

God in the Early Twenty-first Century: Ayodhya as Case Study

By Winfried Corduan

. . . I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions. (*Hamlet* Act II, Scene II)

Hamlet, in trying to expose the murderer of his father, drew upon the fact that sometimes we see ourselves more readily in the actions of others than by looking at ourselves directly. For example, a colleague mentioned to me recently that whenever he hears a poor scholarly presentation, his first thought is to worry about his own presentation skills. Similarly, books, films, or television shows may hold up mirrors to us in which we see our own flaws. And at times looking at contemporary events far away may help us reach greater understanding of our own immediate world. Specifically, understanding the nature of contemporary belief in God outside of Christianity may help us gain greater recognition of how similar patterns could also be true within Christendom.

In this paper I would like to take one scenario in current events, unpack its religious associations, and signal some broader implications about how the idea of God functions in the world today. The issue I have chosen is the effort to build a Hindu temple to commemorate the birthplace of Rama in the little town of Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, India.¹ Let me frame this situation with the following assessment by the celebrated ex-Muslim novelist Salman Rushdie:

The political discourse matters, and explains a good deal. But there's something beneath it, something we don't want to look in the face: namely, that in India, as elsewhere in our darkening world, religion is the poison in the blood. . . . So India's problem turns out to be the

In this paper Winfried Corduan describes the clashes between Hindus and Muslims in the Indian town of Ayodhya to make the point that oftentimes the concept of God is used as an icon for a particular culture. Thus, the Hindu god Rama epitomizes the Hindu dharma, while Allah often turns into an abstract concept justifying Islamic culture. The essay concludes by reflecting on attempts in the United States today to (re-)identify God with American culture. Mr. Corduan is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Taylor University.

world's problem. What happened in India has happened in God's name. The problem's name is God.'

Ayodhya: Historical Background

Let us be clear about one thing right from the outset. Ayodhya needs another temple about as much as Vatican City needs another church. It is a city filled with many beautiful temples as well as a number of mosques. There is no lack of places of worship in this small town. In fact, in a country where a pilgrimage to a holy site is the typical idea of a family vacation,¹ Ayodhya is, if not the "Disney World," then at least the "Six Flags over India" of its culture. The city, in attempting to attract tourists, claims representation for "Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, etc." (Christianity is either absent or not mentioned by name), and it boasts a total of 55 temples, not counting sacred baths or groves. In fact, there are already two presently functioning temples that claim to mark the birthplace of Rama, a point which could theoretically render the entire ensuing discussion moot.²

¹Ayodhya is located in the state of Uttar Pradesh in northern part of India, roughly two hundred miles southwest of Delhi. For maps, pursue the links available at <http://www.eindiatourism.com>. As a methodological matter, I hope in the course of this paper to demonstrate copious and responsible use of the Internet for research, perhaps even so that students can use it as a model. My Internet references fall basically into three categories: 1. Due to the nature of this project, much of what I am relating in the early part of this paper is collated from the news accounts concerning the issue. Such a task is made easier than it once was by keeping track of the news on the Internet, where we find online versions of virtually every newspaper in the world from the *Muncie Star Press* to *The Times* (of London). In my documentation, where appropriate, I will give a reference to a news account in print or a news agency (such as AP), followed by a Web URL. 2. Sometimes a Web site is significant in its own right, such as a commercial or propaganda site. Then I will use it in order to demonstrate a rhetorical point with no print reference provided. 3. Although usually a scholarly discussion does not include pictures, sometimes photographs or illustrations help the reader gain a better frame of reference. These are easily provided by sending the reader to a URL without having to worry about printing graphics. Insofar as I make reference to some Web sites whose text has become integral to this paper, I have cached those sites (loaded with flags to that effect) on my personal domain so that they may remain accessible, even if the newspaper should take them off the Web. (In terms of traditional research methodology, this would be the equivalent of having a tape of a television or radio broadcast.)

²Salman Rushdie, "India's Shame is Religion's Too" *The Age* (March 12, 2002), also available at <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/03/12/1015909849138.html> and cached at http://members.tripod.com/Win_Corduan/rushdie-cache.html. Rushdie's reflections over the last ten years are anthologized in Salman Rushdie, *Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992-2002* (New York: Random House, 2002). See also the appraisal of his life and work in S. Prasannarajan, "Freedom Fighter," *India Today (International)* 1.36 (Sept. 2, 2002): 46-47.

³See, for example, the advertisements (as well as polemics) at <http://www.ayodhya.com> to explore the possibilities of a vacation at Ayodhya.

⁴Ashis Nandy, Shikah Trivedy, Shail Mayaram Achyut Yagnik, *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5. The fact is, of course, that more often than not when in the history of human culture there has been a conflict between religion and arithmetic, arithmetic has had to yield the day.

There are few undisputed facts in this affair, but one that everyone agrees on is that in 1528 a mosque was built in Ayodhya. The Moghul governor, Mir Baqi, who built it named it "Babri Masjid," in honor of Babar, the first Moghul emperor.⁵ Unfortunately, as soon as we move beyond that single objective fact, the debate already begins.

Hindus claim that in order for Mir Baqi to build this mosque, he first had to raze a temple that stood on just that particular location. And this was not just another temple among the many thousands that the Muslim invaders of India destroyed, for this temple marked the true birthplace of the god Rama himself. Rama is one of the highest gods of Hinduism; in fact, for his direct devotees, he is God pure and simple. Rama's birthplace in Ayodhya, as detailed in the Ramayana,⁶ would surely have been marked by a temple from most ancient times, and the Moghuls, in their campaign to subdue and desecrate everything Hindu, went out of their way to erect the mosque exactly there. But Muslims tell a different story. According to them, there was no temple at this site. Why would there have been one, given all the many other temples in the vicinity? There are no references in the ancient writings that there was a temple at this spot, nor even any indications that this particular town was actually the Ayodhya of the Ramayana, including no archaeological confirmation. The Hindu view, from the Muslim perspective, is circular: there must have been a temple at this site because it is the exact spot where Rama was born, and we know that this is Rama's birthplace because, after all, this is the site of the ancient temple.

