

# Semipelagianism

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Semipelagianism (Latin: Semipelagianismus) is a Christian theological and soteriological school of thought on salvation; that is, the means by which humanity and God are restored to a right relationship. Semipelagian thought stands in contrast to the earlier Pelagian teaching about salvation (in which people are seen as affecting their own salvation), which had been dismissed as heresy. Semipelagianism in its original form was developed as a compromise between Pelagianism and the teaching of Church Fathers such as Saint Augustine, who taught that people cannot come to God without the grace of God. In semipelagian thought, therefore, a distinction is made between the beginning of faith and the increase of faith. Semipelagian thought teaches that the latter half – growing in faith – is the work of God, while the beginning of faith is an act of free will, with grace supervening only later. It too was labeled heresy by the Western Church at the Second Council of Orange in 529. Catholicism teaches that the beginning of faith involves an act of free will, that the initiative comes from God, but requires free collaboration on the part of man: "The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man's free acting through his collaboration". "Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life." The term "semipelagianism", a 16th-century coinage, has been used as an accusation in theological disputes over salvation, divine grace and free will. Theologians have also used it retrospectively to refer to the original formulation, an anachronistic use that has been called inappropriate, ambiguous and unjust. In this context, a more historically accurate term is Massilianism, a reference to the city of Marseilles, with which some of its proponents were associated.

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## 1. Pelagian and Semipelagian Theology

Pelagianism is the teaching that people have the capacity to seek God in and of themselves apart from any movement of God or the Holy Spirit, and therefore that salvation is effected by their own efforts. The doctrine takes its name from Pelagius, a British monk who was accused of developing the doctrine (he himself appears to have claimed in his letters that man does not do good apart from grace, claiming only that all men have free will by God's gift); it was opposed especially by Augustine of Hippo and was declared a heresy by Pope Zosimus in 418. Denying the existence of original sin, it teaches that man is in himself and by nature capable of choosing good.<sup>[1]</sup>

In semipelagian thought, both God and the human person always participate in the salvation process. Humans make free will choices, which are aided by God through creation, natural grace, "supernatural" grace, God's restrictions on demonic invasion; God continually brings the human person to real choices, which God also aids, in the process of spiritual growth to become like God. The entire process is grace; snapshot focus on the specific moments of decision are always in the context of the overarching grace of God. Semipelagianism is a synonym for synergism, which is the traditional patristic doctrine.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 2. Patristic Era

The term "semipelagianism" was unknown in antiquity, appearing for the first time only in the last quarter of the 16th century. It was used in connexion with Molina's doctrine of grace. Opponents of this theologian believed they saw a close resemblance to the views advocated by monks of Southern Gaul at and around Marseille after 428. After this confusion between the ideas of Molina and those of the monks of Marseille had been exposed as an error, the newly coined term "semipelagianism" was retained in learned circles as an apt designation for the views of those monks, which was said to have aimed at a compromise between the Pelagianism and Augustinism, and was condemned as heresy at the local Council of Orange (529) after disputes extending over more than a hundred years.<sup>[3]</sup> The monks, however, consistent with the desert fathers, considered their teaching to be the ancient teaching of the Church.

## 3. Development of the Term and Subsequent Use

### 3.1. Early Use of the Term

The first use of the term "semipelagian" was by Theodore Beza, who argued that the Catholic doctrine of original sin—which said that after baptism, only a "spark" or tendency to sin remained in Christians.<sup>[clarification needed]</sup> This was intended to deny the ability of people to obtain merit by their good works, cooperating with grace. The Epitome of the Lutheran Formula of Concord (1577) rejects "the false dogma of the Semi-Pelagians, who teach that man by his own powers can commence his conversion, but can not fully accomplish it without the grace of the Holy Spirit".<sup>[4]</sup>

Between 1590 and 1600 the term "semipelagianism" was applied to Luis de Molina's doctrine of grace, which at that time was accused of similarity to the teaching of the Massilians.<sup>[5]</sup>

