

Are Hinduism studies prejudiced? A look at Encarta.

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Introduction

In this article we discuss the differences, in both approach and result, of Encarta's articles on Hinduism in comparison with the articles on some of the other major world religions in Encarta. Encarta Encyclopedia is published by Microsoft Corporation, which claims that it is the "Best-selling encyclopedia brand." Encarta is widely used as a reference source in American schools. In particular, because of its widespread use amongst children, we would expect Encarta's coverage of religions to be even-handed, sensitive and unprejudiced. In a world of religious conflict, it becomes particularly important that children are given balanced viewpoints of mainstream beliefs and practices of all religions.

In particular, we contrast Encarta's treatment of Hinduism, with the two other major religions -- Islam and Christianity. On occasion, we also refer to the treatment of other religions like Judaism and Buddhism. The purpose of this article is not to make value judgments or a comparative study of the religions themselves. In studying such a vast and complex phenomena as the major religions, one can always find conflicting or questionable issues, just as one can find highly elevating truths. What aspects of the religion get highlighted is a matter of editorial choice. Our interest is not in comparing the religions per se, but in understanding the differences in editorial choice – both in the selection of content as well as style, in the scholarly treatment of these religions in Encarta.

Unless otherwise noted, all references below are to the main content article on each of the religions in Encarta. We have used Encarta Encyclopedia 2002 (US edition) for our reference, though a casual look at Encarta 2003 suggests that the articles on the major religions have remained the same as Encarta 2002. All actual quotes are in quotation marks preceded by the name of the article in Encarta.

The Contents Page

Our study begins with the main contents page for each of the religions. In some cases, the contents page contains, in quotes, a single highlighted statement about the religion. In the 2002 version of Encarta, these quotes are present for Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism, and not for Christianity and Islam.

- Judaism: “The God of creation entered into a special relationship with the Jewish people at Sinai.”
- Buddhism: “Karma consists of a person’s acts and their ethical consequence.”
- Hinduism: “Rama and Krishna are said to be avatars of Vishnu though they were originally human heroes.”

Note, that the one statement that was chosen about Hinduism is that which repudiates Hindu belief, while the statements for the other two religions reflect a balanced positive or neutral stance. Notice also the use of “said to be” in Hinduism while the statement on Judaism is presented in the editorial voice as a presentation of fact. To understand this representation, let us draw up a hypothetical quote on Christianity to parallel the quote on Hinduism.

- Christianity*: Jesus Christ is said to be the “Son of God” though he was just a human.

Irrespective of belief in the truth or falsity of this statement, or the parallel one in the case of Hinduism, when such a statement is the highlight of the commentary on a religion, it reflects a certain *attitude* about how the subject is approached. Let us see if this attitude continues to persist in the article on Hinduism in comparison to other religions.

Fundamental principles

In the article on Hinduism, we find that the “Fundamental Principles” divided into four sections – Texts, Philosophy, “Gods” and “Worship and Ritual.” We find the sequencing of ideas within this section fairly haphazard – generally moving to specifics without laying out the general – giving the impression of a somewhat incoherent system.

Hinduism:

“The canon of Hinduism is basically defined by what people do rather than what they think. Consequently, far more uniformity of behavior than of belief is found among Hindus, although very few practices or beliefs are shared by all. A few usages are observed by almost all Hindus: reverence for Brahmins and cows; abstention from meat (especially beef); and marriage within the caste (*jati*), in the hope of producing male heirs.”

In doing so the author takes the richness and diversity of Hindu thought and tries to approach it from the point of view of an orthodox church defining a single “canon.” Failing to find the “canon” or articulate the underlying worldview of a system that allows many paths to flourish within it, the author gives up to quickly start listing mainly social practices. Let us see how the same issue is treated in Christianity.

Christianity:

“Any phenomenon as complex and as vital as Christianity is easier to describe historically than to define logically, but such a description does yield some insights into its continuing elements and essential characteristics.”

In the description of Christianity, Encarta approaches it from a point of view of humility – the problem being of the expository limitations of the author. No such humility is visible in the description of Hinduism, where the author quickly reduces any notion of complexity to an anthropological viewpoint. Further on, we explore various examples of how the anthropological viewpoint dominates the article on Hinduism.

Dealing with “contradiction”

Let us see how the articles deal with supposed contradictions.

Hinduism:

“Although Hindus believe and do many apparently contradictory things—contradictory not merely from one Hindu to the next, but also within the daily religious life of a single Hindu—each individual perceives an orderly pattern that gives form and meaning to his or her own life.”