Temple or mosque, which belongs on that site? We can only say for certain that the dispute has been going on for several centuries now, but it is impossible to say whether it actually goes back all the way to the sixteenth century because, in truth, there is no incontrovertible evidence of a prior temple site, and presumably the Moghuls were not given to keeping detailed records of Hindu grievances against them. During the period of the British Raj, the colonial powers, attempting to placate both Hindus and Muslims, allowed both groups to worship in separate parts of the building, a policy that lasted from 1859 to 1949. In that year someone allegedly placed one or more statues of Rama inside the Muslim prayer court, both sides made charges and countercharges of defiling each other's religions, and the recently independent Indian government, who controlled the site, shut it down altogether.

⁵Ibid., 172. For a picture of the mosque prior to the events narrated here and Muslim commentary, see "Babri Masjid Before its Desecration," <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~gabhatia/masjidpict.htm> and "The Ruins of Ayodhya," March 3, 2002, <http://islam.about.com/library/weeldy/aa030302a.htm?iarn=dpile&terms=ayodhya+mosque>. One of the many points of contention is whether Babar himself ever set foot in the mosque.

⁶The Ramayana is attributed to the mythical poet Valmiki, probably no earlier than about 200 B.C. There are several translations. I will refer to Swami Venkatesananda, *The Concise Ramayana of Valmiki* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988). There is a beautiful translation in verse from the nineteenth century by R. Dutt at "Internet Sacred Texts Archive," ed. J. B. Hare, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/dutt/index.htm>.

170 Needless to say, neither side was happy with that outcome. Muslims remonstrated loudly, but this grievance was just one of myriads lodged in the context of the establishment of the secular state of India. Hindus moaned as well, but eventually started to take matters in their own hands. A number of nationalist organizations not only asked for the destruction of the mosque and the building of a bona fide temple to Rama (Ramjanmabhoomi), but by 1986 had begun to hold services (puja) there again.¹ On December 6, 1992, a mob of Hindus tore down the mosque.² In the violence that followed, approximately 3,000 people, almost all of them Muslims, wound up losing their lives.³ But even that event was only the beginning of a story that is continuing into the immediate present. Obviously, the Muslims want the mosque rebuilt, and the Hindu nationalists, who have cleared the site, now want to place a temple worthy of Rama's birthplace in its stead.

Now, before going further with the events, a word needs to be said about how this particular scenario fits into a larger picture. India's population is roughly 83% Hindu and 11% Muslim, but, despite this large margin, radical Hindu nationalists express fear of oppression by the Muslim element, possibly leading to the eventual obliteration of their culture.⁴ They believe that India must wage a war for its very soul against attempts by Muslims to drain its national life blood. Their message is that the minority group is getting special treatment, and, left unchecked, the majority will eventually have to serve the minority (most likely by being incorporated into greater Pakistan).

There is no question that the Indian legal system is allowing certain distinctions to be made between Muslims and Hindus, both on a regional and a national level. Although India is a secular state, Muslims have won the right to be treated

¹I will try not to clutter the body of the paper with the acronyms of all the various groups that make up the landscape of Indian politics. Some of the more important ones involved in this dispute are:

RSS—Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a national volunteer organization, the group that actually led the destruction of the mosque in 1992;

Shiv Sena—originally a nationalist youth organization, now also a political party;

VHP—Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a worldwide Hindu nationalist organization;

Bajrang Dal—originally the student branch of the VHP. "Bajrang" is another name for Hanuman, the monkey, who is Rama's able assistant in the Ramayana. Hanuman represents craftiness and unlimited power;

JHP—Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party), the majority coalition party that, consequently, supplies the prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, in many ways espousing the ideals of the VHP, but also diverging from them occasionally.

In addition, there are numerous smaller groups, such as local, temple, and ashram organizations, who attempt to make their presence felt whenever they can.

²A very detailed account of that day's events is provided by Nandy, et al., *Creating a Nationality*, 24-31.

³Ashok Malik and Shard Gupta give us a clear layout of the site and the issue of its surroundings in "Inhouse Ramayan," *India Today (International)* 1.6 (February 11, 2002): 14-15. They observe, "Like so much else in India, understanding the Ayodhya dispute has become a convoluted geography lesson."

⁴David Crystal, ed., *The Cambridge Factfinder* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 256.

according to Islamic shari'a on various points of law, such as in matters of divorce." Consequently, these Hindu nationalists believe that they are being subjected to injustice because Muslims are getting special favors.

However, what is at work in the Ayodhya situation goes far beyond legal grievances. The nationalist groups, sometimes collectively called the Hindutva, are inspired by an ideology that combines religion and patriotism—and revises them both. Here is how columnist Peter Popham summarizes the philosophy:

The first man on earth was an Indian, and a Hindu. Hinduism was the primeval religion, not just of India but of the world. There was no Aryan invasion of India, no enslavement of the southern Dravidians. Hindus were here from day one. Other people arrived on these shores, but eventually they bent the knee to Bharat Mata, Mother India, and were knitted into the Hindu fabric. Only the Muslims (and to a lesser extent the Christians) stood out. They smashed temples and erected mosques on the rubble, with sword and fire they tore millions of Hindus from the breast of Mother India and brought them forcibly over to Islam. It is the duty of patriotic Hindus to reverse that historic wrong."

As the outgrowth of this ideology, Ram's temple at Ayodhya has taken on central significance. The question of whether it should be built (or rebuilt) is not just about the construction of a temple, but, in this view, it is about the construction of a nation. A Web page calling on Hindus to participate in the effort proclaims:

All World Hindus are hereby strongly requested to immediately go to Ayodhya to provide assistance for the Ram temple construction. The temple construction will determine the fate of us Hindus in our land of Bharat. If we loose [sic], we have lost forever."

Still, so far neither the temple nor the mosque has been erected. In 1994 the Supreme Court of India decreed that no one should be allowed to have access to the site until it has been determined who should actually have property ownership over it and remanded the case to the appropriate court in Allahabad, thereby—with the shrewdness worthy of any supreme judicial board—giving itself the op-

"The Birth of Intolerance" (unsigned article), *India Today (International)* 1.14 (April 8, 2002): 18-21. A prominent court case in 1985 in which a Muslim woman, Shah Bano, was awarded alimony from her ex-husband by the Indian Supreme Court has taken on great symbolic value. In appeasement of Muslim authorities who argued that this ruling was offensive to Islam since in the Islamic code (the shari'a), a divorcee is not entitled to alimony (though she is allowed to walk away with her share of the family property), the government of Rajiv Gandhi passed a special law by which Muslim women would be judged according to the shari'a and not Indian secular law. Numerous Hindus felt that this accommodation violated the basic principle that a nation should have a single system of justice for all, not one law for the Hindu and one law for the Muslim.

