

The Happiest Place on Earth

Disney's America and the Commodification of Religion

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Our personnel sincerely seek happiness. Hell! That's what we all want, isn't it?

-Walt Disney

IT REALLY IS A SMALL WORLD, AFTER ALL

In a classic commercial, sports celebrities caught after a contest hear a list of their accomplishments and a question: "Now what are you going to do?" Invariably they respond in what seems to be the only way possible in contemporary, commercial America: "I'm going to Disney World!" (see Fjellman 1992, 160).

Indeed, how many millions have neither experienced nor dreamed of participating in "the middle-class hajj, the compulsory visit to the sunbaked holy city," Walt Disney World (Ritzer 1996, 4)? It is just one facet of a global corporation that produces movies and television programs, owns part or all of several other theme parks, television studios and networks, sports teams, housing developments, cruise ships, retail outlets, seminar centers, and training facilities that earned more than \$20 billion in 1997 (Miles 1999, 15).¹ One million people visited the California park, Disneyland, in its first seven weeks, and more than four million visited there in 1955-56, its first year of operation (Weinstein 1992, 152). In Florida, ten million visitors in 1971-72 (its first year) placed Walt Disney World ahead of the United Kingdom, Austria, and the former West Germany as a vacation destination, and more popular than the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (seven million visitors), Gettysburg (five million), and Yellowstone National Park (two million). By the beginning of the 1980s, more people visited Walt Disney World than the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, the Tower of London, or the Pyramids (Fjellman 1992, 136-39). In 1984 alone, the Florida and California parks drew nearly twenty million customers (Lawrence 1986, 65). "Since the number of visitors to both parks together exceeds the number going to Washington, D.C., the official capital," notes Margaret King, the parks could be considered "the popular culture capitals of America" (1981,

117). Appropriately, the Walt Disney World logo depicts the globe as one of three spheres used to silhouette Mickey Mouse's face; it's a small world, after all, and Disney covers it completely. The American who can avoid contact with Disney must live in a cave; to reject Disney is to defy a major global force, and challenges much that is synonymous with contemporary American culture.

But what has this to do with religion?

In contemporary America, many consider all elements of life, even intangibles, as things that can be bought, and religious leaders now find themselves financially burdened competing for congregants' attention. On television or in the pulpit, they offer salvation along with twelve-step programs and child care. They have developed sophisticated attitudes toward money and fundraising, and some have adopted businesslike attitudes toward their congregants. As George Ritzer notes, "religion has been streamlined through such things as drive-in churches and televised religious programs" (1996, 48). Not surprisingly, many people treat salvation like a product, pursue it for selfish reasons, and often purchase it in seemingly nonreligious forms for seemingly religious reasons. Americans can be found pursuing diverse activities—working out, exploring nature, or watching television—and believing that they have obtained the same benefits that they could receive from traditional religious activities. The distinction between religious and commercial activities has blurred, and as one scholar notes, such developments have made "a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses who peddled religion door-to-door on a Sunday afternoon much the same as a vacuum cleaner salesman" (R. L. Moore 1994, 256). In other words, whether it is through eternal bliss or clean carpets, salvation for many Americans is a readily available commodity.

An odd situation to be sure. But even odder when commercial ventures, operating for profit rather than piety, create competition for traditional religion. They are not simply providing paraphernalia for religious devotion—votives, Bibles, or "Pope-on-a-Rope" soap—but are *competing* (if unintentionally) with religious communities by offering similar goods: mythologies, symbols, rituals, and notions of community by which consumers organize their lives. These corporations offer (at a price) salvation from the modern world of twentieth-century American capitalism. And while, as Michael Budde argues, such a situation presents "new and imposing barriers ... to the formation of

deep religious convictions," he also recognizes that "[m]ore than any other set of social institutions, these industries collectively influence how people relate to the processes and products of economic activity." They are the "vectors and initiators for ideas regarding the valued, the innovative, the normal, the erotic, and the repulsive" (1997, 14-15, 3Z). In other words, these companies create the environment in which even religious ideas are communicated.

