

Media, Hinduism & Buddhism: Mainstream media coverage of Asia's two major religions

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Abstract

After the September 11th attacks on New York city, the American public became acutely aware of Islam and different variations of Islam including extremist and radical perspectives. On the contrary, the common man hardly knows anything about Buddhism and Hinduism. Buddhism and Hinduism appear to be totally off the media's radar except when Tibet is on the news or when some scandal surfaces at the Hare Krishna temple and Hollywood parodies the Indian gurus in their movies. Yet, Hinduism and Buddhism are practiced by a large number of people in Asia and growing exponentially in Europe and in the Americas. The exodus of Tibetans to other parts of the world has contributed to the growing popularity of Tibetan culture and Buddhism. In Taiwan there are more than 200 Buddhist centers and in France more people call themselves Buddhist than Protestant or Jew. The two religions share the same core concepts that include 'dharma' (duty), 'karma' (one's actions and consequences) and 'ahimsa' (non-violence). Buddhism claims to be the world's first 'universal' philosophy. The teachings of Buddha are understood by Buddhists to be valid and applicable to all mankind regardless of their different historical and social backgrounds. The concept of 'ahimsa' is more pronounced in Buddhism and along with the concept of inter-connectedness, Hindu and Buddhist principles have significant potential environmental and ecological implications.

The media by nature is biased towards controversial, violent and conflicting events and situations, thus giving more prominence to Islam than to any other religion. Hinduism and Buddhism being pacifist in outlook hardly get the same exposure as Islam and that too rarely, only if some conflict arises between religious and communal factions as in Hindu-Muslim riots in India and Chinese-Tibetans confrontations in Tibet.

This paper identifies and analyzes the content of recent news stories dealing with various religions and see the frequency and 'bias' of the stories covered by the U.S. cable and TV networks. It is anticipated that the mainstream media would cover the two religions more comprehensively because of the underlying 'connectedness' of the two religions to nature and global environment.

Keywords: religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, extremism

Introduction

Religion made the headlines on cable, broadcasting and the Internet channels again in 2010. The debate swirled around the so called mosque being built near 'ground zero' in New York and a pastor of a small church in Gainesville, Florida who threatened to burn the Koran on the ninth anniversary of September 11th attacks. *The New York Times* made a pertinent point in an article questioning media's role in all of this. A stunt by a fringe pastor in Florida garnered worldwide news media attention in summer 2010, attention that peaked when he announced he was canceling what he had dubbed as the 'International Burn a Koran Day.' The pastor consented to more than 150 interview requests in July and August 2010, and each time

expressed his extremist views about Islam and the Sharia law. By the middle of the second week in September (Sept. 6th-10th), the planned Koran burning was the lead story on some network newscasts, and the lead topic on cable news — an extraordinary amount of attention for a marginal figure with a very small following. How did this happen? Did the media heighten or even exaggerate this event or the issue by giving excessive coverage? Chris Cuomo, an ABC News anchor 'tweeted': "I am in the media, but think media gave life to this Florida burning ... and that was reckless." (Stelter, 2010).

After the September 11th attacks in New York, the American public has become acutely aware of Islam and different variations of Islam including extremist and radical views. The media by nature is biased towards controversial, violent and conflicting events and situations, and since September 11th, Islam has been under the spotlight more prominently in the media. However, images of violence in the name of Islam have come to define the faith for many non-Muslims in the U.S. while ignorance about what Islam teaches is widespread. More than half of respondents in a recent poll by the Pew Forum said they knew little or nothing about the Muslim faith (Zoll, 2010). Similarly, awareness about Buddhist and Hindu principles, concepts and teachings appear to be almost negligible. Buddhism and Hinduism, Asia's two major religions, are further off the media's radar except when Tibet is on the news or when some scandal surfaces at the Hare Krishna temple and Hollywood parodies the Indian gurus in their movies. Yet, Hinduism and Buddhism are practiced by a majority of people in Asia and growing steadily in Europe and in the Americas. The exodus of Tibetans to other parts of the world has contributed to the growing popularity of Tibetan culture and Buddhism. Hinduism and Buddhism being pacifist in outlook rarely get the exposure as Islam and they do only if some conflict arises between religious and communal factions as in Hindu-Muslim riots in India and Chinese-Tibetans confrontations in Tibet.

The two religions share the same core concepts that include 'dharma' (duty, righteousness, justice), 'karma' (consequences of one's acts) and 'ahimsa' (non-violence/non-injury). Buddhism claims to be the world's first 'universal' philosophy. The teachings of Buddha are understood by Buddhists to be valid and applicable to all mankind regardless of their different historical and social backgrounds. Even though the concept of 'ahimsa' (non-injury) along with the concept of inter-connectedness is more pronounced in Buddhism than in Hinduism, Hindu and Buddhist principles have significant potential environmental and ecological implications.

In this paper I analyzed the media's agenda-setting role and 'framing' capacity to spotlight religious issues including various religions in their coverage of contemporary events. This paper identified and analyzed the content of recent news stories in *The New York Times*, *CNN* and *TIME*, on Buddhism and Hinduism, and the manner in which the news stories were 'framed' by these national mainstream news organizations. I anticipated that the mainstream media would cover the two religions more comprehensively, in-depth and

non-superficially because of the underlying connections of the two religions to the global environment and nature.

Buddhism 101

During its over 2500 year old history, Buddhism has evolved across a wide range of physical and cultural geographies. From Theravada traditions in the South and South-East Asia, to the Mahayana school in China and Japan to the Vajrayana school of thought in Tibet, Buddhist teachings have been modified and elaborated in different ecological settings. Over time the range of Buddhist philosophy about nature and human-nature relations has been based on different teachings, texts and cultural views (Foltz, 2003).