"Peter Popham, "The Myth of Ram's Temple has Become a Licence to Kill in India," *The Independent* (March 11, 2002), <http://argumentindependent.co.uk/commentators/story.jsp?story=270940>, cached at http://members.tripod.com/Win_Corduan/popham-cache.html.

"Bajrang Dal, "Hindu Unity—Soldiers of Hindutva! Awake Hindus!," <http://www.hinduunity.com/>. This is the official Web site of the Bajrang Dal, and the content changes periodically. The particular wording cited here was no longer relevant after March 15, 2002, and has been changed in its specifics. However, the message remains constant.

172 tion of postponing a resolution for all eternity." But that maneuver has certainly not stopped the momentum of the movement. Ayodhya became a part of the national platform that helped elect the present majority coalition party (the nationalist BJP—Hindu People's Party) to power, though prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, personally sympathetic to the temple-building movement, has pledged to abide by the court ruling.

In the meantime, the nationalist groups were making active preparation for building the Rama temple." They were assembling columns and other building components, so that, when the appointed day came, all that needed to be done was to carry the material to the site and to put it together. To that end, thousands of pilgrims were flocking to Ayodhya in order to be a part of the effort. The appointed day was to have been March 15, 2002.

But not all Muslims stood by idly while this was going on. On February 27, hundred of miles removed from Ayodhya, a group of Muslims attacked a train of Hindu pilgrims returning from the city and burned an entire car of passengers. Fifty-eight Hindus were killed. In the ensuing retributive violence, anywhere from 700 to 1,000 Muslims have lost their lives."

March 15, 2002, passed without the temple being built and without the dreaded ensuing conflagration. The zealots had proclaimed on their Web site: "We will be going ahead with our plans to shift the carved stones to the Ramjanmabhoomi site at Ayodhya on March 15. If we [sic] stopped and arrested, so be it! We are ready for anything that comes in the way."⁷ Nevertheless, the government managed to restrict their efforts. Among other tactics, they confined thousands of nationalist leaders right before the critical day, presumably on the sound theory that a person arrested now will not be able to resist arrest tomorrow. The authorities even rejected more moderate requests, such as holding a puja (worship) directly on the site on March 15 or being allowed to build on the property adjacent to the disputed lot. The upshot was that on March 15 nothing more happened than that the Hindus held a grimly defiant parade and celebrated a puja almost a mile from the place of contention. Needless to say, no one doubts that further confrontations have only been postponed, and, in fact, there have been some sporadic outbursts of violence; for example, on March 17, 2002, four Muslims were killed in the province of Gujarat, the area of the train conflagration, and several mosques were burned."

"Jyotsna Singh, "What the Courts Must Decide," BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/south_asia/newsid_1867000/1867247.stm. See also the earlier defeatist attitude reflected in the essay, "Babri Mosque Judicial Inquiry Makes a Mockery of Justice," Murtaza Haider, <http://www.muslimedia.com/archives/world98/babri.htm>.

"For a layout of the proposed building, as well as a description of the many factors impacting the location and extension of the proposed temple, see Ashok Malik and Shard Gupta, "Inhouse Ramayan," *India Today (International)* 1.6 (February 11, 2002): 14-15.

"See the stories and analysis of Swapan Dasgupta, "In the Line of Fire," *India Today (International)* 1.10 (March 11, 2002): 16-21.

⁷Bajrang Dal, "Hindu Unity."

"Geetinder Garewal, "Hindu Mob Sets Fire to Mosques in Northern India," Reuters Report,

Also in Gujarat, on September 24, 2002, Muslim guerillas took over a Hindu temple, killing 29 worshipers.¹⁹

Over the last year, the Allahabad court has decided to move more actively towards a resolution. It has agreed to meet more than once a week and put a limit on the number of witnesses it is willing to hear;²⁰ it has made it possible to treat the actual mosque site separately from the surrounding sixty-five acres;²¹ and—most significantly—it ordered a ground x-ray survey of the temple grounds. When the survey revealed structures underneath, it directed that there be an excavation by professional archaeologists. The court put a time limit of thirty days, beginning in early March of 2003, for scientists to expose and identify any artifacts in the first stratum underneath the site; undoubtedly the work will take much longer than that. However, preliminary word confirms a twelfth-century building predating the mosque.²²

Understanding the Events

Now let us turn to an analysis of these events. To begin with, we see here what seems to happen the world over whenever different social or cultural groups clash. The details vary; the patterns remain the same. African tribal rivalries, Bosnian ethnic hostilities, Chilean guerilla warfare, Danish social unrest,—one can run through the alphabet of global turbulence without having to pause too long for thought, and in each of these cases the same patterns of resentment, suspicion, and paranoia emerge." Violence gets rationalized as either preemptive or retaliation, and the cycle seems to be unbreakable. Thus, a good way, and perhaps the best way, to interpret such a situation is in terms of societal dynamics."

Nevertheless, one cannot help notice that religion does represent the dividing

http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/nm/20020317/wl_nm/india_mosque_dc_2.

"For a full account, see Ashok Malik, Uday Mahurkar, and Sandeep Unnithan, "Terrorism's New Strategy," *India Today (International)* 1.40 (October 7, 2002): 10-19.

"Yahoo! News Report, <http://in.news.yahoo.com/020402/43/lkby5.html>.

²⁰Ashok Malik, "In God We Trust," *India Today (International)* 2.7 (February 17, 2003): 14-15.

²¹Ashok Malik, "Depths of Ayodhya," *India Today (International)* 2.12 (March 17, 2003): 12-15.

"Yes, even the ideals of Scandinavian social engineering no longer seem to be holding up under contemporary pressures, at least as reported anecdotally by John Derbyshire, "A Day in the Life," on *National Review Online* (March 8, 2002), <http://www.nationalreview.com/derbyshire/derbyshire030802.shtml>.

