

[Thou Shall Not Limit God by Thy Concepts](#)

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Used to be that Hinduism was just too complex for most Westerns. They were comfortable with their faith. God, the Father, reigned in heaven as a benevolent and mostly aloof Deity. He was the massive, bearded, sometimes wrathful white God depicted by Michelangelo. All was well. Well, not any more.

Witness the April 27th article in the Wall Street Journal, we hear rumblings of a new vision of God emerging in the West. The WSJ tells of a First Congregational Church in Long Beach, California, where pastor Mary Ellen Kilsby begins her Sunday service with this Christian prayer: "May the God who mothers us all bear us on the breath of dawn, and make us to shine like the sun, and hold us in the palm of Her hand." Heresy? Some think so. Oddity? Not any more.

Throughout the Western world - mostly in Europe and in North America's 350,000 churches - the fundamental concept of God as a white male is under siege. Two camps have emerged. On the one side are those who want, and are getting, language changes in scripture, hymnals and sermons that reflect a non-sexist, non-racist vision of God. On the surface, it is a battle of words - Father versus mother, He versus She, Mankind versus Humankind. Soon even the Catholic Church will issue a trial translation of psalms that will not use the pronoun He for God. Elsewhere, the association of Satan as the Prince of Darkness and of evil with blackness is being challenged by African-Americans.

Underneath all this, it is ideas and not words that are the issue. Schoolteacher Karen Miller is representative of the new view when she says she still believes in the teachings of Jesus, but "I'm evolving into a sort of neo-pagan. I envision the universe as God and all in the universe as a part of God." Said Joseph Hough, dean of Vanderbilt University's Divinity School, "I don't think our conception of God will ever stand still again. I don't think anyone would want to defend the view that God values males more than females, but that's exactly what [traditional] language does."

A genderless God? A feminine God? A black God? They may be familiar notions for Hindus (we have all three), but they are radical revelations for many nurtured under orthodox Western traditions. Some of it can get a bit odd. Oxford-educated poet Brian Wren is touring the US sharing his new hymns which sing to God as "strong Mother God," "warm father God," "old, aching God," "Straight-Talking Lover," "Beautiful Movement" and "Daredevil Gambler."

Not unexpectedly, there is a powerful resistance to such change among the more traditional theologians. They dread the pantheistic implications of much of the new language, and they fear the loss of Christianity's unified vision of the Divine, a unity they see as perhaps the most central shared theme of Western civilization. They note that Jesus called God Father, not Mother, and they urge their flocks to hold their ground against this next in the line of many fads.

It may be a battle of words, but this is not a minor skirmish. The defensive backlash is hostile and serious enough to bring death threats to Burton Throckmorton in Connecticut. As chairman of a committee of the National Council of Churches preparing a series of Bible readings which omitted male pronouns of God, he was forced to register at hotels under a false name and to call in the police with bomb-sniffing dogs. What does such a philosophical trend portend for us? Hindus and Buddhists can take a little credit and a lot of joy in these new developments. The credit is due because we are in a very small way responsible for the present reassessment. Millions of Christians, more than at any time in history, have gone to yoga classes, visited zendos and ashrams, listened to swamis from India, read the works of Buddha and Sankara and discussed enlightenment with friends over tepid Darjeeling tea. While loving the Eastern teachings, this generation of Christians seems disinclined to abandon the faith of their forefathers as did the Flower Children of the Sixties. Instead, they are trying to change church doctrine from the inside.

The joy derives from the fact that if these transformations continued and are somehow permanently incorporated by the reigning ecclesiastical powers, there will arise a more forbearing Christianity, one less outwardly ambitious and disinclined to the anti-Hindu tirades of minister like Pat Robertson.

As Western faiths move toward a more universal, less simplistic view of God, Hindus are struggling to provide more simplicity to their communities. It's too overwhelming to attempt to present the whole of Sanatana Dharma to children or

to those unfamiliar with Hinduism. It takes a lifetime to convey the elaborate mystery that we call Hinduism, and people don't have a lifetime anymore. They have a few hours a week, at most. So we are seeing a plethora of pithy primers and publications penned and printed, little works like *Daddy, Am I a Hindu?* and larger texts like Himalayan Academy's *Dancing with Siva: A Modern Hindu Catechism*.

I know what you're thinking, "That's all well and good, but don't stop there. Hindu need something more. Our religion is too amorphous, too unassuming, too wide-ranging and unconstrained. What we really need in this Kali Yuga are some edicts, directives, maybe a decree or two to rein in the beast. Or maybe some good, old-fashioned commandments, a 'Thou shalt not' to give us the spiritual bottom line."

As it happens, we are in possession of just such a list, Hinduism's first and (thank goodness) only commandments. There are eleven, of which the last is the most important.

1. Thou shalt not limit god by thy concepts nor divide Divinity from creation, nor forget the Ubiquitous, All-Embracing Presence.

2. Thou shalt not deny the sister or brothers their chosen paths, nor compel them, even with thy tongue, to follow thine own way. Secure in the Oneness of all, rejoice in the multiplicity and tend thine own light quietly.

3. Thou shalt not act against Dharma, even in thy thoughts or dreams.

4. Thou shalt avoid violence of even kind, living a harmless existence, never eating the flesh of animals or injuring a living creature by thy thoughts, thy words or thy deeds.

5. Thou shalt not neglect thy real purpose on this earth-to learn, to serve others, to seek Truth to mature in loving, to realize the Self, to attain moksha and thus to

know God.

6. Thou shalt cherish the Vedas and all illumined saints and sages, and seek solace daily through yoga and thorough worship in temples and shrines.

7. Thou shalt take immense joy in life, cheerfully learning from each experience, enduring the weal and woe of repeated births with the certain knowledge that you, and indeed all souls, will ultimately reach that which is.

8. Thou shalt not blame fate nor man for thy circumstances, for it is thine own thoughts, words and deeds which determine destiny. Knowing this, work diligently and sensibly toward thy liberation.

9. Thou shalt not enter the abyss of lower consciousness - doubt, fear, lust, greed, anger, hatred, arrogance, sloth and all the rest. Knowing wisdom to be the only rigid rule follow its thornless path.

10. Thou shalt see God everywhere, in all things and all peoples at all times. Should this prove difficult, seek ye a preceptor who has attained it and do what he says.

11. Thou shalt keep a healthy skepticism and be a little wary of admonishments which begin with the three words "Thou shalt not."

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