

How Many Gods Are There?

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The new golden calf of the conservative Christian part of America seems to be the Ten Commandments. I think it is pretty ironic. Former Alabama Supreme Court Justice Roy Moore and those who have imitated him and supported him have managed to make an idol out of a set of words that include an injunction against graven images. I can live with the Goddess of Justice on the courthouse, I can even live with Moses and the Ten Words pictured on a courthouse. But, a two-ton marble monument right on the courthouse steps around which people gather to pray? Whatever that represents is being worshipped and doesn't belong at the courthouse.

The Ten Commandments in the Christian tradition, the Ten Words in the Jewish tradition are elements of monotheistic faiths. Parts of the Jewish tradition take the injunction against idols to the point of not speaking or writing the name of God. Any symbol, even a name, is not God and should not be used. Hinduism goes in the other direction. God is so large that there can be all kinds of symbols all of which speak to some aspects of the holy. Much is contained in each form. In an article from August 2000 on an Indian art website the writer speaks of the symbolism of the form of the holy in the goddess Kali. The article notes that, "Kali's four arms represent the complete circle of creation and destruction, which is contained within her. She represents the inherent creative and destructive rhythms of the cosmos. Her right hands, making the mudras of "fear not" and conferring boons, represent the creative aspect of Kali, while the left hands, holding a bloodied sword and a severed head represent her destructive aspect. The bloodied sword and severed head symbolize the destruction of ignorance and the dawning of knowledge. The sword is the sword of knowledge, that cuts the knots of ignorance and destroys false consciousness (the severed head). Kali opens the gates of freedom with this sword, having cut the eight bonds that bind human beings. Finally her three eyes represent the sun, moon, and fire, with which she is able to observe the three modes of time: past, present and future. This attribute is also the origin of the name Kali, which is the feminine form of 'Kala', the Sanskrit term for Time." Depending on the form of Buddhism, its adherents can go in either direction, some having many forms of god and others having no personification of the holy, so that theirs is an atheistic faith. No symbol is appropriate, not even a name. There can never be enough symbols to include all that is holy. No personified idea of holiness is necessary or appropriate. I can see truth in each of these claims.

Like the world community, the Unitarian Universalist community includes monotheists, atheists, and polytheists. Our principles and purposes proclaim that, "The Living tradition we share draws from many sources: (including) Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." You will note that the word God is very purposefully not used. We went through a struggle in the late 1800s to keep our theists and atheists all in the same denomination. In 1872 in an exposition titled, Radical Problems Unitarian Cyrus Bartol quoted a friend as saying, "I spell my God with two o's and my devil without a d" (David Robinson, The Unitarians and the Universalists, p. 111). Unitarian Thomas Sunderland responded with a tract entitled, "The Issue in the West," the issue being whether belief in God was a necessary component of religion. Sunderland wrote, "It is as a radical that I hold that no religion which does not believe mightily in God...can ever get much of a hold over men" (Robinson, p. 120). There were some tense times, but eventually the theists and the agnostics and atheists learned to live together in our religious community.

We went through another struggle in the century just over to keep our polytheists, atheists and monotheists all in the same denomination. Some Unitarian Universalist women and men discovered female images of the divine and embraced a multiplicity of goddesses and gods. Feminine images of the holy were often linked with nature and groups gathered to celebrate the turning of the year. Some ecologically minded UUs and some feminist minded UUs declared themselves pagans. Curriculum titled "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven" and "Rise Up and Call Her Name" were produced. Some of

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the agnostics, atheists and monotheists among us were appalled. These neo-pagans seemed irrational to them. The old school UUs had given up much of the ritual of the traditions of their past as irrational and now here were Unitarian Universalists embracing ritual and even the use of the word “magic.” It was incomprehensible to some among us. But, here we are, still together, agnostics, atheists, monotheists and pagans.