²²As provided, for example, by Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001). Varshney compares and contrasts three cities in India with a high rate of religious violence and three cities with a low rate and concludes that the difference lies in the extent to which people of different religions are integrated together into social organizations, such as trade unions and professional societies. Nandy et al. place the Ayodhya discord into the context of the ongoing legacy of European colonialism: "On this plane, the conflict is not the climax in a series of grand crusades between Hindus and Muslims, but one more desperate attempt to make the two communities deserving citizens of a global order built on the values of the European enlightenment" (*Cre-*

174 line in this case, and, furthermore, that some people do hold religion accountable for the whole situation. We need to remind ourselves of Rushdie's statement that "what happened in India has happened in God's name. The problem's name is God."²⁸ So, let us ask ourselves whether belief in God may have actually brought about this situation. In other words, the division into Hindus and Muslims is not just a handy classification of two cultural groups, but the beliefs of the groups must be in some way pertinent to the case. Specifically, I do not want to use religion as an explanation for the situation, for it is far too complex to do that, but to take a look at the concepts of Rama and Allah and see how they may be contributing to the circumstances.

Rama: The Embodiment of the Dharma

When students first learn about Hinduism, they typically hear that Rama is an avatar of Vishnu; he is the hero of the Ramayana, and his devotees worship him as the ideal man and husband of the ideal woman, Sita. He is all of that, and the mythology associated with him provides us with many interesting details, but that is not the whole story. Beyond the mythology, beyond the specifics associated with him, beyond his representations in epics and iconography, to his followers he is ultimately God. The Hinduism of Rama is a form of theism. He is transcendent and immanent; he has personhood; and he is the creator of a world that is dependent on him and bound to him through divine immanence. Many Westerners tend to think of Hinduism as essentially pantheistic, but in reality the more popular forms of Hinduism focus on a personal conception of God. This theology originally arose out of the bhakti movements that exalted Shiva in southern India and Vishnu in the north as supreme personal godhead. In particular, Rama bhakti is associated with the eleventh-century scholar and devotee Ramanuja.²⁹

In Ramanuja's view, the ultimate form of God is Brahman, but in contrast to the impersonalist Vedantic philosophy, in which Brahman is non-dual reality beyond all words and concepts, for him Brahman is the personal. Rudolf Otto summarizes his view thus: "He is not without attributes, but is the summation of all noble attributes. He is the subject of all ideal predicates. He is eternal and infinite, before and above the world."³⁰ One can refer to God as Brahman, Ishvara (a term for God as Creator), Vishnu, or Rama. In whatever way you may think of God, he still has those same attributes. What this boils down to is this: even though Rama is most easily categorized as an avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu, we should not think of him as *merely* an avatar. Both as an avatar and as the God whom he incarnates,

²⁸*Ming a Nation*, ix).

²⁹Rushdie, "India's Shame."

³⁰Ramanuja's view of God and the world is summarized in Rudolf Otto, *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity Compared and Contrasted*, ed. Frank Hugh Foster (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 35-43.

³¹*Ibid.*, 37.

he is still always supreme God. The details of the mythology only help us focus on some particular attributes of God, but they do not limit the divine person.

When we turn to the mythology, the basic blueprint for understanding Rama comes from the Ramayana, the story of the life of Rama and his wife Sita. Most iconographic depictions of Rama show him colored blue or green, with a huge bow and accompanied by his wife Sita, his brother Lakshman, and Hanuman the monkey god.²⁸ In the Ramayana, Rama and Sita represent the ideal husband and wife as role models for all of humanity. As the story unfolds, the divine attributes emerge through their actions. The plot of the Ramayana centers on the abduction of Sita by the demon king Ravana and her rescue by Rama and his companions. Leading up to these events we learn how Rama was born in Ayodhya and how he and Sita met and lived in exile together. Then, after her release from the kidnapping, we find out how they reclaimed both their home town of Ayodhya as well as their own relationship. The story is replete with villains of great cunning—even an evil stepmother—and heroes of unparalleled qualities, such as Lakshman, Rama's pure and undefiled brother, and Hanuman, the crafty and powerful grand vizier of the monkeys.

Let us take a glimpse at a few vignettes in the story of Rama to get some insight into his character. One of the very early climaxes of the book occurs when he wins Sita's hand in marriage. Her adoptive father, King Janak (Sita was actually birthed from a furrow in the earth), had set a test. Any man who could string and bend his bow, which originally came from Shiva (Rudra) himself, would receive Sita for his bride. Many great warriors had tried and failed, but Rama brought off what no one else could.

Five thousand exceptionally strong men brought in the weapon with its strong casing, mounted on wheels.... And, as thousands of people were looking on, Rama mounted it, and filled it, and then fired it: with a loud roar the weapon broke in the middle."

Rama had just done something that no divine being, let alone a mortal human, should have been able to do. The earth reverberated from this event. Rama's extraordinary power was highlighted again when he finally killed Ravana, the demon king. Equipped with a spear from Brahma and riding a chariot given to him by Indra, the two engaged in a combat. Finally, Rama was able to strike the fatal blow, and again the effects were cosmic: "As Rama took [the Brahma missile] in his hands, the earth shook and all living beings were terrified. Infallible in its destructive power, this ultimate weapon of destruction shattered the chest of Ravana, and entered deep into the earth." To understand the significance of this event, we can adduce a statement by P. Thomas, "While the Greek ideal is beauty, and the Chris-

"A picture of the Rama group is included on the Web site "About Hinduism," <http://www.christiananswers.net/evangelism/beliefs/hinduism.html>.

²⁸Ramayana 1 (Bala Kanda), 67, in Venkatesananda, *Concise Ramayana*, 40.

"Ramayana 6 (Yuddha Kanda), 111, in Venkatesananda, *Concise Ramayana*, 336.

tian ideal love, the Hindu ideal of the Deity is Power."³¹ Rama epitomizes this ideal.