One of the central principle of Buddhism is 'ahimsa' or non-injury/non-harming of any living beings. Where Buddhism has been the dominant religion as in Tibet and South-East Asian countries, societies are much less aggressive since their conversion to Buddhism. Two of the most respected Buddhists, Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi (Myanmar), base their social and political activism directly on Buddhist principles, meditation and discipline. The Dalai Lama has public advocated environmental protection as vital to human survival and well-being of the planet earth (Gross, 2003).

The principle of non-injury – 'ahimsa' – is one of the characteristic features of many ancient Indian religious traditions. There is evidence that the concept of not harming living things pre-dates the arrival of Aryans in the sub-continent some 4500 years ago. The Aryans practiced animal sacrifice but no such evidence is found in the religions of Jainism and Buddhism. The Aryan's followed a more life-affirming and martial form of life contrary to the ancient Indian path of renunciation. Both renunciation and 'ahimsa', thought to be indigenous Indian modes of behavior, were stressed quite frequently in the early Buddhist texts. The concept of 'ahimsa' (non-injury) is extended and incorporated into the idea of reincarnation and vegetarianism. In Buddhist context, the practice of non-harming could lead to a favorable future birth or the opposite, harming could result in an unfavorable rebirth and destiny. An act of cruelty to animals or any living beings contaminated the person who committed those acts and consequently became impure. Monks were expected to avoid all activities that resulted in harm to flora and fauna, and failure to do so could lead to a failure on the path to 'nirvana'. Non-injury or 'ahimsa' was regarded in a positive light by Buddhists as much for its purification role in a person's spiritual development as it was for the welfare of the living world. Buddha is said to have even avoided all damage to seed and plant life, extending the principle of 'ahimsa' (non-injury) to the vegetable life (Harris, 2003).

Buddhists hold the view that the world is periodically brought into being and many millions of years later it is destroyed, a view similar to that of Hinduism. The process has no beginning and no end, and in this

matter, the Indian religions differed from Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the Hindu cosmic philosophy there are long cycles of history, for eternity where the cosmos after a long period of time is dissolved and again brought into existence from the void and so on. This is contrary to the Judaeo-Christian view of creation which is essentially linear with a definite starting point and an equally definite conclusion to the world process. Creation in the Christian tradition was caused by a benign and purposeful creator (Harris, 2003).

The world as Buddhists saw it in the 4th-5th century is practically unchanged to the present day. However, in Christian tradition the cosmic view was radically redrawn with the introduction of Western science in the early modern period. The findings of Galileo and Copernicus ultimately won over church's condemnation. On the other hand, Western scientific thinking had a marginal impact on the traditional cosmic views held by the Asian religions partly because the "status of myth and story has been higher in the East than in the West." However, in some Buddhist countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka progressive thinking is changing some of the well established Buddhist doctrines (Harris, 2003).

Contrary to the Judaeo-Christian perspective and even the Hindu world-view, the Buddhist vision of the world is more pessimistic in the sense that the world is viewed as endless, meaningless and purposeless. The world was viewed, at least in the earliest phases of Buddhism, as a vicious circle ('samsara'). But, Buddha had taught and given the means of escape from conditioned existence and Buddha's teachings – 'dharma' – was the highest of rewards for a person. Knowing that the world was so configured encouraged a follower to find the means of escape from the world of suffering. Since the desires for worldly things were considered to bind us more tightly to worldly existence, it increased our suffering. Buddhism praises the virtues of world renouncer and in Buddhism it is the monk ('bhikku') who renounces the world is held in high esteem (Harris, 2003).

Buddhism's lack of supreme creator and a view of the world as an eternal process stands in stark contrast to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Buddhism espoused a world-weariness and a life of suffering, and Buddha's main teaching was his "identification of a world devoid of substantiality." Buddha himself adopted an ethical outlook based upon pre-Buddhist system of thought, and his most important borrowing was the concept of 'ahimsa' (non-injury) which the Buddhists were expected to apply in their dealings with all living beings. All actions are to be based on this ideal – this was the essence of right action, one of the tenets of the noble eight-fold path (Harris, 2003). Thus, Buddhism does support a toleration and cooperation with the natural world. Some Thai Buddhist scholars believe that nature has an inherent 'dharmic' value, going beyond the practical view of nature and not merely instrumental to the monastic pursuit of spiritual transformation. Within the context of worldwide concern for environmental degradation,

many Thai monks presently have been involved in efforts to stop the exploitation of the forests in their districts (Swearer, 2003).

The new era of global economics and cultural homogeneity had a negative impact on the classical moral values, religious world-views and on traditional ways of understanding human existence. Facing the onslaught of globalization some groups are trying to revert to the principles of a 'simpler era' and of the past idealized in myths of earlier historical times. Thus religious fundamentalists whether Christians, Jewish, Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists are said to be retreating from the confusions and threats of the modern world to the values and principles of an earlier age. However, there are other thoughtful and concerned religious adherents all over the world who are seeking to understand and interpret their traditions in ways that preserve the core values of their faith while at the same time engage in the realities of today's ever complex, technologically dependent world rather than retreating from it. Nonetheless, some scholars see economic development, materialism and the emphasis on GDP undermining the moral and spiritual integration between the social and natural environment (Swearer, 2003).

Environmental issues in Buddhist countries have been a natural magnet for Buddhist activists in the West. But Western Buddhists have taken other local initiatives, bringing their Buddhist and environmental sensibilities to bear on nuclear waste, consumerism, animal rights and preventing deforestation, and based on these principles and practices Buddhist activism is taking shape. This is in marked contrast to Christian fundamentalism which is often allied with anti-environmental views (Kaza, 2003).