The Walt Disney Company is one such business marketing religious symbolism and meaning and providing strong—if indirect—competition to traditional religion in the United States. There are others who are also exploring this market, other purveyors of religious symbols and meaning. However, because of its market penetration, its integrated marketing, and its access to many levels of culture through its corporate network, Disney is uniquely suited for the "religification" of its commodity. And as Margaret King suggests, because a coincidence of factors unique to post-World War II America makes possible, "even obligatory—for Americans, adults as well as children, at least one pilgrimage to Disney Land [sic] or World as a popular culture 'mecca' of nearly religious importance" (1981, 117), this corporation is able to capitalize on its commodity in a way that is distinctly suited for this time and place.

THE MARKETPLACE AND COMPETITION IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN RELIGION

Once firmly committed to the idea that religion would fade from society as that society became more sophisticated, sociologists have come to use an economic model to explain the continued religiosity of the American citizenry (see Warner 1993). This model argues that religious communities—free of government intrusion or control—benefit from a "free market," and in competition with other religious communities ("producers") *offer* to religious adherents ("consumers") "products" they can compare and select rationally. These "products" (comfort, identity, community, but usually some form of salvation) are like items in a supermarket and compared in terms of their desirability, "market share," and general consumer appeal.

Though this model has its critics, it seems to explain in a more satisfying manner the continued vitality of religion in contemporary America. However, it means nothing if the "consumers" in the model—religious participants—aren't free to pick from religious options; market economies depend on consumers who are free to choose. Thus, over the past decade, scholars have examined the freedom individuals have enjoyed to "go shopping" for religion, and the loss of loyalty to specific religious communities that has resulted. Phillip Hammond argues that restrictions on religious identity have virtually disappeared, and "the social revolution of the 1960s and '70s wrought a major change: a near absolute free choice in the religious marketplace" (1992, 168). Similarly, Wade Clark Roof notes that among members of the "baby boom" generation, "religion was whatever one chose as one's own" (1993, 244, emphasis omitted). The loss of a cultural monopoly by any one religious tradition, matched with the growing role of the individual (rather than the community) as the locus of identity, has made Americans freer to pick from among the various religious options, and to mix and match as they please.

At its logical extreme, this suggests market forces so diverse, and competition between religious "producers" so fierce, that consumers may not only choose more varied and less traditional forms of religious participation (as seems to be the case currently), but might also turn to nonreligious "producers" for the same (or similar) "products." In such a climate Disney, as much as any other for-profit venture, might be understood as creating, maintaining, and even being depended upon for the images, ideas, and emotions that were once reserved for traditional religious communities. In other words, in a religious marketplace truly free of limits, competition to provide religionlike commodities might include organizations not traditionally understood as religions, and any institution with the wherewithal can compete equally with traditional religions, regardless of its financial or religious goal.

There is a great temptation to equate everything with religion, including Disney. Even a discussion of its founder, Walter Elias Disney, suggests Christlike comparisons: a man with a vision, lifelong innocence, a message to be shared with the world, and a special affinity for children, envisions a new kingdom of heaven on earth and leaves his vision with his disciples, who build cathedrals in his honor while he awaits resurrection. The myth of his cryogenic preservation and postmortem corporate participation suggest a

continued presence and guidance from beyond (see Fjellman 1992, 418, n.33; Ritzer 1996,174-75). One author describes meetings with "the spirit" of Disney in attendance; anticipating his company's future, Walt had himself filmed for screening at meetings after his death, asking questions of participants and commenting on the status of scheduled events (Fjellman 1992, 117).

However, it would be fruitless to suggest that Disney is the same as a traditional religion, or that it is consciously designing its business for religious competition. The first claim would be foolish to make, the second impossible to prove.² Instead, Disney's products (tangible and intangible) fill many of the roles often filled by religion. They have entered the market at a time when many people are not only searching for alternatives to traditional religion, but are also flexible with what they find. They have also entered the market at a time when religious institutions are in competition with "global culture industries" (Budde 1997) over the construction and maintenance of meaning at the end of the twentieth century.

