A national campaign has been mounted to post the Ten Commandments in public schools, courthouses, and other public buildings. On October 21, 1999, the Family Research Council and over three dozen members of Congress launched an initiative, known as the “Hang Ten” project, to display the Ten Commandments in congressional offices, public schools, and other public buildings. Several states have been considering and passing legislation sponsoring the installation of such monuments and displays. The approach of the United States of America to this issue is and will continue to be a testament to the strength of our commitment to the separation between church and state established by the U.S. Constitution, the Founding Fathers, and the development of this nation’s unique history.

Efforts to post the Decalogue in public places are unconstitutional and violate the secular ideals enshrined in the U.S. laws. The Constitution unequivocally mandates the separation of church and state. It refers to religion only in the First Amendment, which precludes government interference with religious matters, and in Article VI, which prohibits “religious tests” for public office. The First Amendment explicitly prohibits laws “respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Clearly, neither the Constitution nor the country has officially been founded as Christian entities.

Legal precedent supports the separation of church and state and actively protects the neutrality of the public sphere with regards to the display of manifestly religious texts and symbols. In 1980, the Supreme Court in Stone v. Graham struck down a Kentucky law that required public schools to display the Ten Commandments. The justices held that the Commandments are “undeniably a sacred text” and that posting them has a religious purpose. Lower federal courts have also struck down such displays.

Beyond the legal dimension, the posting of the Ten Commandments in public spaces would tear at the pluralist, multi-religious fabric of American society. Four of the Ten Commandments are specifically religious in nature. Untold numbers of people have been killed in battles over what constitutes a “false god” and the ban on worshipping a “graven image.” Furthermore, there are several versions of the Ten Commandments. There are Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish versions of the text, and different denominations list the Commandments with varying language and form. Displaying only one version would constitute government preference for one tradition over others. In order to preserve the constitutionally mandated neutrality of religion, would government officials also be willing to post the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism and the Five Pillars of Islam along with precepts from other faiths? There are over two thousand religions, traditions, denominations, and sects active and vibrant in America. It would be a disservice to each and every one of them to officially sanction a religious statement from one particular tradition over others.

This is a particularly sensitive issue for Hindus living in America. Former judge Roy Moore, who incited national controversy by installing a monument of the Ten Commandments in the courthouse of the State Judicial Building in Alabama, has been quoted as saying, “We’re not a nation founded by Hindu or Buddha or Mohammed.” In 2001, State Rep. Don Davis of North Carolina, who introduced and championed legislation officially sponsoring display of the Commandments in public schools, distributed an e-mail to fellow lawmakers claiming, “Two things made this country great: White Men & Christianity.” The legislation successfully passed. Such language threatens the equal citizenship of other racial groups, Hindus and all other non-Christian peoples in America, who have equally contributed to America’s greatness.

The Constitution is based on a secular vision that derives from the ideals of all of humanity and not just the beliefs of one religious tradition. The principles that guide law and jurisprudence in America may reflect the best of
Judeo-Christian values, but they are universal and embody the ideals of all humanity, regardless of religious background. Posting the Ten Commandments in courtrooms and other public buildings conflates American law with one religious tradition and denies the true universality and secularism of the American nation.

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) believes strongly that the separation of church and state must be maintained and that the posting of the Ten Commandments in public schools, courthouses, and other public buildings would violate the secular ideals enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and threaten the multi-religious, pluralistic fabric of American society. As such, HAF urges the following:

1) **Condemnation of any state or federal legislation that seeks to sponsor or sanction the posting of a version of the Ten Commandments in public schools, courthouses, and other public buildings;**
2) **Recognition of the secular, multi-religious, and pluralistic character of the United States as envisioned by the U.S. Constitution, federal and state legal precedent and laws, and the majority of the American people;**
3) **Acknowledgment of the need to ensure continued religious diversity and pluralism in America; and**
4) **Recognition of the contributions a variety of religious faiths and cultures continue to offer American society.**

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