Each of Buddha's experience added to a progressive unfolding of a single truth about existence – the law of 'mutual causality', that all phenomena, all of nature arise from complex set of causes and conditions. Ecological understanding of natural systems fits well within the Buddhist description of interdependence. Interdependence of all living beings forms the basis of environmental concerns for many Buddhists. The question being asked now is: Will Buddhist environmentalism turn out to be more environmental than Buddhist? The answer is still not clear since 'green Buddhism' is just finding its voice and there are concerns that this voice and movement could be drowned out in a backlash against environmentalism or in Western resistance to engaged Buddhism. The synergistic combination of millennialism and economic collapse may also overwhelm Buddhism and many other constructive social forces (Kaza, 2003).

The idealized and romanticized perception of Buddhism in the West, especially Tibetan Buddhism, was cultivated over the years through newspaper stories, literature, travelogues, academics, and visiting lamas from Tibet and South-East Asia. In the late 19th century, the Victorians viewed Buddhism as a form of rational religion under which one could live ethically and spiritually without a theology, a frightening God or a revelation (Lopez, 1999). Donald Lopez's (1999) dispassionate and focused analysis, demystifies what much coverage of the Dalai Lama and centuries of fables have obscured: Tibet's reality. He strips the

façade away and reveals the 'real' face of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism by analyzing the misinformation, disinformation and fantasies promulgated by various people including charlatans like T. Lobsang Rampa, famous for having written a series in the 1950's about his "life" as a lama in Drepung monastery. Among the sources of misinterpretation he notes are: psychological interpretations of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*; *The Third Eye* by Englishman Cyril Hoskin ('Lobsang Rampa'), an incredible tale of Tibetan spirit possession published in 1956; mistranslations of the famous mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum*; exhibitions of Tibetan art in Western museums; the institutionalization of the academic discipline of Tibetology; and increasingly gossamer-like spiritualization of Tibetan culture. What these texts interpreting Tibetan Buddhism share, says Lopez, is a whole or partial disregard for the concrete, living contexts of Tibetan religion. Elements of Tibetan Buddhism are communicated as abstract symbols onto which Western writers have projected their own spiritual, psychological, or professional needs and visions. Generally the basic premise of Lopez's book that Tibet has been misunderstood and misrepresented for many different reasons (romantic projection of an exotic culture and religion, cultural and personal survival, and monetary gain by Tibetans) is clearly seen in the history of Tibet and in the current political and cultural situation (Lopez, 1999).

Hinduism 101

The civilization of India, dated some 5000 years ago, has produced a large number of theologies and interrelated cosmologies that include human attributes and resources for dealing with physical natural order. Often times the ancient traditions of India are associated with escapism and neglect of earthly materialism, but there are several concepts present in Hinduism that promote reverence and respect for the environment and nature.

Hindus in general say that Hinduism is more than a religion, it's a 'way of life'. In the Hindu society there is a deep relationship between religion and ingrained social structures and behavioral patterns that control the activities and practices of an average Hindu. Ancient Hindu texts and stories as in Puranas and the epics (Mahabharata & Ramayana), are known by all Hindus and loved by the masses. Plants and trees are valued highly in the sacred texts and their destruction is depicted in doomsday scenarios. The Puranas and the epics give detailed narratives of the cyclic destruction of the world when people forget about their 'dharma' and despoil nature and degrade the environment (Narayanan, 2003). Many existing Hindu beliefs and practices could be traced back to the original residents of South Asia, prior to the Aryan invasion in 2d millennium BCE who migrated from the Central Asian steppes (Foltz, 2003).

Among the core values shared by various South Asian religions and worldviews, including Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, are 'dharma' (duty to follow rules), 'Karma' (consequences of one's deeds) and 'Ahimsa' or the concept of non-injury and non-violence. The 'ahimsa' ideal is central to the Buddhist worldview which was developed by Buddha some 3000 years ago, and by Jains in India. Jainism is the most prominent of South Asian religions associated with doctrine of 'ahimsa' popularized in the 20th century by M. K. Gandhi (Foltz, 2003).

Hindus have a strong connection with nature – from cradle to creation, water and wood play major roles in religious sacraments and sanctification of important events. Sacred Hindu texts show a close correlation between 'dharma' (duty, righteousness, justice) and the environmental destruction and preservation. When 'dharma' declines, human beings degrade nature. Hindu texts however, promote a positive view that humans should enhance the quality of life. No texts focusing on 'dharma' advises the devout to be passive and defeatist with a life negating philosophy (Narayanan, 2003).

In Hinduism and Jainism, all elements have life: the earth, water, plants, animals and humans are said to possess 'jiva' or life force. This 'jiva' takes various and repeated forms from the beginning of time in the process of reincarnation. Here the principle of 'karma' (consequences of one's acts) plays a big role. Due to the continued accumulation of 'karma' through acts of violence, cruelty and neglect, 'jivas' are reborn in different forms on earth again and again. To stop this senseless cycle of reincarnation (prominent in Hinduism and Buddhism) people are encouraged to live an ethical life to mitigate existing 'karma' and to minimize future effects of 'karma'. The asceticism promoted in the Asian religion traditions is designed explicitly to revere and respect another's life and in that process one's life is purified (Chappell, 2003).

The term 'karma' in its broadest sense applies to the effects and consequences of one's actions. A brief definition of the law of 'karma' is that each act, willfully performed causes consequences and these consequences are felt long after that person has departed from earthly life. The karmic law tells us that every action performed creates its own chain of reactions and events, some of which are immediately visible. Environmental pollution is one example of 'karma' of those people who thought that they could continue to pollute the environment without taking into consideration the conditions left behind for future generations. According to the Hindu sacred texts right action or 'dharmic' action generates beneficial results, while an 'adharmaic' or wrongful action results in harmful effects. Whatever action, good or bad, knowingly performed by a person will have consequences and the person will have to face them. Even though a person is dead and gone, the person's 'karma' lives in the form of memory and carries into the next life (Dwivedi, 2003).