DISNEY AS "RELIGIOUS" ? THE RELIGION OF TIME AND SPACE

Religion scholar Mircea Eliade separates the world into two types of people: nonreligious and religious. While nonreligious people go through life without distinguishing varieties of time or space, religious people observe and maintain sharp distinctions between the sacred and the profane. The sacred (the different, the powerful) is the wholly other that gives meaning and orientation to believers' lives. Writes Eliade, "Something that does not belong to this world has manifested itself apodictically and in so doing has indicated an orientation or determined a course of conduct" (1959, 27). This place of manifestation is the center of the universe, the heart of the cosmos and the place where the realms of existence interact. For example, in Judaism, Israel represents the space promised by God to the early Hebrews. Jerusalem remains the center of the Jewish cosmos, and synagogues are built so that worshipers face Jerusalem as they pray. Eliade suggests that "the sacred is equivalent to a power, and, in the last analysis, to reality. The sacred is saturated with being" (12; emphasis omitted). For religious people, sacred time and space are bounded by thresholds of power and orientation and provide a sense of the "really

real," the order of the cosmos, and the unity of creation. "The threshold is the limit," Eliade writes, "the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible" (25). This boundary is well marked to differentiate between space that is common and meaningless from space that is sacred because of the power it represents.

Eliade argues that, for religious people, sacred space exists in a specific relation to sacred time, a return to the time when deities exerted their greatest creative powers, "when the world was young." Eliade notes that sacred time has virtually no relationship to time as experienced by the nonreligious. Instead, the religious person "experiences intervals of time that are 'sacred,' that have no part in the temporal duration that precedes and follows them, that have a wholly different structure and origin, for they are of a primordial time, sanctified by the gods and capable of being made present by the festival" (71). Eliade notes that "sacred time is reversible in the sense that, properly speaking, it is a primordial mythical time made present" (68; emphasis omitted). He suggests that it is "made present" by the reenactments by the believers in sacred space. Contemporary participants in the Jewish holiday of Passover ritually return to the time of their enslavement in Egypt: "It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth from Egypt" (Exodus 13:8). "Me," not someone else, but the person at the ritual meal. During the Catholic Mass, the Eucharistic wafer and the wine don't represent Jesus, they actually become him ritually. Eliade's religious people long to return to the sacred time because that is the best way to fully experience sacred space, and therefore be in close contact with the deity. "In short," Eliade writes, "this religious nostalgia expresses the desire to live in a pure and holy cosmos, as it was in the beginning, when it came fresh from the Creator's hands" (65; emphasis omitted).

Both sacred time and space are re-created through the use of myth and ritual. According to Eliade, these elements provide religious people with access to sacred space and time by recalibrating life toward the divine. Myths re-insert sacred time into believers' lives. They are, writes Eliade, "the recital of what the gods or the semidivine beings did at the beginning of time. To tell a myth is to proclaim what happened *ab origine*" (95). Rituals permit the community to reenact the myths that reinsert the sacred

time into their lives. Myths and rituals permit religious people to demarcate time and space, to orient the world in terms of the deity (or deities), and (according to Eliade) to avoid the meaninglessness of the nonreligious world. He notes that the religious person "lives in two kinds of time, of which the more important, sacred time, appears under the paradoxical aspect of a circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythical present that is periodically reintegrated by means of rites. This attitude," he continues, "in regard to time suffices to distinguish religious from nonreligious man; the former refuses to live solely in what, in modern terms, is called the historical present; he attempts to regain a sacred time that, from one point of view, can be homologized to eternity" (70). Religious people, by operating in sacred space and time, never lose their connection to the deity, and live in a world that is reborn through ritual and myth, constantly young and full of power, wonder, and awe.

"DEEP IN THE HUNDRED-ACRE WOOD": WALT DISNEY WORLD AS SACRED SPACE AND TIME

As an example of Eliadean sacred space, Walt Disney World (and, to a lesser extent, Disneyland) is bordered, demarcated space in which something out of the ordinary occurs. As part of the agreement over its development, one of Disney's subsidiaries was granted power that, in effect, makes the land surrounding the park an independent governmental entity (Johnson 1981, 158). This entity, which spans twenty-seven thousand acres, now produces its own money (the so-called "Disney Dollars," which are legal tender at Disney parks, resorts, and Disney retail outlets), generates its own power, manages its own trash, provides for its own fire and safety needs, and regulates its own local sales taxes on a "semi-autonomous basis approaching a city-state like Vatican City" (King 1981, 121).