Still, just as important as Rama's power is his commitment to the dharma, the Hindu way of life. Dharma refers to the entire system of Hinduism, including social and ritual obligations. It includes worship practices and moral duties. The Ramayana depicts this trait in Rama early on: "Rama and Lakshmana continued to serve their parents and preceptors. . . . They thus delighted the hearts of king Dasharatha, the holy ones and others."³² But how much Rama was really committed to the dharma came out at the end. Even though he supposedly loved and trusted Sita unreservedly, he consented to her taking a test of purity to demonstrate that she had not allowed herself to be defiled by the evil Ravana while in his clutches. Against his own better feelings, he allowed Sita to throw herself into a fire set ablaze by Rama's brother Lakshman, from which she, of course, emerged unscathed. She was vindicated, and so was Rama's devotion to the highest standards of marital behavior under the dharma. He declares:³³

This baptism by fire was necessary, to avoid public calumny and ridicule... I knew, too, that Sita would never be unfaithful to me: for we are non-different from each other even as the sun and its rays are. It is therefore impossible for me to renounce her."

So, we see Rama, the one who wields the power of the universe, as the one who embodies the highest form of the Hindu ideal. Rama *is* Hinduism in a real sense: he is the energy that expresses itself in the cosmic law, and, conversely, he is the dharma that liberates the ultimate power. Brahma, the creator, exclaims: "You are verily lord Narayana [Vishnu]. You are the imperishable cosmic being. You are the truth. You are eternal. You are the supreme dharma of the worlds."³⁴

For our purposes, we can observe that Rama's appeal to his followers is exactly along that line, namely as the divine being who is at one and the same time God and the Hindu system. Just as we see that Rama embodies in himself cosmic power and the dharma, so devotion to Rama and devotion to the dharma are bound up with each other. In general terms, this is what all contemporary devotional Hinduism is about. It is the essence of all contemporary bhakti Hinduism that the personal commitment to one's God subsumes all good works. So, to cite another example, Krishna said in the Bhagavad Gita: "But those who dedicate all their work to Me, serve Me as the only goal, worship Me and concentrate on Me exclusively, and stay possessed by Me, are quickly retrieved by Me from the death-

³¹P. Thomas, *Epics, Myths and Legends of India* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons (Sr Co., n.d.), 8.

³²Ramayana, 1 (Bala Kanda), 77, in Venkatesananda, *Concise Ramayana*, 46.

³³In the last book, generally accepted to be a later addition, Rama gives in to the gossip about Sita once more, and again she submits to a test—this time by allowing the earth, which had first given birth to her, to swallow her up for good. She had demonstrated her purity for a second time, but this time by leaving Rama permanently.

³⁴Ramayana 6 (Yuddha Kanda), 121, in Venkatesananda, *Concise Ramayana*, 342.

³⁵Ramayana 6 (Yuddha Kanda), 120, in Venkatesananda, *Concise Ramayana*, 342.

ridden ocean of phenomenal world."³⁶ Rama extends this notion even further so that the worship of Rama implies a full endorsement of all that he stands for. Rama absorbs in himself the entire essence of Hinduism, and Rama-bhakti is the expression of total commitment to Hinduism as a system just as much as devotion to the God. Thus we begin to get a clue how the issue of building a temple to Rama on the alleged site of his birthplace in Ayodhya can take on such all-pervasive significance for the Hindus involved. This is not to say that, from a less nationalistic point of view, the project is justified, since it is hard to get around the way in which the specifics of the issue have been manufactured and provided with a dubious urgency. Still, if one is looking for a deity to symbolize the ideals and aims of the nationalist movement, then Rama is the one. In the hands of these devotees, Rama is no longer a deity to be worshiped but an icon of their culture.

According to a contemporary post-modern understanding of religion, the gods of a culture are directly dependent on the power dynamics within that culture. David Adams Leeming states, "In our depictions of divinity, we humans have given form to our sense of the ultimate source of our significance. We make our god in our own image because our own image marks the physical limits of our being."³⁷ This may be an unwarranted overstatement, but in the case of Rama in the context of our issue, it is surely correct. It is fair to say that the way this god functions for many Hindus, Rama is no longer Rama, but the culture that he stands for.

Allah: The True System

Clearly, the Muslim conception of God begins at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Hindu idea of Rama. God is never to be associated with any object in the realm of finite creatures. An incarnation, let alone a representation with an idol, is completely unacceptable. "Allah" is the Arabic word for God. It is relatively generic in meaning, so that most Christian missionaries continue to use this word to refer to the God of the Bible, even though they are aware of the important conceptual differences. There simply is no better word.³⁸ Allah is both transcendent and immanent; he is distinct from the world that he created, and he governs the world with his rules. Let us learn a little bit more about Allah by looking at a few passages in the Qur'an. Obviously, this is not the place for a full-blown Islamic theology proper, but let us point out some important factors in understanding the nature of Allah in Islam. A good place to begin this exploration is the first section of sura 6, in which Allah, through Muhammad, takes the idolaters of Mecca to task for their false beliefs and their defiant attitude:³⁹

³⁶Bhagavad Gita 12:6,7, in *Madhusudana Sarasvati on The Bhagavad Gita* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977), 221.

³⁷David Adams Leeming, *The World of Myth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 123.

³⁸William J. Saal, *Reaching Muslims for Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 33.

³⁹"Introduction to Sura VI," *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, trans. A. Yusuf Ali (Brentwood, Maryland: Amana, 1983), 288. Ali's translation is available in many differ-

The sin of these people is evident:
 Yet those who reject Faith
 Hold (others) as equal.
 With their Guardian-Lord. (6:1)

This is the sin of *shirk*, or idolatry—associating any creature with Allah—that is frequently referred to as the most serious sin a human being can commit.

But why do these people remain idolaters? Why do they not come to belief in the teachings of Muhammad? For that matter, why does Allah not give them whatever evidence they may need to convince them of their present error? These issues are addressed in this sura. There are two strands running through this sura. One is the attitude of the idolaters themselves. Their problem is that, regardless of what evidence might be presented to them, they will always reject it because of their own obstreperousness: "But never did a single one of the Signs of their Lord reach them, but they turned away therefrom" (6:4). The idea of "signs" as evidence for Allah recurs throughout the Qur'an, but, as we shall see presently, they will not usually convince the unbelievers of the truth of Islam. It includes the notion that God's glory is being revealed in the universe. "It is He Who has created for you all things that are on earth; moreover His design comprehends the heavens, for He gave order and perfection to the seven firmaments; and of all things He has perfect knowledge" (2:29).

