NEARLY 3,500 YEARS AGO, Exodus tells us, God inscribed the Ten Commandments onto two stone tablets for the Israelites. Although Jewish tradition counts 613 commandments in the Torah, the Ten have taken on a life of their own, inspiring millions of Jews, Christians and Muslims over the centuries and evolving into a symbol of morality that has influenced Western thinking. Over the past 50 years, they’ve become a contentious subject in the United States, emerging at the heart of the culture wars between conservatives and liberals who disagree over their role in American law and ethics. Moment speaks with a range of American scholars about the Ten Commandments’ contemporary relevance and meaning, and discovers—surprise, surprise—that their opinions differ dramatically.
The Ten Commandments don’t change based on time or place but are instead statements of high-order moral sentiments. Different generations will sometimes understand the details of law differently, but that’s not what is really at stake. For example, there are voices in our secular society urging us to re-examine our view of homosexuality and arguing that a changing moral consensus ought to make us re-evaluate our Jewish ethics. Jewish tradition thought homosexual conduct was immoral. It didn’t matter whether many people were or were not homosexual. Jewish tradition doesn’t look at the moral consensus of a particular time or place on these kinds of core value issues.

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The commandments don’t strike me as ethically illuminating for today’s world, nor are they so inspired as to suggest divine authorship. Quite the contrary, they are readily explainable as deriving from a Bronze/Iron Age people who created rules that would promote internal cohesion. There is the reminder that there is a jealous and watchful God who has chosen this tribe, which is an effective way of establishing an intrinsic distinctness for the group and consequences for defying it. The awesomeness of the God is emphasized; not even his name is to be taken in vain. There is a sabbath day, requiring the sacrifice of productivity, another effective way of promoting an internal sense of group difference. Then there are basic rules needed to minimize internecine violence: no murder, no theft, no adultery, no coveting what belongs to your neighbor, including his women and his slaves. That women are treated as property and that slavery is regarded as morally unobjectionable.

That women are treated as property and slavery is regarded as unobjectionable stamp these commandments as of their time.

I am the Lord Your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods beside Me.

You shall not make for yourself any graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not take the name of the Lord Your God in vain.

Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy.

Honor your father and your mother.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, nor his wife, his man-servant, his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.
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The Ten Commandments are as relevant today as they were in antiquity because they represent the crucial distinction of right versus wrong. The Ten Commandments are important for maintaining morality. We need them both.

Joel M. Hoffman is an expert in translation, Hebrew and the Bible and author of And God Said: How Translators Conceal the Bible’s Original Meaning.

The significance of the Ten Commandments in contemporary America, where they’re called the nation’s “rightful heritage,” is more a matter of history than of religion. A case in point: Several years ago, The Colbert Report featured a Geor- gia congressman who was eager to put up copies of the Ten Commandments in the U.S. Capitol building. When pressed by Colbert to name them, he couldn’t.

For this congressman, and undoubtedly for many of his constituents as well, it wasn’t the individual prescriptions, the specifics, that mattered so much as their cumulative symbolism. The U.S. is not known for its cultural literacy but for its commitment to the Bible. We probably know much more about Elvis than we do about the ancient text, but the Bible remains central to America’s sense of itself, its sense of providence and election. Little wonder, then, that in its 2005 rulings, the U.S. Supreme Court, mindful of the larger historical and cultural context, said both “yes” and “no” to having the Ten Commandments displayed in the public square: “Yes” to a long-standing monument on the grounds of the Texas state capitol where it can be seen as a physical testament to Texas history, and “no” to a brand-new, religiously motivated iteration of the Ten Commandments in a Kentucky courthouse, which crossed the line between church and state. What’s also worth noting about America’s relationship to the Ten Commandments is that once upon a time they unified rather than divided the country. Today, the Ten Commandments are a source of rupture rather than community.

The Ten Commandments are relevant now as they were when a moment but impassioned band of Hebrews wandered through the desert trying to discover how to be a just and moral people. The Ten Commandments are more meaningful than U.S. law.

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They are not just an ancient legal code, but rather a whole approach to life that has come down to us, becoming a crucial part of what it means to be a modern person. Modern Western life draws upon two very distinct ancient spirits. One is the spirit of reason, which comes from ancient Greece and teaches that all of us have the right to formulate our own opinions about life, politics and ethics. This has given us the most open discourse and the greatest political freedoms in human history. But reason alone is not enough to get you out of bed in the morning and take decisive action to change your life and your community and improve the world. For that we need the second spirit, the spirit of redemption, which comes from ancient Israel via the Hebrew Bible. Every biblical hero—even God—is first of all a world-improver, either through words or deeds. The Ten Commandments encapsulate this redemptive spirit, with each of them offering a different aspect of how to turn that spirit into reality. The Second Commandment, for example, addresses the idea of morality that goes beyond the pull of power and wealth, which is really what idolatry is all about. The Fourth, which concerns the Sabbath, is about deepening our own relationship with God in order to give ourselves as independent beings separated from creative activity and our achievements. The Fifth, which is about honoring our parents, is fundamentally about a certain kind of profound human life—wisdom that’s transmitted from generation to generation. And so on. We find each commandment expressing a different aspect of redemption in a different part of life: each one a pillar of civilization that is every bit as vital today as it was back then.


It is odd that some people are so determined to post the Ten Commandments in classrooms, when these laws offer little guidance to student conduct, since few third graders are married and hence in a position to commit adultery.