The article on Hinduism is very clear that there are contradictions, and highlights this aspect. The articles on Christianity and Islam are either unable to find any contradictions, or don’t find them the most significant aspect of the religion to cover. In the few instances when they do, they use substantially different language to talk about these.

In Christianity, any contradictions of behavior are attributed to the limitations of individuals rather than limitations of the faith or of “Christians” as a generalized entity.

Christianity:

“To a degree that those on the inside often fail to recognize, however, such a system of beliefs and values can also be described in a way that makes sense as well to an interested observer who does not, or even cannot, share their outlook.”

The article on Islam does not mention any “contradiction” at all, but a continued “refinement.”

Islam:

“Recurring debates among Islamic scholars over the nature of God have continued to refine the Islamic concepts of God’s otherness and Islamic monotheism.

...

Even when the article on Islam admits differences in contemporary practice, it puts the difficulty of these on the analytical or expository abilities of the author (“difficult to identify”), rather than the religion.

Islam:

“Yet the radically different political, economic, and cultural conditions under which contemporary Muslims live make it difficult to identify what constitutes standard Islamic practice in the modern world.”

The key to understanding both the diversity as well as the unity of Hinduism is neither in the search for a “canon” (a strongly Christian worldview), nor in the anthropology of particular practices. It is in recognizing that the philosophical foundations of Hinduism have celebrated diversity of path and individuality (which itself is a distinctive feature), while at the same time encouraging theological debates to further understanding.

In the articles on Christianity and Islam the problem, if any, is usually depicted as that of the author’s inability to describe rather than any contradictions. The author of Hinduism, apparently, faces very little difficulty – she carries on with an anthropological description of practices “from above” – sure that any contradiction that is found is surely in the religion itself, and not in any lack of understanding or expository ability.

Peaceful “Jihad” and violent “Ahimsa”

A further study about the difference in approach and attitude in the articles on religion can be found in the description of subtle concepts. We take two – *jihad* and *ahimsa*, in particular, both of which may be somewhat familiar to the lay reader.

Islam:

“Many polemical descriptions of Islam have focused critically on the Islamic concept of jihad. Jihad, considered the sixth pillar of Islam by some Muslims, has been understood to mean holy war in these descriptions. However, the word in Arabic means "to struggle" or "to exhaust one's effort," in order to please God. Within the faith of Islam, this effort can be individual or collective, and it can apply to leading a virtuous life; helping other Muslims through charity, education, or other means; preaching Islam; and fighting to defend Muslims. Western media of the 20th century continue to focus on the militant interpretations of the concept of jihad, whereas most Muslims do not.”

Hinduism:

“The most important tenet of sanatana dharma for all Hindus is ahimsa, the absence of a desire to injure, which is *used to justify* vegetarianism (although it does not preclude physical violence toward animals or humans, or blood sacrifices in temples).” [Em. added]

In both cases, the authors treat subtle subjects in the respective religions. In the article on Islam, the author presents a sympathetic view of Jihad, and attempts to favorably influence Western perceptions. In the article on Hinduism the author adds decidedly unfavorable editorial asides seeking to “correct” possibly favorable perceptions by introducing “contradictions.” The tone of the article again is of a higher entity looking down on lowly customs and illogical “native” interpretations (as in (“ahimsa” ... “is used to justify”). This is an illustration of the very different viewpoint (dare we say “agenda”) from which the article on Hinduism is written. While the articles on Islam and Christianity attempt to uplift the reader to a refined understanding of those religions, the article on Hinduism attempts to denigrate instead.

To understand what we mean by this let us see how Encarta would present Christianity and Islam, if it were to use the same logic and attitude as used in the article on Hinduism.

Christianity*:

The most important tenet of Christianity is love (although it does not preclude burning heretics and witches at the stake, the Crusades, Christian colonization and the Jewish Holocaust).

Islam*:

Muslims claim that Islam is a religion of peace (although it does not preclude suicide bombing or other terrorists acts).

To be really clear, we are not suggesting that such descriptions of Christianity or Islam should have been in Encarta – they would be decidedly negative portrayals.

Unfortunately, this tone of portrayal prevails in the article on Hinduism.

This is, surprisingly, not the only example of the technique of negative editorial aside in the article on Hinduism. We see also:

Hinduism:

“Svadharmā” comprises the beliefs that each person is born to perform a specific job, marry a specific person, eat certain food, and beget children to do likewise and that it is better to fulfill one’s own dharma than that of anyone else (even if one’s own is low or reprehensible, such as that of the Harijan caste, the Untouchables, whose mere presence was once considered polluting to other castes). ...

