Central to monotheism in all three of its major variants is not the number of divine beings it affirms but its hostility to idolatry. I doubt that any religion professes itself in favor of idols and idolatry, but part of the logic of monotheism asserts the unity and transcendence of the divine through an opposition to idolatry. I’m interested in the moral consequences of this hostility.

No religion does without symbols, yet the status of symbols and their uses is always contested. For example, some religious thinkers have reacted against attempts in the United States to post the Ten Commandments by describing them as acts of blasphemy, not because the tablets become an object of worship but because they are used for secular—political and moral—rather than sacred purposes. I want to look at Monotheism and Morality not by looking to religion as a source or sanction for morality but as a set of symbols put to use to organize a community, and thus to create a community distinct from others.

My story begins about ten miles from where I write this. According to Justice Stevens’ account in Van Orden

The program was initiated by the late Judge E.J. Ruegemer, a Minnesota juvenile court judge and then-Chairman of the Eagles National Commission on Youth Guidance. Inspired by a juvenile offender who had never heard of the Ten Commandments, the judge approached the Minnesota Eagles with the idea of distributing paper copies of the Commandments to be posted in courthouses nationwide. The State’s Aerie undertook this project and its popularity spread. When Cecil B. DeMille, who at that time was filming the movie The Ten Commandments, heard of the judge’s endeavor, he teamed up with the Eagles to produce the type of granite monolith now displayed in front of the Texas Capitol and at courthouse squares, city halls, and public parks throughout the Nation. Granite was reportedly chosen over DeMille’s original suggestion of bronze plaques to better replicate the original Ten Commandments.

The donors were motivated by a desire to “inspire the youth” and curb juvenile delinquency by providing children with a “code of conduct or standards by which to govern their actions.” It is the Eagles’ belief that disseminating the message conveyed by the Ten Commandments will help to persuade young men and women to observe civilized standards of behavior,
and will lead to more productive lives. Significantly, although the Eagles’ organization is nonsectarian, eligibility for membership is premised on a belief in the existence of a “Supreme Being.” As described by the Eagles themselves:

In searching for a youth guidance program, [we] recognized that there can be no better, no more defined program of Youth Guidance, and adult guidance as well, than the laws handed down by God Himself to Moses more than 3000 years ago, which laws have stood unchanged through the years. They are a fundamental part of our lives, the basis of all our laws for living, the foundation of our relationship with our Creator, with our families and with our fellow men. All the concepts we live by—freedom, democracy, justice, honor—are rooted in the Ten Commandments.

The movement to post copies of the Ten Commandments in public places in America may be due in the first instance to historical accident, but its popularity suggests something about monotheism and morality in the contemporary world, at least in the United States. Others may take this as simply a function of the peculiarities of American law or the American psyche, but I think the struggle has greater significance. If posting the Ten Commandments was not well adapted to some purpose, its popularity would have faded. The problem is to figure out what that purpose could be.

According to many measures of traditional theology and morality, the Ten Commandments are a very poor choice to serve the functions of civil religion.1 They seem to work only if one does not look very closely at all at what they say. Here are some of the oddities that might disqualify it from usefully serving as a symbol.

The Ten Commandments are an odd choice for a unifying symbol of a morality that unites us all. First, and most obviously, the Ten Commandments differs from other powerful unifying (and divisive) symbols such as the flag and cross because the Ten Commandments contains, or is made of, words. As a verbal icon, the text has a meaning distinct from the meaning of the symbol. Because the Ten Commandments is made up of words, we can argue about their truth—or whatever value is appropriate to the mood of the statement, whether declarative, imperative, or prohibitive—

---

1 Frederick Mark Gedicks and Roger Hedrix, “Uncivil Religion: Judeo-Christianity and the Ten Commandments,” West Virginia Law Review, 110 (2007), 275–305 at pp. 276–277. “A ‘civil religion’ is a set of nondenominational values, symbols, rituals, and assumptions by means of which a country interprets its secular history. Civil religion aims to bind citizens to their nation and government with widely shared religious beliefs, thereby supplying a spiritual interpretation of national history that suffuses it with transcendent meaning and purpose” (footnotes omitted).