The ancient Hindu texts, sages and gurus, and the culture provided a system of moral guidelines for environmental conservation and preservation. Environmental ethics was practised not only by common

people but also by rulers and kings. The environmental ethics became intertwined with the Hindu way of life and that way of life enabled Hindus and other religious groups in India to use natural resources without any divine powers of control and domination over nature and its elements. The Hindu belief that as long as Mother Earth is able to sustain magnificent mountains, lush green forests and ever-flowing rivers etc. she will be able to nourish all humans and their progeny (Dwivedi, 2003: 125-127).

In the Upanishads and the Vedas, ancient Hindu texts, all things with forms were seen essentially to be undifferentiated from 'universal consciousness' or the 'ultimate reality', and anything with a form could be viewed as an occasion to remember the 'Brahman' that is formless. In this Hindu model, the human order was an extension of and totally dependent on the natural order of things. From the perspective of Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism, the killing of life forms is akin to murdering one's own family members. For an average American the loss of trees and lakes due to environmental crises could be of no consequence and a matter of indifference. Aside for environmentalists and nature lovers, most Americans view nature as a resource and an object for consumption and appreciation, but to a Buddhist, Hindu or a Jain, the loss of a lake or a tree could mean a partial loss of oneself (Chappell, 2003: 112-113).

Scholars say that India now faces the reality of an environmental disaster because to a large extent the people of India (predominantly Hindus) have veered away from the 'dharma' which they are supposed to follow. The use, abuse and misuse of natural resources is propelling the country headlong into a catastrophe. The laws of 'karma' have been activated, and environmental abuses are bearing their own fruits. Scholars and researchers are asking, can any of the Hindu principles and religious concepts and traditions inspire and motivate the Hindus to take action? South Asian religions including Hinduism are said to be eco-friendly but why is there so much of neglect, ignorance and callousness when it comes to environmental issues in that region? The reasons given are as follows:

- Hinduism is often a source of complacency. For example rivers like the Ganges are considered to be always sacred and pure and nothing can pollute them.
- Passages in Hindu religious texts encourage acquisition of wealth and fortunes within certain contexts.
- In the Hindu hierarchy, Prithvi (earth goddess) is lower in rank than Lakshmi (goddess of wealth and good fortune). Lakshmi has a greater hold on people's faith and aspirations than the earth goddess. Consumption and quest for wealth is now at all time high.
- A strong emphasis is placed on 'individuality' and on 'self' in some Hindu traditions. Hinduism's primary focus lies on the 'self', one's immediate family and one's caste niche to the neglect of the larger society and community. While the private sphere is carefully scripted in Hindu tradition, public life in India borders on and often descends into chaos (Agarwal, 2003).

The earliest accounts of Hinduism in America can be found in W. Thomas's book titled *Hinduism Invades America* (2003). This book was first published in 1930 and offered a wealth of information about gurus, swamis and scholars who came to the United States from India after 1890. Swami Vivekananda was the first to arrive on the shores of America in 1893 followed by Swami Yogananda in 1920. Later known as Parmahansa Yogananda, he set up the Yogada Satsang Society (YSS) in New Jersey which was later incorporated as Self Realization Fellowship (SRF) in California (Thomas, 2003). The '60s counter-culture in the U.S. was more open to and aware of Eastern religions and the incursion of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) established by Sri Prabhupada in 1965 popularized Hinduism amongst the young Americans. To this we can add the sudden fame of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi with his association with the Beatles music group in 1967 which led to the establishment of Transcendental Meditation movement in the U.S. and in Europe. However, these movements did not popularize Hinduism widely amongst the general population in the U. S., in fact, there was a backlash against such 'alien' movements to the extent they were classified as cults by most people.

Other books on Hinduism in America focused more on the growing religious diversity in the United States. Diana Eck (2002), a professor at Harvard University, documents how the United States has become the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Her primary focus in the book is on the *Immigration Act of 1965* which allowed for the first time in American history a large immigration to the U.S. from Asia. Asian immigrants brought with them their religious traditions, particularly Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Eck studied the growth of these communities in the United States and explored how they changed the religious nature of the nation. Eck outlines the history of each religion and delves deep into the contribution made by the different religions to the society. In 1893 a world 'Parliament of Religions' took place in Chicago in which representatives of both Hinduism and Buddhism made a huge impact on the American public. Emerson and Thoreau showed a great deal of interest in both Buddhism and Hinduism and had valuable things to say about them (Eck, 2002).

Steven Prothero (2006) writing about Eastern religions in his book *A Nation of Religions*, describes how Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims are becoming more politically involved in the American society, seeking recognition of their holidays and espousing their values in the public sphere and becoming more politically visible. Books critical of Hinduism and its practices are few and far between but a book by Ankerberg and Weldon (1991) titled *Facts on Hinduism in America* tends to misquote and misrepresent Hindu authors, scholars and philosophy making it a one-sided condemnation and an attack on Hindu culture and religion.

The public in general do have to understand the true meanings of 'dharma' and 'karma' and their connection to the natural environment, their relevance to environmental protection and conservation in

order to develop a common strategy of eco-spirituality and stewardship of the environment. The media, increasingly commercialized, pay less heed to religious principles and beliefs than to charismatic religious leaders and tragic, unusual and sometimes bizarre religious acts and events. Commercial and corporate news media do have financial priorities and are more interested in the new products and services sold in the market. However, whenever the media focuses on religious and environmental issues, they are presented and 'framed' by the media in a way that affects the outcome and the public perception of those issues. The 'framing' and agenda-setting of religious issues pertaining to Buddhism and Hinduism form the theoretical basis of this paper.