A positive portrayal of “Svadharmā” (literally “Self-Dharma”) would introduce it as a high statement to an individual to discover and understand their purpose and calling in the cosmos and actualize it. Yet in the hands of the Encarta author it becomes an excuse for an aside on the historical practice of untouchability that is derided in contemporary mainstream Hinduism. In neither of the other two articles of the major religions, Christianity or Islam, do we find the use of the technique of the denigrating editorial aside. Indeed, the purpose of the other two articles appears to be to elevate rather than to denigrate – and quite rightly so for a mainstream source dealing with religion.

Philosophy or Anthropology?

The article on Hinduism appears quite disjointed in its understanding of Philosophy, Anthropology, Cosmology and Mythology. “Fundamental Principles” leads with Anthropology. As we see below the section on “Philosophy” is mostly “Mythology” depicting “Cosmology” – the very limited coverage of the well-developed schools of Hindu philosophy is relegated to a list in the section “Rise of Devotional Movements,” in the topic on History. Without setting out the philosophical principles underlying beliefs

and practices in Hinduism, the coverage of “Gods” and “Rituals” appears particularly bizarre. Let us see how the section on “Philosophy” starts.

Hinduism:

“Incorporated in this rich literature is a complex cosmology. Hindus believe that the universe is a great, enclosed sphere, a cosmic egg, within which are numerous concentric heavens, hells, oceans, and continents, with India at the center.

“They believe that time is both degenerative—going from the golden age, or Krita Yuga, through two intermediate periods of decreasing goodness, to the present age, or Kali Yuga—and cyclic: At the end of each Kali Yuga, the universe is destroyed by fire and flood, and a new golden age begins.”

Firstly, this is not philosophy, but as the author points out, cosmology. Secondly, as a description of Hindu cosmology, it is fairly inadequate and reductive. It fails to point that there are multiple creation myths in Hindu texts. Also, as far as Hindu cosmology goes, people like notable astronomer and author, Prof. Carl Sagan, have pointed that the calculations of the age of the universe based on this cosmology works out to be fairly close to our current scientific estimates – and “(Hinduism) is the only ancient religious tradition on the Earth which talks about the right time-scale.”ⁱ Mentioning any of this, would, of course be quite contrary to the tone of the article. Rather than presenting the creation myth as a story and presenting the hidden elements of scientific truth, the article gives a reductive description, preceded by the phrase “Hindus believe.”

To understand this better, let us compare it with the article in Encarta about the Biblical creation myth.

Adam and Eve:

“Adam and Eve, in the Bible, the first man and woman, progenitors of the human race. The biblical account of the creation of human beings occurs twice: in Genesis 1:26-27 and in Genesis 2:18-24. Marked differences in vocabulary, thought, and style between these accounts have led to the scholarly consensus that these creation stories reflect two distinct sources (see Bible: The Development of the Old Testament). In the first account, the Hebrew common noun adam is used as a generic term for all human beings, regardless of gender; Eve is not mentioned at all. In the second account, Adam is created from the dust of the earth, whereas Eve is created from Adam's rib and given to him by God to be his wife.”

The first notable difference is that of the expository technique. The latter article presents different creation accounts in the reading of Biblical texts. Note how this shifts subtly if it were preceded by “Christians believe ...”. That there are differences in two different stories in the same book could then be extrapolated, as is done in the article on Hinduism to state, “Christians believe many contradictory things.” Instead the article about Adam and Eve” treats it as a scholarly study of text (where different “accounts” are found), rather than conclusive statements about “Christian belief.” Let us see how one would

present a section on Christian “Philosophy” with the same approach as in the case of Hinduism.

Christianity*:

Christians believe that all humans descend from one man and woman, called Adam and Eve and calculated the age of the world to be about 10,000 years. They believe also that the female Eve was created from male Adam’s rib by God to be his wife (which is *used to justify* Christian attitudes towards women such as a historical denial of voting rights).

Christians believe many contradictory things – for example, that an all-loving, forgiving God puts human beings in everlasting Hell, if they sin without repenting in this life. [Em. added]

This would be a similarly reductive account presenting “Christians” as irrational, and failing to grasp the multiple levels of subtleties involved in understanding a religion. As we see in the description of Hinduism, this is precisely the approach of the Encarta article.

An account similar to the one in Encarta of Adam and Eve would be a neutral objective treatment of similar material in Hindu mythology, rather than a treatment that “boxes-in” the rich and diverse Hindu cosmology into “Hindu belief.” Adding the relationships to modern scientific understanding would make it a “sympathetic” treatment for current audiences. Instead, the Encarta article on Hinduism consistently chooses a subtle (and sometimes, not so subtle) negative portrayal.