### 3.2. Eastern Orthodoxy

The Orthodox Church generally emphasizes the synergistic doctrine of *theosis* in its conception of salvation as a process of personal transformation to the likeness of God in Christ through the Spirit. Theosis closely links the ideas of justification and sanctification; salvation is acquired through the divinization of man. This doctrine is sometimes dismissed as semipelagian by theologians of the classical Protestant traditions on the grounds that it suggests that man contributes to his own salvation.<sup>[6]</sup> The accusation is rejected by Orthodox Christianity, which unlike the established Western traditions remained for the most part uninfluenced by Augustinian theology and holds that "for the regenerated to do spiritual good – for the works of the believer being contributory to salvation and wrought by supernatural grace are properly called spiritual – it is necessary that he be guided and prevented [preceded] by grace ... Consequently, he is not able of himself to do any work worthy of a Christian life".<sup>[6]</sup>

John Cassian, known particularly for his teachings on theosis, is considered to be a Saint in the Eastern Churches as well as in Roman Catholicism. He is generally considered to have been an early proponent of semi-Pelagianism.<sup>[7][8][9][10]</sup> But some recent scholars deny that his views were in fact semi-Pelagian. Lauren Pristas writes: "For Cassian, salvation is, from beginning to end, the effect of God's grace. It is fully divine."<sup>[11]</sup> Augustine Casiday states that Cassian "baldly asserts that God's grace, not human free will, is responsible for 'everything which pertains to salvation' – even faith".<sup>[12]</sup> Others hold that "the view of Cassian as the ringleader of 'semi-Pelagianism' rests on a conjectural chronology".<sup>[13]</sup> The Roman Catholic Church includes John Cassian in its official list of recognized saints, with a feastday on 23 July,<sup>[14]</sup> and cites him in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.<sup>[15]</sup> It did not endorse Augustine entirely<sup>[16]</sup> and, while later Catholic theologians accepted Augustine's authority, they interpreted his views in the light of writers such as Cassian.<sup>[17]</sup> West and East consider both John Cassian and Augustine of Hippo as saints.

### 3.3. Calvinism and Arminianism

In more recent times, the word has been used in the Reformed Protestant camp to designate anyone who deviates from what they see as the Augustinian doctrines of sovereignty, original sin and grace: most notably Arminian Protestants and Roman Catholics. Although Calvinist and Lutheran theologies of salvation differ significantly on issues such as the nature of predestination and the salvific role of the sacraments (see means of grace), both branches of historic Protestantism claim the theology of Augustine as a principal influence.

Many Arminians have disagreed with this generalization, believing it is libelous to Jacobus Arminius (from whose name Arminianism derives) and the Remonstrants who maintained his "Arminian" views after his death. John Wesley (an Anglican defender of Arminianism and founder of Wesleyan Methodism) and other prominent classical and Wesleyan Arminians maintain a unique nuanced doctrine of sin that he called "total corruption" and "entire deprivation" of the human race, which is not identical to but often mistakenly confused with the Calvinist doctrine of original sin and Total Depravity.<sup>[18]</sup> According to John Wesley, while man by nature is 'totally corrupt,' no man is born in such a state.<sup>[19]</sup> Counter to the Calvinist's Total Depravity that teaches humans are born spiritually dead, Wesley taught that all humans are born in a state of prevenient grace and are able to respond and seek God.<sup>[20]</sup> Likewise, ever since the Council of Orange (529), the Roman Catholic Church has condemned semipelagianism and has not accepted the Calvinist interpretation of Augustine.<sup>[21]</sup>

### 3.4. Jansenism and the Jesuits

In the 18th century, the Jesuits accused the Jansenists of affirming the radical Augustinian doctrines of Calvinism; the Jansenists, in turn, accused the Jesuits of semipelagianism.<sup>[22]</sup> The 1713 papal bull of Pope Clement XI, *Unigenitus*, in declaring Jansenism heretical, upheld the Jesuits' objections.<sup>[23]</sup>

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