Framing Buddhism & Hinduism

The media and the press have been very influential in telling people "what to think about" than telling them "what to think" as political scientist Bernard Cohen noted. The coverage of issues helps to focus the public on what to discuss on a given day. The theory of agenda setting is currently recognized as one of the most significant theoretical contributions to the literature of mass communications, and it continues to spawn new research projects. The coverage of issues helps to focus the public on what to discuss on a given day. According to the agenda setting theory, public opinion on specific issues is heavily influenced by the topics and news stories that appear in the news pages and TV programs. The power to push people into thinking about certain kinds of issues became known as 'agenda setting' and agenda setting research, to a large extent, was a response to a growing disenchantment amongst American scholars regarding "attitudes and opinions as dependent variables and with limited effects model as an adequate intellectual summary" (McCombs in Williams 2003, 181). According to the agenda setting theory, public opinion on specific issues is heavily influenced by the topics and news stories that appear in the news pages and TV programs (McCombs in Williams, 2003: 181).

McCombs and Shaw (1972) developed the agenda-setting hypothesis in researchable form in their examination of the news coverage of the 1968 presidential election campaign. They found that there was a convergence of public agenda and media agenda and public opinion corresponded to the media issues after analyzing newspapers, news magazines and TV network news programs. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) attempted to overcome some of the limitations of previous research through a series of experiments. They tested the prominence of issues in national news that were considered very important by the TV viewing public. They found that people exposed to one of the three different presentations (on pollution, national security & inflation) of news over a four day period led to expressions of greater concern about the issue featured in the news of the day by the experimental group (Spark, 2006: 176).

Funkhouser (1973) looked at three sources of data: public opinion polls, media coverage and statistical indicators and confirmed earlier findings that showed substantial correlation between public opinion and media coverage (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000: 240). In a study of international news, Paik found that there was considerable evidence that media set the public's agenda and the policy agenda. Findings of his study on news in the Wall Street Journal coverage of different regions and countries of the world showed that there was an imbalance in global information which could be attributed to the control of global communication by a few Western news agencies and media multinationals giving minimum news of Third World Countries. News about Third World nations were invariably 'framed' in a western ideological and cultural perspective leading to a highly stereotyped account of only a few type of events such as coups, catastrophes, famines and natural disasters (Paik, 1999).

Can the newscast actually influence people what to think? Apparently yes, through a concept known as 'framing.' Tankard defined framing as the "central organizing idea for the news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration" (Spark, 2006: 177). The way a story is framed by the media can have a great impact on the interpretations that people take away from the message. People do look to the print and broadcast news for guidance on which issues are really important. The language the media uses to describe the importance of an issue, the manner in which the issue is 'framed' and the role of credible and authoritative people in promoting the issue are often critical in setting the agenda (Severin & Tankard, 1988).

Iyengar and Kinder introduced the concept of 'priming' to describe how the media could go beyond telling people what to think about and shape the criteria used by individuals to judge the political leaders and political issues. Priming presumes that when evaluating political phenomena people do not take a comprehensive view of the issue but instead rely on what comes to mind. The researchers point out the power of the media does not stem from its persuasive power but in "commanding the public's attention (agenda setting) and defining criteria underlying the public's judgement (priming)" (Williams 2003, 182).

Even though we know who sets the public agenda (news media), there are questions about who sets the media's agenda. A large body of agenda-setting literature show the importance of multi-source influences on the news media. In recent years researchers have acknowledged that the media's agenda is often shaped by others: interest groups, government officials, citizens and politicians who try to influence what the media reports as the most important story of the day (McQuail 1987, 276). Herman & Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model suggested that the media's agenda is set by a combination of government and corporate forces intent on protecting the interests of the rich and the powerful. The corporate owners of the media and various 'gatekeepers' of media channels and agencies (public-relations and advertising) make sure that profitability remains the top priority (Croteau & Hoynes 2000, 240). The agenda-setting

and 'framing' of major religions in the current news environment is conducted with due considerations given to the audience reception and orientation, to the ratings and bottom line, and to national security priorities. And after 9/11, the religion of Islam and individuals and groups associated with Islam, moved to the top of the media agenda.

The study is based on critical analysis of sampled articles and opinion pieces taken from three major U.S. news sources that are easily available to the public. I searched the *New York Times*, *CNN* and *TIME* magazine online databases to sample articles related to 'Buddhism' and 'Hinduism'. From January 1st 2008 to June 15th, 2010, the *New York Times* database search yielded 1820 articles for 'Buddhism' and 559 articles for 'Hinduism.' This was done with a refined search using specific dates and ignoring blogs and multimedia items. Search of *CNN* online database yielded 1672 items for Buddhism and 155 items for Hinduism. There was no provision for doing specific dates search on *CNN*, so the numbers reflect total number of items available on *CNN* website. The *TIME* magazine website, a sister site of *CNN*, yielded 75 articles for 'Buddhism' and only 23 for 'Hinduism' for specific dates (Jan. 1st, 2008 – June 15th, 2010). However, to bolster my argument and hypothesis, I have taken news items from other news sources also throughout the paper. *CNN*, *TIME* and *the New York Times* were selected as sources because of their stature as influential national media channels with international reach, 'gatekeeping' role in the news business, large readership and audience, and easy accessibility to their websites.