Despite a very rich philosophical tradition, the anthropological view dominates the article on Hinduism. Both the articles on Christianity and Islam, lead instead with the philosophical ideas. Apparently the broadness of Hindu philosophical ideas “Vasudeva Kutumbha” (the world is a family), and the ideas of religious pluralism (“many paths lead to God”) that continue to guide most Hindus, find no place in the Encarta article.

“Gods”

Nowhere is the anthropological view more apparent than in the treatment of “gods”. Firstly, an inadequate attempt is made to put the idea of “gods” (not “Gods”) in proper perspective for a Western reader. The word “deva” in Sanskrit, is less akin to the “God” of Christianity, but more so to “angel” (a power higher than man but lesser than “God”). Secondly, the concepts that “God” is “unknowable” and that different deities are thus representations of different aspects (“roop”) of “God,” is glossed over. The Encarta article also completely misses the concept of the Hindu trinity – that any Hindu child could recite – a key idea in the presentation of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva as creator, preserver and destroyer, and their female counterparts as three aspects of the One God.

That the male and the female energies co-exist in Indian thought and the idea of God as both male and female (at the same time being beyond gender) is also missed. Having skipped all the structure, the topic of “Gods” is presented as a confusing “curio-shop” of unrelated deities and sects, complete with sensational descriptions of blood and gore.

Hinduism:

Shiva embodies the apparently contradictory aspects of a god of ascetics and a god of the phallus. He is the deity of renouncers, particularly of the many Shaiva sects that imitate him: Kapalikas, who carry skulls to reenact the myth in which Shiva beheaded his father, the incestuous Brahma, and was condemned to carry the skull until he found release in Benares; Pashupatas, worshipers of Shiva Pashupati, “Lord of Beasts”; and Aghoris, “to whom nothing is horrible,” yogis who eat ordure or flesh in order to demonstrate their complete indifference to pleasure or pain. Shiva is also the deity whose phallus (linga) is the central shrine of all Shaiva temples and the personal shrine of all Shaiva householders; his priapism is said to have resulted in his castration and the subsequent worship of his severed member.

While “phallus” is one interpretation of “linga” there are others as well. Apparently the author, whose interests appear to have a limited focus, continues to find contradictions from that single point of view – missing both other common interpretations as well as the underlying symbolisms. A disproportionate interest in the dimension of esoteric “sects”, “phallus”, “skulls”, “flesh” and “ordure” dominates the article and we find that practices and aspects far more prevalent and relevant to contemporary times – like Yoga or Chakras, meditation or mantras, breath and Pranayama that are practically absent in the article.

The article continues with these descriptions, clearly showing the author’s interest in particular ways of looking at Hinduism.

Hinduism:

As Durga, the Unapproachable, she kills the buffalo demon Mahisha in a great battle; as Kali, the Black, she dances in a mad frenzy on the corpses of those she has slain and eaten, adorned with the still-dripping skulls and severed hands of her victims. The Goddess is also worshiped by the Shaktas, devotees of Shakti, the female power. This sect arose in the medieval period along with the Tantrists, whose esoteric ceremonies involved a black mass in which such forbidden substances as meat, fish, and wine were eaten and forbidden sexual acts were performed ritually.

In the well-embellished description of Kali, the intensity of the language speaks for itself of the Encarta’s author interest in this particular area. Clearly blood and gore, erotica and exotica are of much greater interest to this particular writer than Hindu philosophy, or any of the symbolism of these ancient descriptions. Again, the article shows more interest in the portrayal of esoteric sects and ceremonies than exploring mainstream and

commonplace Hindu rituals – like saying “namaste”, the sacred syllable “Om”, lighting *diyas* or wearing *bindis* (the “dot” on the forehead)– practices that are vastly more familiar to a Westerner and a Hindu child alike, none of which find a place in the Encarta article.

The article instead describes various “Gods” and “Goddesses”, particularly emphasizing the sensational, as we saw in the description of Kali above, without presenting these within the unifying coherent theme that most Hindus view these manifestations – of different forms of One Supreme Reality, which cannot be boxed into a single set of attributes or descriptions.

As the section on “Indian Philosophy” on Encarta states:

“Most of the poems of the Veda are religious and tend to be about the activities of various gods. Yet some Vedic hymns and poems address philosophic themes ... such as the henotheism *that is key* to much Hindu theology. Henotheism is the idea that one God takes many different forms, and that although individuals may worship several different gods and goddesses, they really revere but one Supreme Being.” [Em. added]

Has the Encarta article on Hinduism lost all keys? While there is a passing mention of this concept in the Encarta, it is, characteristically, watered down from the clearer statement above.