As one enters the park, clues reinforce the notion that it is a different, separate space, and therefore significant.³ Man-made mountains and ordered space carved from the waters remind the "guest" (never "customer") that Walt Disney World, a well-manicured piece of sacred space, is an oasis in the vastness of profane space. The mountains-reminiscent of Eliade's notions of the "center of the universe" and the place

"where the realms of existence interact"—are the second and third highest "mountains" in Florida: Space Mountain and the Big Thunder Mountain ride (Fjellman 1992, 75).

Disney's empire, like the creation account in Genesis, was created by draining swampland and channeling the water into lakes, literally letting "the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place" (Genesis 1: 9). It is fitting that crossing into the park thus reenacts defiance against the forces of profanity. As Eliade writes, "The threshold has its guardians—gods and spirits who forbid entrance both to human enemies and to demons and the powers of pestilence" (1959, 25). Crossing the lake that separates the mundane (parking lot) from the sacred (park) on a boat that is, according to Fjellman, part of the fifth largest "navy" in the world, visitors symbolically move into a world that is spatially and temporally removed from that in which they ordinarily operate.

In the park, the visitor is presented with a choice: to visit the Magic Kingdom, EPCOT, Disney-MGM Studios, the recently opened Animal Kingdom, or all four. The decision will determine not only how one spends the day, but also the type of space with which one interacts. The Magic Kingdom, the oldest and mythically richest portion of the park, begins with a journey down Main Street USA and moves to other spaces embodying American mythic time: Frontierland, Adventureland, and so on. EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow) is a celebration of American commercialism and technology combined with a multicultural collection of international representatives encircling a man-made lake. Disney-MGM Studios provides a glimpse "behind the scenes" of Disney movies and television, and the Animal Kingdom provides an opportunity to mingle with live and animatronic beasts. Everywhere one goes there are wonderful, colorful, clean, and seemingly educational sights, tempting foods, and picturesque vistas (usually identified for photographing), "a symbolic American Utopia" (King 1981, 123). The park is truly a space unlike anything with which most people are familiar.

Ironically, just like the sacred spaces of any religious community, this space is as powerful for what isn't seen as for what is. Nowhere is there any hint of disorder, nowhere is there any sight of the mundane. Beneath the park (the Disney netherworld?), the veil of sacrality is protected as workers transport products, food, equipment, and maintain waste removal, all out of sight of the guests. David Johnson notes, "This

sequestering makes it easy to forget that work is actually going on, so that the park's operation often seems far more effortless than it really is; visitors can thus enjoy their leisure without being reminded of the everyday world of work" (1981, 159). People are free to walk around and forget the crime-, hate-, and poverty-filled world from which they came. As Walt Disney noted, "I don't want the public to see the real world they live in while they're in the park.... I want them to feel they are in another world" (quoted in King 1981, 121).

This total experience of space is a perfect example of what Fredric Jameson calls "hyperspace," which George Ritzer defines as "an area where modern conceptions of space are useless in helping people orient themselves" (1996, 159). Like a shopping mall or a casino, Walt Disney World deprives its visitors of any reference to the outside world by making everything cross-referential. All of the signs, all of the narratives, all of the merchandise relates back to the central theme of the space, the Disney version of Eliade's "really real." Time itself is expressed spatially throughout the parks. Not surprisingly, there is no significant representation of the present, and while some of the areas represent the future (Tomorrowland, EPCOT), the greatest emphasis is on the past. Much of the space within the park is designed to conjure for the visitor a sense of times gone by—sacred times to the traditional religionist. These times are of two sorts: the romanticized (or actual) youth of the visitor and a mythic time of national innocence (King 1981, 131). Disney thus successfully exploits its relationship with adults who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s as much as children who grew up in the last few years. Writes Paul Croce: "Adults, who make up four out of five of the visitors [to the parks], are ushered back to childhood, with playful rides, mouse ears, and buildings designed on a small scale" (1991, 97). On the other hand, there are signs of a gloried American past everywhere the visitor goes. The Hall of Presidents, the references to the American frontier, the requirement to stroll down an 1890s-style street (Main Street USA is the only way into or out of the Magic Kingdom), all recall an America in its glory, when there was no Watergate, when there were no drugs, when every citizen was strong, and when every leader was honest and wise. In Eliade's words, "when the world was young." Historian Mike Wallace writes of Walt Disney, "he transported visitors back in time" (1985, 34).

