

Rules, rules and more rules

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [February 28, 2001](#) issue

It may seem odd that at the beginning of the 21st century our lives are so pervasively dominated by rules, big rules and small rules, rules that frame our interactions and rules that enter into the fine fabric of our personal lives. After all, at least since the Enlightenment, the epochal trend has been to carve out more space for the individual's freedom—freedom from the church, from God, from the state, from conventional morality, from nosy neighbors. Freedom to craft ourselves into whatever shape we deem fitting. In short, freedom from everybody and for anything. But freedom of this sort comes with a price. And the price is, paradoxically, entanglement in a thick web of rules and regulations.

In a recent essay titled “In Lieu of Manners,” Jeffrey Rosen notes that following the dismantling of traditional hierarchies, “the vocabulary of law and legalisms is the only shared language we have left for regulating behavior in an era in which there is no longer a social consensus about how men and women, and even boys and girls, should behave.” He describes the phenomenon as “an explosion of legalisms.” This explosion of legalisms is different from and much more pervasive than the commonly bemoaned “explosion of litigation.” Most of us, Rosen notes, will never be parties in an actual court case. But all of us are experiencing the increasing regulation of our lives by “rules and laws” instead of “manners and mores.”

What is so bad, comparatively speaking, about “rules and laws”? “Manners and mores” can be just as oppressive and can carry a false aura of inevitability, while rules and laws are just what they are—changing codes by which people regulate their common life. We might decide that our “rules” serve us better than “manners.” And we might prefer either of them to “God’s laws.”

For with God’s laws, life is regulated by something unbending and unchangeable, with an authority derived from the sacred and absolute. Though we might not like most human “rules and laws,” we might like the idea of a divine lawgiver and laws even less. Without God we are freer, because we live by *our* rules and *our* laws, not by laws imposed on us from above. Such reasoning is pleasing to the ears of freedom-loving inhabitants of modernity. But is it persuasive?

Consider what happens if we don't like a particular rule. We can go to court and challenge it. But what if we don't like the decision of the court? We go to the Supreme Court. But there is no guarantee that we will like the Supreme Court ruling either. Rightly or wrongly, the recent *Bush v. Gore* ruling struck many liberals and moderates as ideological and partisan. Cynicism in relation to the rulings of the Supreme Court lands us in dire straits if all we have are "rules and laws." We must have rules to regulate our common life, but there is nobody to make the rules stick—and hence they seem arbitrary. As a result, we are less and less effective in dealing with social tensions. For that purpose, God's laws have a distinct advantage over human regulations. As long as they are affirmed as God's laws, it is hard to be cynical about them. One might not like them, but what are one's likes or dislikes compared to the weight of divine authority?

The argument so far may not satisfy you. It does not satisfy me either. So here is an important addition. "Rules and laws" regulate the formalities of our interactions; they are not a reflection of who, in a deep sense, we as human beings are. They are external to our being; they are a means to our getting along with one another.

It is different with the divine laws. These are an expression of the divine being, and they map what it means to live human lives. When we live in accordance with divine laws, we are fulfilling our calling as human beings. In holy scripture, people can be said to "delight" in God's law, whereas it would be strange to say that a person delights in "rules and regulations." Rules and regulations are a necessary evil; God's law is a positive good. This "goodness" of the divine law explains the trajectory we find in the scriptures' understanding of how the divine law is related to human beings. In the Old Testament, the law of Moses was given to the people on tablets of stone. In the New Testament, the law of the Messiah is written on "hearts of flesh." In the world to come, God's law will become so much a part of ourselves that the only thing we will ever want is to do what it commands.

You may think that next I'm going to recommend that we place the Ten Commandments in all our courtrooms, return prayer to our schools and impose the divine law throughout the land. Have I not argued that an uncontestable authority like God's may have some social advantages over changing human rules? Have I not maintained that God's laws are an expression of who we are called to be? Yet I think that all such recommendations are mistaken. We no longer live in the pious world of our Puritan foreparents. And I am not sure that it was right even then to impose the divine law on the nation, much less now that we live in an irreversibly pluralist

society.

There is an alternative both to being constricted by human rules and to having the divine laws imposed on us. If you want freedom—freedom from rules, freedom to be your best self, freedom to enjoy both God and neighbor—then you will want the divine law inscribed on your heart. Everything else is slavery, more or less!