Hinduism:

In this way Hindus *have been able to reconcile* their Vedantic monism (see Vedanta) with their Vedic polytheism: All the individual Hindu gods (who are said to be *saguna*, “with attributes”) are subsumed under the godhead (*nirguna*, “without attributes”), from which they all emanate. [Em. added]

A common Hindu saying is – “As you are, so God’s image appears to you” – since God is beyond images or attributes, we superimpose our own. Does Encarta’s choice of subjects and descriptions in the article – scatological and incoherent, reflect the author’s own state?

Finally, let us see how the article describes Rama and Krishna, considered as incarnations of God (as Vishnu).

Hinduism:

“Most popular by far are Rama (hero of the Ramayana) and Krishna (hero of the Mahabharata and the Bhagavata-Purana), both of whom are *said to be* avatars of Vishnu, *although they were originally human heroes*.” [Em. added]

The article appears to speak with the certainty of divine knowledge! Let us see how a similar issue, the divinity of Jesus is treated in the article on Christianity;

Christianity:

“The ultimate mystery of the universe, called by many different names in various religions, was called “Father” in the sayings of Jesus, and Christians therefore call Jesus himself “Son of God.” At the very least, there was in his language and life an intimacy with God and an immediacy of access to God, as well as the promise that, through all that Christ was and did, his followers might share in the life of the Father in heaven and might themselves become children of God. “

We note both the subtlety of thought and the sensitivity of expression in description, versus the heavy-handed certainty by which the article on Hinduism speaks, of happenings and events further back in time than the historical Jesus. Is this certainty born out of knowledge of fact, or simply a disregard for the corresponding religious sentiment?

More “blood” and animal “sacrifice”

The presentation of “Gods” is not the only place in the article that Encarta is interested in gory descriptions – of “blood”, “skulls”, “ordure” and the like. Starting from the concept of ahimsa (which refers to “blood sacrifices”) to the celebration of the Indian festival of Holi, this point of view permeates the article. In fact, the Encarta article on Hinduism has more references to “blood” and “animal sacrifices” than it does to Yoga. Yoga, arguably the most popular contribution of Hinduism to the West is mentioned in two places – both insignificant, as we see later on. Other than the quote above, let us see where else Encarta mentions themes related to “blood” or “animal sacrifice” in the article on Hinduism.

Hinduism:

“Holi, the spring carnival, when members of all castes mingle and let down their hair, sprinkling one another with cascades of red powder and liquid, symbolic of the blood that was probably used in past centuries.

Let us start with factual accuracies – Holi, as any Hindu knows, is celebrated with all the colors of spring – green, yellow, red, pink, not just “red” as the article states. It celebrates the coming of spring with a riot of color. Factual details aside, for Encarta the suggestion of “cascades of red powder and liquid” works well to further the theme of blood and gore prevalent in the article. This goes on in the description of “Worship and Rituals.”

Hinduism:

“In many temples, particularly those sacred to goddesses (such as the Kalighat temple to Kali, in Kolkata), goats are sacrificed on special occasions. The sacrifice is often carried out by a special low-caste priest outside the bounds of the temple itself.

Similarly, the vast majority of Hindus living today have probably never seen an animal sacrifice in their life – and “many temples” is certainly a gross inaccuracy. Why is this rare practice chosen when we don’t find mention of commonplace practices like “*satsang*” (literally, company of truth, or good), meetings where people congregate to

communally chant or read from scripture are orders of magnitude more prevalent? The comment on “low-caste” that rounds out that quote above is obligatory to keep the “otherness” of Hinduism on centre stage – a technique we find employed elsewhere in the article.

It is also very worthwhile to compare this overall approach to highlighting “blood and gore” with the treatment of “animal sacrifice” in the Encarta article on Islam, a religion on which such sacrifices are obligatory that every Muslim is required to perform on Hajj (rather than a rare occurrence).

Islam:

“The final ritual is the slaughter of an animal (sheep, goat, cow, or camel). This is a symbolic reenactment of God's command to Ibrahim to sacrifice his son Ismail, which Ibrahim and Ismail duly accepted and were about to execute when God allowed Ibrahim to slaughter a ram in place of his son. (In the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, Abraham is called to sacrifice his son Isaac rather than Ishmael.) Most of the meat of the slaughtered animals is to be distributed to poor Muslims.”