However, Eliade's vision of the sacred is far too simplistic—religious people live in the real world just like the nonreligious person—and the peaceful image offered in such an analysis is often misleading. It is not surprising, then, that the version of American history provided at Walt Disney World is problematic at best, and fundamentally flawed at worst. The park designers have taken easily recognizable, pivotal images in American history and given them new (and often different) meanings. Notes David Johnson, "the Disney creators have taken the raw material from history, fantasy and other sources and packaged it into units, each with a discrete beginning, middle and end." He suggests that "they have in effect added conventional plots to inherently plotless materials" (1981, 162; emphasis deleted). By doing so, Walt Disney World staffers have re-created an American history that is not only sanitized, but also reflective of a particularly Disney version of American history—"Distory"—for millions of Americans and non-Americans who pass through the gates each year (see Francaviglia 1981). This repackaged history changes the perceptions of the visitors, and like all myths, establishes itself as the "really real" over that which is taught in textbooks. "For visitors, and especially the young visitors," continues Johnson, "Disney's version becomes the original version, which is actually more powerful than history since its form is concrete, containing 'real' people and 'lifelike' people with plenty of action and drama by both. By comparison, the history books are static, they require a more studied effort to make the history come alive; the Disney version is more interesting as well as more easily assimilated and remembered for our 'post-literate' generations" (164; emphasis deleted).

Criticizing Disney for such rewriting might be holding it to an unfair standard—does it really purport to teach people American history, or is it a place where people can encounter American history as they want it (consciously or not) to have been? As one Disney "imagineer" notes, "What we create is a 'Disney Realism,' sort of Utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements" (quoted in Wallace 1985, 35). It truly is utopian, almost Edenic. "Cast members" (never "employees") are always "in character"; many of the animals (even at Animal Kingdom) are animatronic and harmless (see Danyliw 1998); many of the actors are animatronic and therefore always happy, on cue, and never on strike; the park is always clean; and the visitors are free to live (or relive) their youths

(or the youth of the nation) in comfort and leisure from the moment the park opens until the last tram has carried them out. It truly is the happiest place on earth, even if it seems to represent something real that never actually existed.

"YO, HO. YO, HO. A PIRATE'S LIFE FOR ME": DISNEY CO. ENCOUNTERS RELIGION, INC.

Though exploring Walt Disney World through the lens of sacred space and time provides an interesting analysis of the religious experience of that place, it is Disney's ability to market its product beyond the parks' boundaries that makes more powerful the original contention that the Walt Disney Company is marketing religionlike symbolism and competing with traditional American religion. The company encourages people to visit Disney parks when they see Disney films, purchase Disney items when they visit Disney parks or outlets, see Disney movies when they buy Disney products, and so on. By cross-referencing to its other products, Disney creates a consumer world of its own; no matter what you buy, it relates to something else from Disney. Behind the integrated marketing strategy—or accompanying it—are the myths and symbols also found at the parks. Notes Michael Real, "the Disney universe teaches values while it entertains" (1977, 70), and the stories told in the products and the movies reinforce those found at the parks, translating them into a "reality" that, though not always consistent, is pervasive, directive (directing people to the parks and directing their behaviors outside them), and accessible to all who accept it.

Because the animated features are completely constructed Disney products, they are the most powerful conveyors of the symbols and meaning systems outside the parks. They also are a staple of Disney marketing and the centerpiece of its economic revival. Though phased out by the end of the 1960s, animated films are once again being made under the Disney name, and since the beginning of the Michael Eisner era (1984), the company has released ten full-length animated feature films, as well as mixed- or alternative media features.⁴ These films are the "text" underpinning a world view discernible in Disney stores, theme parks, and other venues. Like the activities at the parks, the movies (which are supported by a diverse pool of popular actors and

musicians) take common or familiar stories, sanitize them, and reconfigure them to reflect myths central to the Disney worldview; compare Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) to Hans Christian Andersen's original.

