs themselves. Teachings about the authority of the church, the sources of legitimacy of that authority, and the role of clergy versus the priesthood of all believers, also affect these debates. Related to these disagreements are debates concerning the authority of the Bible, and whether it is to be interpreted literally or more freely.