Notice how the stress is on symbolism and how the last line is used to soften the theme. We shall spare the reader a rewrite of the Islamic depiction with details of the animal's severed head and pouring blood and omitting any hint of symbolism. Would an anthropologist probing the Bible many millennia from now condemn Christians as cannibals when reading of Christ's disciples being asked to partake of Christ's “blood and flesh”? If approached from the point of view of the Encarta article on Hinduism, devoid of either sensitivity or an understanding of symbolism, this would probably be the case. Surprisingly, the author chooses this approach to Hinduism, which is a living contemporary tradition rather than simply an anthropological study of relics and past rituals.

These are choices in both omission and commission that are worth noting. While including exotic details and ritual the author continually misses large and commonplace topics – like the forms of Indian dance and music as a component of the religion, the celebration of “Ram Lila” – enactments of Ram's life common throughout the north, and major Hindu celebrations like Janamashtami (Krishna's birth), Raksha Bandhan or Onam.

Where is the real “Philosophy” and “Yoga”?

Now that we have read the description in Encarta of Aghoris, ““to whom nothing is horrible,” yogis who eat ordure or flesh in order to demonstrate their complete indifference to pleasure or pain,” we look around for the yogis we have seen or known. Unfortunately, with the concern of the Encarta article on Hinduism in looking for scatology, it completely misses the highly refined theology and practices like Raja Yoga

or Hatha Yoga or Patanjali or yogic meditation. In fact, the word “Yoga” has exactly two occurrences in the article (other than the one description of “Aghoris” as yogis above):

Hinduism:

“Many elements of Hinduism that were not present in Vedic civilization (such as worship of the phallus and of goddesses, bathing in temple tanks, and the postures of yoga) may have been derived from the Indus civilization, however. *See Indus Valley Civilization.*”

...

“The philosophies of Shankara and Ramanuja were developed in the context of the six great classical philosophies (darshanas) of India: the Karma Mimamsa (“action investigation”); the Vedanta (“end of the Vedas”), in which tradition the work of Shankara and Ramanuja should be placed; the Sankhya system, which describes the opposition between an inert male spiritual principle (purusha) and an active female principle of matter or nature (prakriti), subdivided into the three qualities (gunas) of goodness (sattva), passion (rajas), and darkness (tamas); the Yoga system; and the highly metaphysical systems of Vaisheshika (a kind of atomic realism) and Nyaya (logic, but of an extremely theistic nature).”

The first reference serves to separate Yoga from Hinduism. In the second reference, it is buried in a list of themes, each of which is probably more significant to describe than long-winded descriptions of Kali. Note that this list of classical philosophies is the only significant description of these philosophies in the entire article on Hinduism – that too not in the explicit section for Philosophy, but embedded in the “Rise of Devotional Movements” section of “History”

To be fair to Encarta, there does exist a separate article on Yoga that the article on Hinduism does not directly reference. That article states:

Yoga:

As a system of practice, Yoga has from the beginning been one of the most influential features of Hinduism.

Surely, as one of the most influential features of Hinduism, Yoga merits more than a single word (with no link or reference) mention in the article on Hinduism.

In the obsession with external aspects of myth and ritual, blood and gore, the article gives very little space to either the highly developed systems of Hindu theology and philosophy or its most commonplace practices in comparison to the other articles on religion, neither does it link directly to a separate article on Indian philosophy. In the next section we will see a surprising example of what it does choose to include as a link.

Contemporary growth of the religion

There are other differences in detail that consistently add an unsympathetic flavor to the reading on Hinduism. We will end with some examples relating to the contemporary spread of these religions.

Islam:

“The Muslim community comprises about 1 billion followers on all five continents, and Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world.”

...

“Today about 1 billion Muslims are spread over 40 predominantly Muslim countries and 5 continents, and their numbers are growing at a rate unmatched by that of any other religion in the world.”

Both in the introduction and conclusion, the article on Islam repeats positively how Islam is growing, almost from the point of view of an evangelist.

Let us see how Encarta covers the spread of Hinduism.

Hinduism:

“In more recent times, numerous *self-proclaimed* Indian religious teachers have migrated to Europe and the United States, where they have inspired large followings. Some, such as the Hare Krishna sect founded by Bhaktivedanta, *claim to* base themselves on classical Hindu practices.”

As is consistent with the tone of the article, notice the deprecating use of “self-proclaimed” and “claim to”, words rarely used in similar ways in the other articles. The author also fails to mention the fast growing “Yoga” movement (which Time magazine reported as having over 15 million practitioners in the US) and the large influence of Hindu thought on the “New Age” movement. The article completely misses movements like “Transcendental Meditation” of Maharishi Mahesh Yoga and the Self-realization fellowship of Parmahansa Yogananda, or the influence on Americans of the beat generation or the 60’s culture (Swami Satchitananda was called the “Woodstock guru”)—people like George Harrison, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Mia Farrow, Madonna. To do that would bring Hinduism in, leave it less “other.” But, unfortunately, the quote above follows the general theme of the article – to obscure or denigrate anything positive, and find and highlight that, which is likely to be misunderstood, failing to provide it in the proper context.