On the surface, these films reveal nothing surprising: an optimistic (even moralistic) American vision of the world in which freedom and independence are appreciated, where difference, though initially distressing, is ultimately affirmed, where outsiders, though initially ridiculed, are ultimately integrated into the group and those who ridiculed them ostracized, where selfless sacrifice is rewarded and selfishness is equated with villainy and destroyed, and where superficial, outward characteristics are overlooked, and all are appreciated. Notes Aladdin in the film that bears his name, "it is not what is outside but what is inside that counts." On the other hand, there is no subtlety about evil; villains are clearly differentiated behaviorally as well as physically, are often drawn or colored differently, and exhibit unmistakable hubris. The animated films also suggest ethical positions to their viewers; good and evil are defined in every Disney movie, and while the villains are offered salvation, many are destroyed—often by fire, hellishly confirming their villainy—because of their continued arrogance and evil. Heroes, though flawed, learn from their mistakes, and are willing to forgive the villains. While some need more help than others on the path toward righteousness, they ultimately do the right thing.

And yet, these seemingly innocent characterizations and ethical positions are not without controversy, and they only hint at larger conflicts over symbols used by Disney and various religious communities. In order to discern the "right thing," characters often seek help from other realms. Scholars and ethnic community representatives have protested some characterizations used by Disney in movies and at their parks as too simplistic, ridiculing a particular group, or misrepresenting them.⁵ Some conservative Christians have protested Disney's presentation of morality altogether. During the summer of 1997, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)—the largest Protestant denomination in the United States—announced it was organizing a Disneywide boycott, an enormous task given the company's diversification. Leaders of the organization complained about Disney policies they considered "antifamily," including health benefits for same-sex partners of Disney employees, toleration toward "Gay Days" (an event at

the Florida and California parks organized by gay and lesbian representatives), and acceptance of the open lesbianism of Ellen Degeneres and her character on Disney-owned ABC. They identified Disney as morally corrupt, implying it was not only unsafe but traitorous. On another front, some members of the American Catholic community decried the release of *Priest* by Miramax (one of Disney's subsidiaries), while others organized a media campaign against *Nothing Sacred*, also broadcast by ABC (Dart, 1997a; 1997b). The Miramax film *Priest* and the television show *Ellen* both addressed issues of homosexuality, while *Priest* and *Nothing Sacred* portrayed Catholic clergy as liberal, nonorthodox interpreters of Catholic doctrine.

The use of Disney products in debates over morality and religion is profound not simply for what it says about the Southern Baptist Convention's nostalgia for an American society that no longer exists (if it ever did), but also for what it says about Disney's place in American culture. Disney is not the first corporation targeted by religious organizations for economic boycott. It is a business like any other—"emblematic of capitalism itself," notes Margaret Miles (1999, 15)—and disgruntled members of religious communities may express their displeasure economically, either through boycotts or by establishing competing theme parks (such as Heritage USA). While Southern Baptists are free to own Disney stock, Disney is not a Baptist corporation (Walt was raised as a Congregationalist), and is therefore not betraying anything other than a particular denomination's conception of cultural propriety. Interestingly, while the boycott has elicited little public response from Disney, an objection from the Arab-American community over the depiction of Arab peoples in Disney's *Aladdin* resulted in changes for the video release (Fox 1993). This does not mean that the Arab-American concerns are more significant than those of Southern Baptists. As Michael Budde implies, international corporations like Disney have become "symbolic predators," taking and using familiar religious symbols for commercial purposes. As he writes, "many of the classic narratives of Judaism and Christianity (e.g., Exodus, miracles, resurrection) act effectively as deep structures in commercial messages" (1997, 91, 9Z). Inevitably, some Christians will be offended (to the point of boycott) at the way Disney portrays important symbols, just as it is inevitable that Disney cannot change such portrayals. Disney uses Christian religious imagery and symbols as the vehicles of the narrative. However, with

the portrayal of a particular community type (such as Arabs, Africans, etc.), the image is not woven into the narrative in the same way, and changing images by eliminating cultural stereotypes is possible even when changing the premises of a story are not. Disney refines a virtually religious message, but cannot help but risk offending the religious community that sees its own story woven into the narrative. In so doing, it competes for the attention of largest segment of the consumer market, whomever that might be. And while this is good business sense, the fact that Disney appears to be trading in religious symbols and the categories of space, time, and morality means that the competition may be drawn from the religious as well as the business world.

REAL MARKET FORCES AT WORK

In *The McDonaldization of Society* (1996), George Ritzer uses Max Weber's sociological model of bureaucratization to compare McDonald's assembly-line mentality to all of American culture. He suggests that America has become McDonaldized—operating on the same assumptions that have made the fastfood chain a global phenomenon—because of a slavish devotion to "efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control" (9). But like Weber, Ritzer sees the inevitable hazard: the "iron cage," in which activities are robbed of any meaning. "By 'iron cage,'" Ritzer concludes, "I mean that as McDonaldization comes to dominate even more sectors of society, it will become ever less possible to 'escape' from it" (143).

