

[California Puts Religion, Including Hinduism, Back In Public School](#)

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Prior to World War II, American schools unabashedly taught Christianity to their students. In the 1940's a series of US Supreme Court rulings effectively eliminated religion in all forms from the education system. Then in the 70's and 80's new rulings and reinterpretations of old rulings opened the way for religion to return to public school. Religion could be taught, the court said, not to indoctrinate, but as part of world history.

The State of California is among the first to take advantage of this change in legal climate with its selection of new textbooks for the 1991 school year. These books, for sixth, seventh and tenth grade, are among the first to fully incorporate the presentation of religion, including Hinduism, in history courses. Many states follow California's educational innovations and will likely adopt these same or similar texts.

Not only are the books the first in 50 years to include any religion, they are the first ever to attempt to break the ethnocentric grip of America and Europe on the teaching of world history. Prof. Gary Nash of the University of California at Los Angeles tried to explain the magnitude of change being contemplated: "In the [world history book that has been used most in California schools for the last seven years there are 40 chapters. Zero chapters were devoted to Asia, and one chapter together covered Africa and Ancient America." That means 39 chapters of "world history" were the history of Europe and modern America.

The California guidelines for the creation of these texts emphasize the need to be objective and treat religions and nations equally. But a Hindu reading the history of India and presentation of Hinduism [see sidebar, page 26] in these books is not likely to be pleased - nor were members of other religions, except perhaps Protestant Christians. Rabbi Alfred Wolf of Los Angeles convened a group of Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists to write a 32-page teacher's

supplement addressing the manifold errors. "Each felt their religion most misrepresented," the Rabbi explained, though he himself judges Judaism the most wronged, followed by Islam, Catholic Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. By "wronged" he meant the books' failure to mention the negative aspects of the interaction of Judaism and Christianity. In terms of explanation of religious belief and customs, HINDUISM TODAY'S evaluation is that Hinduism and Islam were the most poorly presented, followed by Buddhism, Catholicism and Judaism, who fared a bit better.

Still, it is an improvement over nothing at all, and school officials and scholars alike that HINDUISM TODAY spoke with were exceptionally open and willing to hear differing points of view and the necessary adjustments. However, there is a serious possibility that so many complaints will come from so many quarters - such as secular humanists, atheists, fundamentalist Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, etc. - that the schools will be scared off from teaching religion at all. Prof. Nash said, "There is a pretty good chance [for the books] to end in a crashing failure" because of attacks not only at the books themselves, but at the individual teachers responsible for the classes. Rabbi Wolf indicated that the publisher of some of the texts, Houghton Mifflin Company, was seriously working to revise their books in response to the complaints received - but the new texts won't be out for three years.

For Hindus, the problems with the texts are in two areas - the history of India and the presentation of Hinduism. Indian history is first of all sparse, and what is given is the now discredited "Aryan invasion" theory of the 19th century European indologists. A symposium of prominent Indian historians met in Bangalore, India, on July 23rd of this year and unanimously passed a resolution which debunked the "so-called migration and invasion of the Aryans, the concept of Aryan race, the supposed dichotomy between the Aryans and others" and denounced "theories [of Indian history] propounded by the Western scholars" as incorrect.

There is careless scholarship present - a point also made by Rabbi Wolf. The main language of India is called Hindustan instead of Hindi (A Message of Ancient Days, p. 15). A map designates Sri Lanka as a Hindu country, when it is majority Buddhist (History of the World, The Modern Era, p. 829).

Aside from one of the six textbooks, Hinduism does not get very good treatment. It is presented as an outdated, caste-ridden, priest-dominated 3,000-year accretion

of beliefs and customs. There is little mention of Hinduism's sophisticated theological systems, exquisite devotional practices or high-powered techniques of yoga to reach the spiritual heights. Christianity is given far more space and its tents presented in a more appealing manner than any other religion. In addition there remains the powerful undercurrents of ethnocentric thinking, that somehow American and European history is more important than other history. The biographical list of *A Message of Ancient Days* includes just three Indians (Buddha, Ashoka and the astronomer Aryabhata) among 177 entries of the important people from the beginning of history to 450CE!

*Global Insights, people & Cultures*, a tenth grade text, gives the best presentation of Hinduism. The author appears to have personal experience and knowledge of India as shown in statements such as, "Even though there are priests and regular services in temples, Hindu worship is an individual matter...Also, Hindu worship is centered more in the home than in the temple." (p. 370) But really none of the other books do justice to the faith.

Hindus in California with school-age children should definitely read these books and other help to the teacher in improving the presentation of Hinduism. Hindus also need to be aggressively involved in the current rewriting of these books. Interested persons may contact HINDUISM TODAY'S editorial offices for under information and contacts.

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