The article on Hinduism ends with a bang – something that can aptly demonstrate that deep-seated prejudice and even, perhaps, a political agenda. After failing to have links for “yoga” or “Indian philosophy” in the Encarta article, at the very end Encarta discovers the power of links.

Hinduism:

For information on religious violence in India, See India.

This is the appropriate ending for the article on Hinduism? We first surmised that this might be due to some current events (even then it would not be an appropriate ending for academic an article on Hinduism, other than motivated by considerable prejudice). But we find the same ending, for the same article, as far back as Encarta 1999! As a crosscheck, let us look at the other articles on religion.

Christianity:

“For additional information, see articles on individual Christian denominations and biographies of those persons whose names are not followed by dates.”

Islam:

<No link suggested at the end>

Given the thread of negativity that permeates the Encarta article on Hinduism, it comes as no surprise when, in the end, it suggests the topic of “religious violence” as additional reading. If the articles of Christianity and Islam were written with the same intent, this is what last links could look like.

Christianity*:

For additional information about burning witches at the stake, see Witch Hunt.

Islam*:

For terrorist violence, see International Terrorism.

Again, we do not suggest these endings be used, nor does Encarta do so. They are provided for the purpose of illustrating the underlying attitude in choosing such endings – an attitude that pervades the article on Hinduism.

Analysis of cause

We have established a significant difference in the treatment of Hinduism versus other religions, notable Christianity and Islam. In this section, we look at probable cause for the difference in treatment.

Selection of Authors

Encarta provides the following names and biographical information for the authors of the three Encarta articles in question:

- Christianity. Prof. Jaroslav Pelikan, B.D., Ph.D. Sterling Professor Emeritus of History, Yale University. Author of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, *Historical Theology*, and other books.

- Islam. Associate Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Yale University. Dallal, Ahmad S., B.E., M.A., Ph.D. Author of *An Islamic Response to Greek Astronomy: Kitab Ta'dil Hay'at al-Aflak of Sadr al-Shari'a*.
- Hinduism. Doniger, Wendy, M.A., Ph.D., D.Phil. Mircea Eliade Professor of History of Religions and Indian Studies, University of Chicago. Author of *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, *Siva: the Erotic Ascetic*, and *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities*.

Emic or Etic?

The first observation we make is that scholars who profess those faiths have written the articles on Christianity and Islam; this is not the case with Hinduism. While the topic of emic (insider) and etic (outsider) study is often debated within academia, we would expect Encarta to choose uniformly either the emic or etic view of the major religions. In the Encarta article on Christianity, Prof. Jarsolav Pelikan strongly defends the emic viewpoint:

Like any system of belief and values—be it Platonism, Marxism, Freudianism, or democracy—Christianity is in many ways comprehensible only “from the inside,” to those who share the beliefs and strive to live by the values; and a description that would ignore these “inside” aspects of it would not be historically faithful. To a degree that those on the inside often fail to recognize, however, such a system of beliefs and values can also be described in a way that makes sense as well to an interested observer who does not, or even cannot, share their outlook.

The same logic, apparently, does not apply to Eastern religions. In general, though not always, we would expect the “emic” view to be more sympathetic than the “etic” view, particularly when the “emic” author is a practicing member of their faith.

Areas of interest of the authors

While the orientation of study of Professors Pelikan and Dallal is towards the philosophical, scientific and theological aspects of the religions they write about, Prof. Doniger’s orientation is more anthropological -- studying rituals and myths rather than philosophy and theology. Even within that field, Prof. Doniger’s dominant area of interest, going by the books she has authored, is in the exotic and erotic aspects of these rituals and myths. Thus the study of Professors Pelikan and Dallal is a living practicing view of the religion, including theological, metaphysical and scientific issues that would positively engage contemporary audiences, Prof. Doniger’s appears to be an archeological dig, turning over quaint specimens that strike her fancy for examination. While this is certainly a valid field for study, it is clear that it leads to very different viewpoints and results in the articles.