Buddhism In the News

Majority of the articles on Buddhism from the three news sources are focused on Dalai Lama: on his character, his personality, his views on life and happiness, his take on neurosciences and his visits to various places along with political ramifications of Tibet – China relationship. The latest news related to Buddhism is about self-immolation by Buddhist monks. Some 30 of them have died via self-immolation in 2011 while protesting against the authorities (Memmot, 2012).

The Dalai Lama as a charismatic leader of an exiled community, continues to get the major share of attention and focus from the mainstream U.S. media than anyone else associated with Buddhism except for celebrities and stars. As the *Des Moines Register's* website said that majority of the people have only the simplest vision of Buddhism – of the Dalai Lama, a smiling, good natured 74 years old Tibetan who wears a dark red robe and begs to live in the moment. On his recent trip to Ames, Iowa, the groups of people who had come to see the Dalai Lama were not necessarily all Buddhists or even religious but they all considered him a very special person who exuded a sense of love, compassion and happiness. Dalai Lama first visit to Iowa seemed to have sparked a deeper interest in Buddhism and in his common sense ideas on how to live

one's life. According to a participant Buddhism is a "fascinating philosophy", and an agnostic claimed he wanted to learn more about Dalai Lama because "the world needs more peacemakers." Americans into Buddhism are trying to go deeper into Buddhist philosophy and find the nature of mind, unconditional love and compassion for everyone else (Kilen, 2010).

The article in the *Des Moines Register* gave a few more details and facts on Buddhism. Nationally the number of Buddhist practitioners have nearly tripled since 1990 to 1.19 million according to American Religious Identification survey of 2008. The Pew Forum on Religious & Public Life survey showed that the growth came mainly from 23% of those who switched from another religion. The article went further in explaining the fundamental principles (the four noble truths, eightfold path), types of Buddhist schools and teachers and showed links between basic Buddhism and psychology (Kilen, 2010).

Dalai Lama is an ardent promoter of science and he encourages scientists to see the benefits and connections between mental health and Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and conduct. According to a psychologist, Dalai Lama is responding to a basic human need, to try and gain some peace and calmness and feel compassion for others. New treatment models in psychology and mental health issues match those of Buddhist philosophy. The damage done by negative thoughts and the benefits of positive thoughts advocated by pop-psychologists also mirror Buddhist thought and philosophy. The concept of 'forgiveness' central to Buddhism has also been incorporated into educational psychology (Kilen, 2010).

Recently, Dalai Lama opened the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin. The center is the only one in the world with a meditation room next to a brain imaging lab. *USA Today* featured the chief neuro-scientist from the laboratory who is partnering with Dalai Lama in an attempt to build connections between Buddhism and Western science. The scientist, Richard Davidson of University of Wisconsin, has used brain imagery technology on Buddhist monks and practitioners of meditation to learn how the meditation training affects mental health. Dalai Lama has been the only religious leader in the world who has spent more time promoting research in traditional Buddhist meditative practices than any other spiritual or a religious leader. He has also urged scientists to create a more ethical and peaceful world. Dalai Lama's commitment to science is remarkable for a religious leader of his stature – he is even prepared to give up any aspect of Buddhism that is contradicted by scientific findings. Meditation training is now being imparted to 5th grade students to cultivate patience and relaxation in students to enable them to focus more on learning. The article also had a sidebar with a primer on the basics of Buddhism (*USA Today*, 2010).

Dalai Lama's four day visit to New York city's Radio City Music Hall to give a series of talks generated a few more articles in the national media, including the *New York Times* (Alvarez, 2010). He came to give a "message for Americans who are angry and pessimistic about the future" and cited growing environmental

movement, new collaboration between science and spirituality, and charitable outpourings of people after major catastrophes as causes for optimism. He has high profile support from stars and celebrities like Richard Gere, and there is a continuing growth in followers amongst mainstream Americans since more and more are attracted to Eastern spirituality (Gibson, 2010).

Dalai Lama although a religious figure, has been embroiled in international politics ever since he went into exile in 1957 when China invaded and took over Tibet. He has become the icon of religious and cultural freedom whose drive for restored Tibetan autonomy and culture has for decades placed him at the intersection of one of world's most intractable international problems – China's emergence as a military and economic superpower and its persistent refusal to recognize the human rights of the Tibetans. In October 2009, President Obama, out of concern for China's reaction to a Dalai Lama visit, refused to meet him in Washington DC. But as a conciliatory gesture, Obama did meet Dalai Lama on his next visit albeit in a low key manner, with no media or TV cameras allowed in the White House during his visit (Gibson, 2010).

Celebrity athletes who have some passing connection to Buddhism sometimes lead to negative or even positive exposure for the religion. After being exposed for his sexual flings with various mistresses shattering his family and career, Tiger Woods vowed to return to the teachings of Buddha that he had followed him since his childhood. He was raised as a Buddhist and he had actively participated in the Buddhist faith since he was a child. He credits his mother, who is a Buddhist, with guiding him as he says: "...the importance of looking at my spiritual life and keeping it in balance with professional life..." is critical. Part of his therapy to get back on the track would be based on Buddhist principles. Brit Hume (Fox News commentator) caused a considerable stir when he suggested that the only way for an avowed Buddhist like Woods to receive forgiveness and redemption was to "...turn to the Christian faith and...make a total recovery and be a great example to the world." This comment irritated and irked many practising Buddhists including Robert Thurman (professor of Tibetan Studies, Columbia University), who said that the Buddhist faith did provide a way for forgiveness and redemption contrary to common views about Buddhism (CBS, 2010).