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They call on us to remember that we are not guides, that we, too, are each fallible, that we owe justice to the other, loving care to all.

deep-seated polarization and destructive individualism in a global family, we have never needed them more than we do now. It is civilization at its highest, most developed, most spiritually centered that the Ten Commandments are all about.

Joan D. Chittister, Order of Saint Benedict, is executive director of Paxton and co-chair of the Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders.

The Decalogue [the Greek word for the Ten Commandments] is part of a specific covenantal relationship, born out of the Exodus, between God and Israel. They do not purport to be a set of universal norms. To act as if everybody in the world came out of Egypt, everyone in the world is required to observe Shabbat and everyone in the world was brought into the land of Israel would make a travesty of the actual biblical narrative. The truth is that neither biblical nor rabbinic traditions speak of the Decalogue as ap

ditional with the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The founders, most of whom were very well-versed in the Bible from their traditional, Protestant, religious upbringing, made the concerted effort to set up a secular government, relying on a broad combination of sources including the Magna Carta, British common law and the philosophical works of enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke. In the 19th century, there was a movement to systematize the law to make it more scientific and predictable—concepts inconsistent with the notion of a static, preordained biblical law. Part of the growing commercialism of that time meant pressure from businesses that wanted clear, predictable results, requiring lawyers and judges to put aside their morals and values when deciding legal issues. You see in the case law—in which there is barely a mention of the Ten Commandments—a rejection of religiously based justifications, even for seemingly religion-based laws held over from the colonial days such as Sabbath and blasphemy laws. That set the stage for the major church and state trials of the 20th century. For the most part, the values represented in part of the Ten Commandments can be seen as having some type of manifestations in most legal systems, but when we look at a more specific grounding of American law, we are absent.

Jon D. Levenson is the Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard University in Cambridge, MA.

The Decalogue remains essential. They form the basis of our core values, and are central to American Judeo-Christian ethics. These core values are critical to our culture today.

Mark Roeker teaches at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC, and is author of The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century.

The Ten Commandments are the foundational laws for civilization. Individual cultures have laws that reflect these basic ones, as is evident from prohibitions against murder and adultery. Ancient cultures such as those in Mesopotamia had similar laws that predated the Ten Commandments, which indicates their universal appeal for ethics and morality. Some of the more famous Christian theologians such as Augustine and Martin Luther maintained that the Ten Commandments were foundational for Christian ethics. The Ten Commandments form the basis of our central core of values, and are central to American Judeo-Christian ethics. These core values are critical to our culture today.

Muslims are aggressively faithful to them because they still live in traditional societies and tend to be very religious.

The Niyamas or observances are: Be moral, be studious and surrender to God's grace. The last is the only commandment added is to love one another, which is attributed to Jesus. That should be the eleventh commandment for the 21st century because this is a century with so much hatred, violence and distrust. Today, this commandment is perhaps the most important as well as the most challenging. Ambassador Akbar Ahmed is the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington, DC.

a source of religious violence

Hinduism has principles of ethical and moral conduct that were put together many millennia ago and are relevant today. Called the Ten Commandments by Sage Patanjali, the originator of the principles of Yoga, they provide an ethical framework with lists of five things to do and five to avoid. The Yama or restraints are: Do not harm (the basis for Gandhi's principles of non-violence), do not lie, do not steal, do not overindulge and do not be greedy. The Niyamas or observances are: Be clean in mind and body, be content, be disciplined, be studious and surrender to God's grace. The last is the only reference to God, and it refers to God as a universal being (God is One). The concept in the Ten Commandments about one God with the sense of obligation to convert others to their God has caused great harm.

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The Decalogue has widespread significance and high prestige here. It is often mistakenly detached from its covenantal framework and treated instead as a code that binds society as a whole. Within the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people, of course, scrupulous observance of the Decalogue remains essential.

Steven K. Green is a legal scholar and especially the Calvinist emphasis on the prominence of Protestantism, which indicates their universal appeal for ethics and morality. Some of the Ten Commandments—a rejection of religiously based justifications, even for seemingly religion-based laws held over from the colonial days such as Sabbath and blasphemy laws. That set the stage for the major church and state trials of the 20th century. For the most part, the values represented in part of the Ten Commandments can be seen as having some type of manifestations in most legal systems, but when we look at a more specific grounding of American law, we are absent.

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a Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition

Commentators in America constantly talk of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but if we were to use the Ten Commandments as the yardstick, then America is very much a Judeo-Christian-Islamic nation. Muslims unequivocally believe in the Ten Commandments. Americans are often surprised to find out that about one-third of the Koran directly echoes Jewish and Christian sacred texts—including the entire Ten Commandments. Moses, who brought down the Commandments from God, is a highly revered and loved figure in Islam and is known as Musa. The inclusion of America's seven million Muslims as part of the American religious tradition is therefore the elephant in the room. I cannot be a good Muslim without being conscious of my Jewish and Christian heritage. The Ten Commandments are universal. Muslims, however, are aggressively faithful to them because they still live in traditional societies and tend to be very religious. The Ten Commandments are relevant today not just for the Abrahamic peoples but for all people. One commandment that should be added is to love one another, which is attributed to Jesus. That should be the eleventh commandment for the 21st century because this is a century with so much hatred, violence and distrust. Today, this commandment is perhaps the most important as well as the most challenging.

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The core of Judeo-Christian values

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The notion that U.S. law has biblical roots is inconsistent with how it has evolved over the years. Early Puritans experimented with religiously based law were overturned in favor of British common law with the Glorious Revolution of