But such insights will not compel the unbelievers. They reject Allah in times of prosperity (6:6) as well as calamity (6:42, 43). What if a piece of parchment inscribed with God's revelation floated down from heaven? The infidels would simply claim that it was a magic trick (6:7). If God sent down an angel, surely then there would be no room left for doubt? The Qur'an engages in a clever little argument here. The only way in which the unbelievers would be able to hear an angel, an intrinsically spiritual being, would be if he descended in human form—but then that would remove the evidentiary value of his being an angel because the person would merely see another human, and the unbeliever would be further confirmed in his skepticism: "If We had made it an angel, We should have sent him as a man, and We should certainly have caused them confusion in a matter which they have already covered with confusion" (6:9). Unbelievers blaspheme against prophets (6:10) and do not let their minds get changed by seeing the consequences of their evil choices (6:11). In short, they do not acknowledge Allah because they do not want to. "Behold! how they lie against their own souls! But the (lie) which they invented will leave them in the lurch" (6:24). When they finally have to face up to the truth at the last judgment, it will be too late (6:30).

The second strand woven into the declaration of sura 6 is the sovereignty of God. "If Allah touch you with affliction, none can remove it but He; if He touch you with happiness, He has power over all things" (6:17). Not only do unbelievers reject whatever signs might be given to them, but God has prevented them from

ent editions and formats. All quotations below are from this translation.

belief as well. "Of them there are some who (pretend to) listen to you; but We have thrown veils on their hearts, so they do not understand it, and deafness in their ears" (6:25). Allah confirms unbelief and calls to belief. "Those who reject Our Signs are deaf and dumb, in the midst of profound darkness; whom Allah wills, He leaves to wander; whom He wills, He places on the way that is Straight" (6:39). So, we get the following picture. God has given human beings signs that should lead them to acknowledge him. But many human beings do not respond to him. They do not do so both because they do not wish to and because Allah has not opened their minds to the truth. Obviously, there is a situation here that is not unique to Islam; Christians have been known to debate the question of reconciling divine providence with human responsibility as well. Islamic scholars are entitled to find a solution that is acceptable to them within their own frame of reference." But we will not pursue either one of these lines at this point. Instead, we will go a little further in clarifying how this understanding of Allah contributes to our larger issue.

I have not yet mentioned one further sign, namely the ultimate one: the revelation of the Qur'an through the prophet Muhammad. In the final analysis, this is the only one that counts; it is the touchstone for belief.

Say, 'What thing is most weighty in evidence?' Say, 'God is Witness between me and you; this Qur'an has been revealed to me by inspiration, that I may warn you and all whom it reaches.' (6:19)

Similarly, another verse (ayat) reads,

And is it not enough for them that We have sent down to you the Book which is rehearsed to them? Verily, in it is Mercy and a Reminder to those who believe. (29:49)

Thus, regardless of how one might attempt to resolve the apparent paradoxes, the crucial consideration is how one responds to the Qur'an. As we can see in this brief picture, Allah emerges as a rather distant deity. One could not imagine a more drastic contrast than the one we see between the ebullient and flamboyant Rama and the stern and controlling Allah. This is not a God who comes down to earth to immerse himself in human affairs, to draw human beings to himself with his heroic deeds and all-consuming passion, let alone to serve as role model. This is a God who has made known his demands on his creatures. If they respond, fine; if they do not, fine as well. He may have mercy, or he may not. No one has the right to question his will.

And so the human being does not relate to Allah so much as to his revelation. The question is not one of a person's relationship to Allah, but whether one submits to the Qur'an and its code of behavior. Aside from the somewhat irregular practices of Sufi mysticism, in Islam a direct personal relationship with Allah is not

"A good summary of the issues and the debate is provided by Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 111-12.

180 an aspect of the religion because Allah is not known immediately, but through the Qur 'an.⁴¹ When someone becomes a Muslim, when someone lives as a Muslim, when someone claims to live in the presence of Allah, the bottom line is still a matter of living according to what God has made known through his prophet. Islam is a system. It encompasses beliefs, worship practices, ethics, and—crucially—always a political community. And to relate to Allah is to buy into the system; conversely, to buy into the system is to relate to Allah. Allah certainly is not identical to his revelation in purely theological terms, but the system based on his revelation is the one and only way to have knowledge of him. And here is the crucial point for this study: living according to Allah's revelation is identical to living according to Islamic culture. Consequently, devotion to Allah and devotion to the culture that results from obedience to Allah are mutually inclusive.

And thus, when we come right down to it, despite all of the obvious differences, there is also a clear similarity between Rama and Allah. For their adherents, their function is ultimately in terms of the system that they validate. For either deity, it is impossible to separate him from his social and cultural context. Rama epitomizes Hindu culture, and Allah, in a very different way, identifies with Islamic culture. In both cases, God and the human culture with which he is associated are inseparable.

Reflections in the Play: An American God?

And so, Rushdie may be right—at least to a point. India's problems as exemplified in Ayodhya are certainly tied to the religions involved, and the concepts of God are such that they do not ameliorate the situation because they solidify the cultural alienation between the groups. Rama by his very nature lends himself to being the icon of radical nationalists, and Allah is the validation of a political and cultural system. One might not wish to go so far as to say simply that God is the problem, but it is clear that in neither case is God particularly the solution because God is the legitimator of the conflicting ideologies. This is not to say that the idea of God has to function in this way. What is needed is the idea of a God who is not intrinsically tied to a social system, whether it be ethnic, economic, or cultural. It is at this point that, to return to our motto from Hamlet, we may perhaps discover

⁴¹In the context of this discussion, when challenged by evangelical Christians in the Western world on whether Islam teaches a personal relationship with God, contemporary Muslim apologists frequently refer to a phrase in Surah 50:16, in which Allah ("We") states concerning the human being, ". . . We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein." But a closer look reveals that this verse is far from describing an intimate relationship between Allah and Muslim. It is actually a warning or threat intended to promote good behavior: "It was We Who created man, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein. Behold, two (watchful angels) appointed to record (his doings) one sitting on the right and one on the left. Not a word does he utter but there is a watcher by him, ready (to note it)" (50:16-18). The phrases in parentheses are provided by the translator.

our own potential "malefactions" by observing the "play." For purposes of this discussion, by "our own" I mean—to begin with—the middle-class, mostly European-originated population of the United States, though, as we shall see, the same observations carry over to the larger American population as well. In the United States at the time of this writing, the debate rages over which conception of God is most able to embody American culture. Let me explain this observation a little further, first by taking a step back in history.