We should be a model for a nation that is only now struggling with some of the issues we struggled with as a denomination over a hundred years ago. Last week I heard a radio interview with Irshad Manji, author of The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim’s Call for Reform in Her Faith. There were a few callers who seemed to think that she had betrayed her faith, but most seemed sympathetic. This week I heard a radio interview with Pat Robertson, host of the Seven Hundred Club, whose latest book is The Ten Offenses: Reclaim the Blessings of God’s Eternal Truths. A few callers agreed with what he was saying, but most seemed to disagree with many of his statements. When he said that the city of Calcutta was cursed because it was named for an idol, Kali it seemed to take all of the host’s patience to remain the neutral arbitrator of the talk show.

What has kept us together as a denomination and what may keep us together as a nation is a willingness to allow that what is holy and good and sacred in the world cannot be contained by one mind or one symbol or one story. The religions of the world that have endured each have within them elements that acknowledge truths beyond themselves. Karen Armstrong in her book, The History of God notes that, “The Koran teaches that God had sent messengers to every people on the face of the earth: Islamic tradition says there have been 124, 000 such prophets, a symbolic number suggesting infinitude” (p.152). Within the Christian tradition the same gospel that has Jesus say, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me,” also has him say, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” A Buddhist teacher once advised a young man who came to him not to become a Buddhist but to be the best Jew he could be.

There are some who still believe that the United States of America is a Protestant Christian nation. They want the Protestant version of the Ten Commandments posted at our courthouses and the Protestant version of the Lord’s Prayer said in our public school classrooms. They are fighting for what they want, but they are fighting because this nation is changing. Chapter One of Diana L. Eck’s book, A New Religious America published in 2001 begins with these words, “The huge white dome of a mosque with its minarets rises from the cornfields just outside Toledo, Ohio. You can see it as you drive by on the interstate highway. A great Hindu temple with elephants carved in relief at the doorway stands on a hillside in the western suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee. A Cambodian Buddhist temple and monastery with a hint of a Southeast Asian roofline is set in the farmlands south of Minneapolis, Minnesota. In suburban Fremont, California, flags fly from the golden domes of a new Sikh gurdwara on Hillside Terrace, now renamed Gurdwara Road. The religious landscape of America has changed radically in the past thirty years, but most of us have not yet begun to see the dimension and scope of that change, so gradual has it been and so colossal” (p.1). Eck could have listed the same kind of multiplicity of religious buildings traveling just a few miles down Route 29 into DC, but that wouldn’t have made the same point. It is not just the urban centers of New York City or Washington, DC that now house people of a multiplicity of faiths. America’s heartland and the rural south are also now home to more than Protestant Christians and a spattering of Catholics and Jews.

Eck claims that the plurality of faiths in America today will not undo American ideals but will continue to give voice to them. She writes, “The story of America’s many peoples and the creation of one nation is an unfinished story in which the ideals articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are continually brought into being. Our pluribus is more striking than ever – our races and faces, our jazz and qawwali music, our Haitian drums and Bengali tables, our hip-hop and bhangra

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dances, our mariachis and gamelans, our Islamic minarets and Hindu temple towers, our Mormon temple spires and golden gurdwara domes. Amid this plurality, the expression of our unum, our oneness, will require many new voices, each contributing in its own way – like the voices of Sikhs who will stand up for the ‘self-evident truth’ of human equality not only because it is written in the Declaration of Independence but also because it is part of the teachings of Guru Nanak and a principle of their faith as Sikhs.”

E pluribus unum, out of many one. Unitarian Universalists. There is a certain synchronicity in that American motto and our denominational name. Many and one, one and many. How many gods are there? More than all the hearts and minds of the world can comprehend. But one in that what all those hearts and minds are seeking to comprehend is the “transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.”

It is our time. We have found a way to live together. Atheist and Theist. Polytheist and Monotheist. It hasn’t been easy, but we are here worshipping in one diverse community. If we can worship together then perhaps it is our duty to teach our nation how to live together. We will not do that by venomous attacks on those who proclaim that theirs is the one and only truth. We will do that by helping those whose eyes are open see that there is more than one way to see.

How many gods are there? 3,306 How many gods are there? 33 How many gods are there? 6 How many gods are there? 3 How many gods are there? 2 How many gods are there? 11/2 How many gods are there? 1 How many gods are there? None. There is truth in each answer.

I believe most of our neighbors are open to hearing that. We need to tell them.