Dalai Lama's position on economics is quite on par with the principles of Buddhism. As Patel points out, Buddhist political and economic models involve an unique perspective on value that is totally opposite from ethical consumerism or even opposite of voting once every four years. The economic model involves daily political practice of controlling value, resources and distribution (Patel, 2010: 176). Dalai Lama claimed he was a Marxist in his lecture on his recent tour in the US : "Marxist economy is (the) only economic system where expresses concern for equal distribution. That is moral ethics. Whereas capitalism (is) only how to make profit" (Gibson, 2010). Earlier he had claimed that he was a Marxist while giving a lecture at the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in India:

I am a Marxist monk, a Buddhist Marxist....I belong to the Marxist camp, because unlike capitalism, Marxism is more ethical. Marxism as an ideology takes care of the welfare of its employees and believes in distribution of wealth among the people of the state. (Patel, 2010: 174)

Interdependence is the most commonly used concept in Buddhist environmental ethics. The effects of growth and technological progress on the total interconnected system are very critical and these effects are not often anticipated. Even though many people are extremely alarmed at the global consequences of destroying the Amazon, African and Asian rain forests, the destruction continues because of the overwhelming power of consumerism (Gross, 2003).

Similarly, the environmental issues and movement continues to excite and animate the Buddhist leader. Buddhist economics is tied to the human nature and its elements like attachment, desire, hedonism and happiness, and also to the natural environment. Buddha renounced his royal possessions and walked into the forest to live a life of poverty but he realized that there was no happiness in poverty and in conspicuous riches. Buddhism's theory of value is located in a social context and with a particular vision of human nature. To the Buddhists, the market exists in the society and the society exists within the ecological sphere, and this challenges the modern concept of value. In Thailand, Buddhist monks are pro-active in supporting environmental issues, and as a protest they ordained a Bodhi tree and wrapped orange robes around it, making its sacred quality visible. In anointing the tree, the monks delivered their sermon on commodification of nature, that the market existed within nature, and that we belong to the earth and not the other way around (Patel, 2010: 174-175).

However, there are hardly any news stories in the mainstream media regarding Buddhist environmental activism even though environmental concerns have gone up over the years. Humans now have the technologies to consume and produce that seem likely to destroy the ecological basis for human life. The world's religions have not previously faced this situation, which explains why environmental ethics and concerns have not been in the front burner in any of the religious tradition. In general Buddhist ecological ethics follow other religious principles that regard individual greed and excessive consumption as a moral failing. Buddhism is innately linked to natural environment and ecology because 'ahimsa' (non-injury) is so fundamental to Buddhist ethics. Thus, a true Buddhist automatically realizes that excessive consumption is harmful to the environment. Plus the Buddhist principle of the 'Middle Way' avoids all extremes and could be sufficient basis for an environmental ethic that would limit consumption. Added to these principles, the Buddhist concept of 'interdependence' means that "nothing stands alone apart from the matrix of all else. Nothing is independent and everything is interdependent with everything else." Thus our identity as separate beings is also called into serious question since "we do not simply stop at the borders of our skin if

we are truly interdependent with our world. When we know ourselves to be fundamentally interdependent with everything else...our self-centered behaviors will be altered in very basic ways." Whatever we do impacts on the rest of the larger community and the world (Gross, 2003).

Hinduism In the News

Majority of articles and opinion pieces dealing with Hinduism from the three main sources (*CNN*, *TIME* and *the New York Times*) focused on topics such as chanting, Hindu rituals, casteism and caste system, temples and construction of temples across the USA, celebrities practicing Hinduism, Hindu threats to Christians in India, religious boycott of movies that ridicule Hinduism ('Love Guru') and so on.

A major source of stories on Hindus and Hinduism for the U.S. news media come from the Indian diaspora (2.8 million approximately) who are settled in various states all over the U.S. In an article titled *Hinduism in America on the rise*, the author states that Hinduism, at least in North Texas, is enjoying an "expanding population". The article goes on to say that "...despite the fact that Indians have been quietly enriching the American melting pot for decades to centuries, few non Indians know much about the colorful religion of Hinduism" (Murdock, 2009). To elaborate the statement little more the author goes on to say:

...Americans as a whole are largely oblivious to Hinduism is because its practitioners in general do not rabbleroise, set up terrorist camps, call for the destruction of the U.S. Constitution, .bilk the American public for millions, establish bogus charities,engage in unethical and seedy "televangelism." Lobby Congress for special favors and consideration, challenge constantly the principle of separation of church and state, abuse the First amendment and all of the fun stuff (sarcasm) we are used to seeing from fervent religionists in our country and elsewhere." (Murdock, 2009).

This "lack of aggression" works in favor of Hinduism but at the same time the author points out the many problems and flaws with this ancient religion including widow-burning ('sati'), sexism, discrimination and bigotry based on caste system, violence by the fanatics, and debilitating superstitions that Hinduism has not only failed to solve but also fostered in India (Murdock, 2009).

The Hindu religion has often been portrayed in the mainstream media as a bunch of strange and alien practices and concepts where worshippers bow to numerous idols and deities unlike those of the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic traditions. So it is not surprising that the media frequently focuses on strange, weird and violent events related to Hindu practices and Hinduism. Superstitions associated with Hinduism and believed by Hindus are often in the media. For example, going through the CNN and the the *N.Y Times* archival articles on Hinduism one finds such headlines:

- Solar eclipse scares Indian mothers-to-be (*CNN*, July 2010)
- Hindus pierce bodies at religious festivals in Malaysia (*CNN*, Feb. 2010)
- U.K. Hindu fights for funeral pyre 'dignity' (*CNN*, Mar. 2009).
- Indians flock to marry and shop on a lucky day (*CNN*, May 2010).
- India: Hints of Human sacrifice (*AFP*, Apr. 2010)
- Urban cowboys struggle with India's sacred strays (*N.Y Times*, Nov. 2008)