In *Protestantism in the United States*² Martin E. Marty defends the following analysis on the interaction of various religious groups with civic life in the history of the United States: As the young nation found its ideological footing during the nineteenth century, there emerged an unspoken compact among the Protestant Christian denominations to allow each other to prosper, a compact that was honored with the title of "freedom of religion." There were two groups that did not fit into that compact and were considered disruptive: first the Mormons and then the Jehovah's Witnesses.³ The calm tolerance of, say, Methodists towards Presbyterians would not easily extend to that of, say, Baptists to the disciples of Joseph Smith. Whereas Christians understood the need to allow each other to evangelize and recruit church members, Mormons were considered sinister and insidious. Catholics also came under suspicion, largely because their behavior—drinking, smoking, dancing, "breaking the Sabbath"—raised doubts as to whether they were truly Christian, but their presence was too entrenched to be questioned seriously.⁴ Beyond it all stood the fundamental satisfaction that at least in this country everyone worshiped God, and that real pagans, those who did not even worship the true God at all, lived in foreign lands where missionaries were taking the truth to them.

Entering into the twentieth century, the scope of the concord broadened itself, at least in public life. "Protestant, Catholic, and Jew!" became the slogan that seemed to denote an all-embracing acceptance of every persuasion in public society.⁵ Will Herberg (who, I must emphasize, was critical of the situation) described the state of affairs in the middle of the twentieth century in this way:

The picture that emerges is one in which religion is accepted as a normal part of the American Way of Life. Not to be—that is, not to identify oneself and be identified as—either a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew is somehow not to be an American. It may imply being foreign, as is the case when one professes oneself a Buddhist, a Muslim, or anything but a

²Martin E. Marty, *Protestantism in the United States: Righteous Empire*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1986).

³Ibid., 71.

⁴See, for example, Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968), 104-106. Roman Catholicism became a serious issue in the 1928 election when the Democrat candidate Al Smith combined in his identity both Catholicism and opposition to prohibition.

⁵The phrase became popularized with the penetrating analysis by Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1960).

This supposed consensus was founded on the idea that we did, after all, all worship the same God. Herberg quotes President Dwight D. Eisenhower as saying, "Back to God" is the first, the most basic, expression of Americanism. Without God, there could be no American form of government, nor an American way of life."⁴⁸ How things have changed! The equilibrium of former days is being recalculated by the ever-increasing number of immigrants who have brought their religions with them and are now becoming permanent members of American society. Terry Muck estimated in 1992 that as many as 17.5 million adults in the United States may be affiliated with a non-Christian religion." To cite a specific example, the 1997 edition of the *World Almanac* stated that there were 910,000 Hindus in the United States; by 2004 this number had gone up to 1,285,000—an increase of 43 percent, with no reason to assume that this increase is slowing down."

Needless to say, the entry of religions into the American scene has presented a challenge to the "Eisenhower vision" of America. Is the Judeo-Christian God still the foundation of America? Must we change our paradigm in order to accommodate all of the new groups and their claims to a stake in the republic? Does the "God" in whom "We Trust" also come under the name of Shiva or Allah? Has the time come perhaps to abandon the notion of God as central to our democracy, or do we need to be proactive in reclaiming the Judeo-Christian God for America? Among those who want to retain a central role for God in American public thought, there seem to be two dominant options.⁴⁹ One is to insist that the "Eisenhower vision" is the correct one, viz that the United States is founded on the Judeo-Christian God, and that other concepts of God are simply not compatible with American ideals. The other option is to allow the paradigm to expand itself *ad infinitum*, so that all religious forms of belief in God can be accommodated. Then "Protestant-Catholic-Jew" would become "Protestant-Catholic-Jew-Mormon-Muslim-Hindu-Buddhist-and-so-forth."

Let us look at a fairly innocuous example to illustrate this matter. The Girl Scouts of America have long made belief in God a part of their constitution, and the pledge recited by all scouts states, "On my honor, I will try to serve God and my country, to help people at all times, and to live by the Girl Scout law."⁵⁰ How-

⁴⁸Ibid., 257-58.

⁴⁹Ibid., 258.

⁵⁰Terry Muck, *Those Other Religions in Your Neighborhood: Loving Your Neighbor When You Don't Know How* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992).

⁵¹Robert Famighetti, ed., *World Almanac and Book of Facts 1997* (Mahwah, NJ: K-III Reference, 1996); *World Almanac and Book of Facts 2004* (New York: World Almanac Education Group, 2004).

⁵²Obviously, there are other options, such as simply not wanting to make American public policy founded on any concept of God. However, at this point in the paper, that is not the option under discussion.

⁵³The Girl Scouts of the United States of America, "The Promise and the Law," <http://www.girlscouts.org/program/promiselaw.html>.

ever, heading into the 1990s, the organization became concerned that girls were not signing up for scouting due to an overly narrow, namely Judeo-Christian, interpretation of the word "God."³³ In 1993 Girl Scouts of America (GSA) decided that no girl or her parents should be put off by the inclusion of God in the pledge, and the official Web site of the organization now clearly delineates, "The word 'God' can be interpreted in a number of ways, depending on one's spiritual beliefs. When reciting the Girl Scout Promise, it is okay to replace the word 'God' with whatever word your spiritual beliefs dictate."³⁴ Was this an innocuous accommodation in order to make sure no girl misses out on the fun of scouting for the wrong reason? GSA thought so, but in the eyes of some Christians, it was yet another example of the banishment of (the true) God from public life. *Christianity Today* reported the decision without editorializing, but gave its report the headline, "Is God Who You Want Him to be?"³⁵ Surely the actual identity of God was not the issue; in fact, it seems that GSA was trying to say that girl scouting was not the place to settle important theological concerns. Nevertheless, many Christians saw this expression of inclusivism (or perhaps simply courtesy) as a part of a movement to set their (Judeo-Christian) God aside.

