RELIG

There Are 10, but Their Order

By Bill Broadway
Washington Post Staff Writer

On Feb. 5, given President Clinton's 70 percent approval rating despite allegations that he committed adultery with two women, Washington Post columnist Mary McGrory asked: "Are God-fearing Americans tired of the Ten Commandments, especially the sixth?"

Tomorrow, the Washington Post Magazine examines the morality and legality of adultery in a cover series titled "Washington and the Seventh Commandment."

Which commandment *is* the president accused of violating? Can't The Post get it straight? The answer is no, because there is no universally accepted numbering system of the principles God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai.

In the version taught to Roman Catholic and Lutheran children, the prohibition against adultery is the Sixth Commandment. In most Protestant and Jewish readings, it's the Seventh. To the Greek Orthodox, adultery is sixth but in a different sequence.

The substance of the commandments, including explanatory sentences often omitted for brevity, does not change, and different numbering is no cause for concern, said scholars and ministers interviewed for this article. But it can be a source of confusion.

"It never occurred to me to doubt" that writers or television commentators mean adultery when they refer to the Sixth Commandment in the context of the White House sex scandal, said Alan Cooper, professor of Bible and ancient Semitic languages at Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

But he acknowledged that if he happened on a conversation about someone violating the Sixth Commandment, "My first impulse would be: Why did he kill somebody?"

The two sources for the commandments, Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21, appear as blocks of text without paragraph breaks, much less numbers. So how do we know there should be 10? References to the "Ten Commandments," also translated as "Ten Words" or "Ten Utterances," occur in Exodus 34:28 and in Deuteronomy 4:13.

So numbering is a matter of interpretation. In the rabbinic tradition, the first commandment is actually a statement, "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt," and cements the relationship between God and the Israelites, Cooper said. "First you have a statement of belief, then what you must do about it."

The first five commandments signify the relationship between humans and God, the second five between humans and humans, he said. The Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," bridges the two.

Christians read "I the Lord am your God" as a preface and either combine it with "no other gods" or omit it when providing an abbreviated version for memorization or liturgical purposes.

Two major differences occur between Protestant and Catholic versions. First, Protestants combine covetousness into one commandment, the 10th, and Catholics break it into two.

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RELIGION

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The Protestants adjust for the difference by making the prohibition against idols or "graven images" the Second Commandment, setting it apart and emphasizing that prohibition. Catholics and Lutherans include the statements on idol worship in the First Commandment.

One might think that Lutheranism, founded by 16th-century German reformer Martin Luther, would differ with the Mother Church on this matter, but it doesn't. The Rev. Judy Simonson, assistant to Bishop Theodore Schneider of the Washington Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, explained that Luther was more interested in personal salvation and other theological issues.

More radical reformers, particularly Huldrych Zwingli in Switzerland, wanted to end what they considered the worship of statues and other images and likely were the source of the Protestant prohibition of idolatrous images, she said.

Luther opposed efforts to eliminate art and even music and was offended by the actions of more radical reformers. "He died a Catholic," Simonson said.

English reformers followed the Protestant revision, which was part of the first Anglican prayer book in 1549 and has remained in subsequent Anglican and Episcopal editions, said Marion Hatchett, professor of liturgics at the School of Theology at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn.

"That first prayer book followed many Lutheran changes dating to the 1520s" but obviously did not retain the numbering of the Ten Commandments, Hatchett said. He acknowledged not knowing the reason, or caring for that matter. "I'm not sure the numbering makes any difference," he said.

JEWISH VERSION

1. I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.
2. You shall have no other gods besides Me.
3. You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God.
4. Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or ... anything that is your neighbor's.

From Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures (Jewish Publication Society, 1985)

CATHOLIC-LUTHERAN VERSION

1. I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.
4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

"A Traditional Catechetical Formula" in Catechism of the Catholic Church (United States Conference, 1991)

PROTESTANT VERSION

1. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not make yourself a graven image.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not kill.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or ... anything that is your neighbor's.

From The Book of Confessions (Presbyterian Church USA, 1991)