Hindu shrines, temples and associated activities within the temples are often the focus of the story as these titles suggest:

- Temples where gods come to life (*N.Y Times*, Sept. 2008)
- Re-consecration with Bells, Saffron and Elephant (*N.Y Times*, July 2009)
- In Minnesota, big moment for a temple for Hindus (*N.Y Times*, June 2009)
- At a temple in Indo-China, placid days but no peace (*N.Y Times*, Nov. 2008)
- The simple life (*N.Y Times*, Dec. 2008)

A common news story in the media is about Hindu pilgrims dying during a stampede at a temple or at a holy shrine. In the last five years hundreds of pilgrims and devotees have died due to stampedes at a few sacred places and temples in India. These stories highlight the problem of overcrowding and safety in old temples during festivals and auspicious pilgrimage:

- Seven killed in Hindu festival stampede (*CNN*, Jan. 2010)
- India temple stampede kills 147 at a Hindu temple in Jodhpur (*CNN*, Sept. 2008)

And there have been many more such as the one in August 2008 when 130 people died during a nine day religious festival at Naina Devi temple in Himachal Pradesh, and 250 devotees died in a stampede in Maharashtra in 2005. Where the media channel or organization runs a story on Hindu superstitions, sometimes it will give background information on Hindu mythologies and Hindu activities such as prayers to the sun god and taking holy dips in sacred rivers, lakes and ponds but these are exceptions.

Another way of framing Hinduism is within the context of violence and violent incidents especially religious, communal and "ethnic clashes" as they are called. News stories pertaining to Hinduism and India often dwell on strife and conflict between Hindu nationalists and Muslim hardliners who are said to be creating the kind of turmoil that could leave the Indian state in chaos. Some of the news stories in *TIME*, *CNN* and the *NY Times* online archives have these titles:

- A Christian-Hindu clash in India (*TIME*, Dec. 2007).
- Indian Maoist group: We killed Hindu leader (*CNN*, Oct. 2008).
- Indian state erupts in violence after Hindu shot (*CNN*, Aug. 2008).
- Arson probe as Indian Muslim family burned alive (*CNN*, Oct. 2008).

- A perilous religious game in Kashmir (*TIME*, Aug. 2008).
- Gunman opens fire at Hindu temple (*CNN*, July, 2008).
- In world's largest democracy, tolerance is a weak pillar (*N.Y. Times*, Oct. 2008).
- Hindu threat to Christians: convert or flee (*N.Y. Times*, Oct. 2008).
- Group claims responsibility for India blasts (*CNN*, May 2008).

But there have been a few news stories regarding Hinduism which have positive tone and connotation like those about sustainability and environmental protection. One of the news story in *CNN/TIME* archive was titled:

- India's Temples go Green (*TIME*, July, 2008).
- the article was about how the temples in India were taking advantage of the new technology and the carbon credit market and how these religious institutions intended to become leading preachers of environmentalism.

It is not surprising that religious groups are at the vanguard of India's green movement. India as the birthplace of four of world's largest religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism – that revere nature and preach conservation has not always matched that preaching with action. India's air and water is increasingly polluted and emissions have increased 57% in the decade following India's economic liberalization. And more religious groups and organizations are now eager to combine spirituality with sustainability and pushing to reverse pollution, contamination and environmental destruction. News story as this one highlighted the green impetus from religious institutions:

- Hindus urged to consider environment as they wash away sins (*CNN*, Jan. 2010).

In another feature news story titled *Religion and the Environment* (*CNN*, Jan. 2008), the author makes a point that there is a strong connection between our religious beliefs and about nature and our destiny. The author compared religious beliefs and the principles of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism and found that to a large extent most religious groups support sustaining the natural world and natural order of things extolling the virtues of not wasting and not destroying and depleting the natural world. Of all the religions compared, Buddhism was viewed by many as the most environmentally friendly religion of them all.

Conclusion

Analysis of the news stories in the three major U.S. media clearly shows that there is a paucity of articles explaining the basic concepts of the two religions and their relationship to the environment and the planet. The news stories on Buddhism and Hinduism in the media are 'framed' in a deliberate and careful manner

to appeal to the readers' and viewers' interest, and make the two Asian religions comprehensible to the lay audiences. The foreign and 'alien' tales of Hinduism and Buddhism are truly strange to a majority of the U.S. population who view their homeland primarily as a Christian nation. As columnist Chris Hedges writes:

According to the Christian Right, people of deviant faiths from Judaism and Islam must be converted or repressed. The media, public schools, the entertainment industry, churches, the secular government and judiciary who do not conform or agree to their viewpoints will either have to be reformed, closed or eliminated. Simultaneously there has been a relentless promotion of Christian values via Christian radio and TV channels and in Christian schools, as information and facts are replaced with overt forms of indoctrination (Hedges, 2010).

On the other hand, the idea that humans control, dominate and exploit nature has been a part of the Western worldview for centuries. As Bernstein points out, "...the entire Western tradition is established in dominion over nature, sovereignty over plants, oceans, air, animals. This is more than individual sovereignty. We have been told that animals, lands, air and water are endless resources for us to conquer and exploit...We are slowly seeing the consequences of not seeing our interdependence and relationship, not only with the economies of our country and the world, but also of our planet" (Bernstein, 2010). If this is true, the mainstream media should be making more of an effort to inform the public and increase awareness about the positive and beneficial side of the two Asian religions, especially when they relate directly to the environment and to the planet's health instead of pandering to the constrictive worldview. Future studies on this subject can perhaps expand the sample of news articles and conduct a quantitative analysis to get a more precise and accurate reading of news reportage of the two major Asian religions in the U.S..

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