A more strident example of this bifurcation can be seen in the remarks made by a high-ranking member of the George W. Bush administration and in the reactions to them. In several public remarks in 2003, the deputy undersecretary for intelligence, Lt. General William G. Boykin, decried Islam as a false and inferior religion and attributed his own personal victories as well as the future success of the United States to a battle between religions." He reported on his victory against a Muslim warlord in Somalia by saying, "I knew my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol."³⁶ In fact, he explained the hatred of Islamic terrorists for the United States on this basis: "Because we're a Christian nation, because our foundation and our roots are Judeo-Christian . . . and the enemy is a guy named Satan."³⁷ No doubt about it: the "Eisenhower vision" continues to live for General Boykin.

Unsurprisingly, there were many strong reactions against the General's declarations. For the point of this article, let me mention two specifically. James Carroll of the *Boston Globe* wrote:

The danger of religious war is real. . . . Boykin describes a 'bigger' God in conflict with smaller gods, vanquishing them. Idols get smashed. The soldier's faith is braced by the assumption that God, too, can have recourse to violence, and foundational texts of Judaism,

³³*Christian Century* 111.7 (March 2, 1994): 221.

³⁴Girl Scouts, "The Promise."

³⁵"Is God Who You Want Him To Be?" *Christianity Today* 3.14 (Nov. 22, 1993): 47.

³⁶Richard T. Cooper, "General Casts War in Religious Terms," *Los Angeles Times* (October 16, 2003), independently cached by a clipping service at <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines03/1016-01.htm>.

³⁷Ibid.

"Ibid.

Thus Carroll, taking a page from Rushdie, sees the biggest harm in Boykin's statements not in their insensitivity, but in the fact that statements of that nature could lead to religious-inspired violence. Not quite as stridently, but equally as dramatically, Geov Parrish of WorkingForChange.com concludes an essay in which he criticizes the general's statement as well as the ensuing debate:

Regardless, both the views of Boykin and other evangelicals *and of many of his critics* seem to ignore the fact that Muslims make up a significant and fast-growing part of our own culture. It's one thing to disparage the religious beliefs of an enemy. It's another to disparage the faith of six million fellow Americans — and that, above all, is what makes comments like those of Lt. Gen. Boykin both offensive and dangerous.⁵⁹

In other words, not only are the general's claims unacceptable, the whole idea of discussing, even refuting, their truth is unacceptable, for there are six million Muslims among us whose faith simply should not be subject to such public vivisection.

What is of greatest interest for us in our discussion is not whether the general's characterization of Islam is true, or whether a more inclusive view of God is the correct one. The thing that stands out is that this debate seems to be not so much about "Which God is right?" as "Which God is right for America?" Do we cling to the Judeo-Christian concept of God, because it is this God who has made America great, or do we endorse a new, broader vision of God because America has changed? Should we reject the "Eisenhower vision" at this time? If we should, is our motivation objective theological truth or social harmony?

In the meantime, American leadership is pursuing a policy of increasing inclusivism. In October of 2003, for the first time ever, the White House hosted a Hindu Diwali celebration. This Hindu holiday honors a goddess, identified either as Sita, the wife of Rama, or as Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune and consort of Vishnu, depending on the region of India. This is the most popular of all Hindu holidays in which, similar to Western celebrations of Christmas, people decorate their houses, send cards, and give each other presents. The religious high point of the holiday is the lighting of a lamp (candle or camphor light holder) and the chanting of a verse from the Upanishads: "Lead us from untruth to truth; lead us from darkness to light."⁶⁰ At the White House celebration, presidential advisor Karl Rove represented President Bush in the official lighting of the lamp. The president, who was abroad on that day, sent the message: "By celebrating their beliefs, ancestry, and culture, Hindus in America and around the world enrich communities and

⁵⁸James Carroll, "Warring With God," *Boston Globe* (October 21, 2003), http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2003/10/21/warring_with_god/.

⁵⁹Geov Parrish, "The Islam Among Us," *Working For A Change*, <http://www.workingforchange.com/article.cfm?ItemID=15902>. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁰Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1, 3, 27.

ensure that important values and customs are passed on to future generations."¹ This message is surely an innocuous one, with which few people should disagree. Nevertheless, the recognition of the contributions of Hindu culture is not in itself a reason why this president, who has publicly strongly identified himself with evangelical Christianity, should initiate the observance of a Hindu ceremony under the roof of his official residence. Obviously, the motivation was to honor those people of Hindu religion who had made a contribution to the president's work as well as to enlist the good will of the increasing number of Hindu practitioners in the United States. This paper is not the place to evaluate the wisdom or propriety of the event. For our purposes, the crucial observation is that, calls for a return to the "Eisenhower vision" notwithstanding, America's movement to an increasingly inclusive vision seems to be inevitable.

Needless to say, this paper cannot predict how this debate is going to come out. But what is clear is that there is another option, namely to steer away from the idea of an "American God" altogether. Presumably this option would involve recognizing the United States as a purely secular state that permits the practice of any religion, but does not see itself as based on a view of God, whether a particular one or a synthesis of many. In practice it may be the case that this is the direction America has gone over the last forty years, though it goes counter to the calls for a renewed religious foundation of the nation, either a Judeo-Christian one or an all-accommodating one. Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's,"² a statement that implies the reality of two realms, Caesar's and God's. No doubt, there will always be questions of the limits of both realms, and the two will always encroach on each other. Nevertheless, it is the recognition of this dichotomy that answers Rushdie. As long as the two realms are identified with each other, God may become a weapon in the hand of Caesar, as exemplified in the words of Gen. Boykin: "I knew my God was bigger than his." Combat between countries becomes a duel between gods.

However, the God of the Bible (though perhaps not the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition) will not become the icon of any culture. Most poignantly, even the nation he himself had chosen was not allowed to claim "ownership" of him. Note the paradox in this verse, spoken through the prophet Amos to Israel: "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (Amos 3:2), followed later by the harsh dismissal, "Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?" (Amos 9:7). The point is not that God had actually rejected Israel, but that God would not allow himself to be tied to Israel's culture and practices if they violated his holiness. He would always be sovereign and separated. But this God cannot be the God whom Rushdie sees as "the problem"; this is the God who judges the problems that people often create by appropriating his name.

¹"Lighting the Way" (unsigned article), *India Today (International)* 2.45 (November 10, 2003): 25.

²Matthew 22:21.