Acceptability of the authors in the represented community

The third aspect of authorship is the broad acceptability of the author in the religious community they purport to represent. In general, it is more likely for emic authors to be acceptable, though not universally so. A research on the web shows that while Profs. Pelikan and Dallal are not regarded as controversial, Prof. Doniger has come in for considerable criticism for her lopsided portrayal, and unsubtle understanding of Hinduismⁱⁱ. While Hindus, in general, are known for their tolerance of criticism (which is probably why the Encarta article has survived, without protest, for several years), we wonder why Encarta, as a mainstream encyclopedia, would deliberately choose to continue with authors that are highly controversial within the communities they write about. Note that, particularly in Hinduism, this could be very true for supposedly “emic”, but in reality, non-practicing, authors as well.

Deliberate prejudice or error?

While there is some evidence of prejudice on the part of Encarta’s author on Hinduism, it is not clear whether prejudice also exists in Encarta as well. Certainly, as the ultimate editorial authority, Encarta cannot evade responsibility for the situation, at the very least in the selection of authors and editorial oversight over prejudiced treatment in a sensitive topic like religion. However, Encarta may well have, knowingly or unknowingly participated in an environment of bias.

A western graduate student of Hinduism in a US university, suggests a broader prejudice: “... in American academia it is politically incorrect to treat Hinduism in a positive light and it is taboo to deal negatively with Islam.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Certainly, the comparison of the articles on Encarta would validate this thesis. However, more study of this topic is clearly required.

Effects

We have not studied the effects of such negative portrayal of Hinduism on Hindu children growing up in America. We can speculate that derogatory mainstream portrayals of Hinduism, quite different from what they have seen or experienced first hand, would at the very least be confusing, and ultimately damaging to the self-esteem of such children. In the author’s personal experience, many Hindus are reluctant to identify themselves as such publicly, even when they are practicing Hindus – we conjecture that this may result from unconsciously accepting the negative portrayals of their religion. We find that this subject has not been studied much – however, the one study^{iv} that we found supports this possibility. There are also accounts that scholars studying Hinduism that also “come out” to be practicing that faith face allegations of “bias” – apparently this is not seen to be the case when Christians or Muslims study their own faiths in the academic community (which is the general rule).

Such articles in “Encarta” also get used by various religious fundamentalists and hate groups to label Hinduism a “cult” – the Encarta article serves as a good “objective” reference to make their point. The interested reader can do a web search on “Hinduism cult Encarta” to find examples.

Inaccurate, negative mainstream portrayals of a religion can ultimately only prove harmful to the community. Clearly much more work is needed to study the exact effects and consequences of such portrayals.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this article, we compare the treatment of different religions in Encarta. We find that there are significant differences in the treatment of Hinduism vs. the treatment of Islam or Christianity in both the selection of content and the attitude displayed in the writing – resulting in a distinctly negative portrayal of Hinduism vs. the other religions. We conjecture that the reason for this difference is related largely to the difference choices in the selection of authors – whether they are emic or etic and their area of interest or specialization in the religion they study. We also find that Prof. Doniger, the author of the Encarta article on Hinduism is controversial within the Hindu community. The authors of the article on “Islam” and “Christianity” have a mature and balanced viewpoint and they represent their religions in a way that the vast majority of adherents will find appropriate and positive. We commend Encarta for their choice of authors in portraying these religions in a sympathetic way. Unfortunately, the same balance and sympathy is not visible in the article on Hinduism. While we believe that Prof. Doniger is certainly free to pursue her specific areas of interest and scholarship in Hinduism, we do not believe that her article represents the mainstream of Hindu thought in both the selection of content and its interpretation, which would be appropriate for a widely read source such as Encarta.

Given that Prof. Doniger’s specific interests and attitudes strongly influence the article, it would be insufficient to simply remove a few of the most glaring examples of negativism, while leaving the rest of the article unchanged. We recommend instead that an article written by someone “emic” to the community, who can represent Hinduism in a positive, mainstream viewpoint, promptly replace the article on Hinduism in Encarta.

Postscript

Microsoft replaced their article on Encarta in response to the publication of this paper.

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* These are hypothetical quotations for the purpose of illustration, not actual quotations from Encarta. These quotations are also not the views of the author who neither supports these quotations nor suggests that they be used to depict that religion in question.

ⁱ Prof. Carl Sagan, distinguished Cornell University astronomer, covered this in the television series “Cosmos” dealing with Astronomy and Scientific exploration. <http://www.rediff.com/news/jan/29sagan.htm> presents an interview from which this quote is taken.

ⁱⁱ See, for instance, Rajiv Malhotra’s, “[RISA Lila - 1: Wendy's Child Syndrome](#)” and associated comments.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yvette Claire Rosser, “[Puzzling Dimensions and Theoretical Knots in my Graduate School Research.](#)”

^{iv} Yvette Claire Rosser, “[Stereotypes in Schooling: Negative Pressures in the American Educational System.](#)”