Not surprisingly, Disney is one of Ritzer's examples. It is efficient (trash cleanup, people moving, product delivery, etc.), predictable (guests rely on this, since many are return customers), and free of disorder or mess. Like McDonald's, Disney "has succeeded because it offers ... efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control." By cross-referencing its products, it also controls its consumers, robbing them of any ability to "escape" Disney's control once they enter the Disney world. "McDonaldized systems," notes Ritzer, citing Walt Disney World, "generally lack a sense of history. People find themselves in settings that either defy attempts to be pinpointed historically or present a pastiche of many historical epochs" (158). By limiting guests' experiences to its own sense of past and future epochs, and by reinforcing those experiences outside the parks

through films and other products, Disney has created a world that seems to lack any meaning beyond its own boundaries.

However, Disney *does* provide meaning to its customers, a key to Weber's "iron cage" of meaninglessness that McDonald's and other "McDonaldizers" do not.⁶ Disney provides a system of meaning that orients the consumer—albeit mythically, commercially, and with a very American product—to the larger world of consumer capitalism in which they live, whether or not they are Americans. The proof of the reach of Disney's mythology is in how it has been received in different places. Ritzer reports that a French politician noted that Euro-Disney would "bombard France with uprooted creations that are to culture what fast food is to gastronomy" (14). In contrast, in its first ten years, Tokyo Disneyland has entertained the equivalent of Japan's population (Miles 1999, 15), encouraging Disney to explore possibilities for a park in Hong Kong (see Reckard and Tempest 1999). This difference in the reception of two non-American cultures to Disney seems best explained by how the French and Japanese cultures integrate different myths. While French and Japanese cultures have experienced periods of xenophobia, the current Japanese attitude toward capitalism makes that culture a much more responsive audience to the idiom in which Disney operates (see Yoshimoto 1984).

Ironically, this same idiom has led to seemingly nonreligious controversy in the United States. A Virginia community rejected a Disney proposal to build an American history theme park near a Civil War battlefield, in part out of fear of increased traffic, but also because of the potential misrepresentation that might result from the park's exhibits (Hofmeister 1994). The "Distory" that is so popular in the Florida and California parks, in films, on television, and in stores across the country, and is being exported successfully around the globe, could not overcome a different sacred mythology surrounding an event that, by definition, was not clean, happy, or utopian.

CONCLUSION

In late-twentieth-century America, the lines between business and religion are often blurry at best, and organizations identified with one may venture into the world of the other—intentionally or not—making for a distinction without a difference. The religion of

Disney, if there can be said to be such a thing, is the same as it is for much of late-twentieth-century America—commercialization—and Disney opponents may also be opponents of that aspect of American culture. What makes Disney unique is that its products do not simply feed the commercial needs of its consumers, but—through accessible and pervasive symbols that have been traditionally reserved for faith communities but are now incorporated into the marketplace—their souls as well. Disney's parks and films exploit the desire to live in a world of peace and beauty, to hope for a better time, and to leave troubles (either personal or societal) behind. Its movies, its television programs, and especially its parks provide a utopian time and space that allows people, if only for a moment, to re-create time and space as they could be, and as they might have been in some mythic (personal or national) past. As Eliade writes, "It is by virtue of the temple that the world is resanctified in every part" (1959, 59; emphasis omitted). Disney provides that symbolic and metaphoric temple that resanctifies the world of American consumer capitalism. Through the production and maintenance of meaning and symbol systems, Disney plays the same role of orientation that traditional religion once did exclusively. And because contemporary trends in American religion have created a situation in which nonreligious entities and activities are often used for personal religious (or "spiritual") ends, Americans (and others) can find in Disney many of the elements they once found exclusively in traditional religion. Hey, America—you've conquered the global economy and provided one of the highest standards of living for your citizens. Now what are you going to do? "We're going to Disney World!"

NOTES

1. A commission of the Southern Baptist Convention lists more than 200 subsidiaries connected to Disney. (Thanks to Shawn Rapp for locating "The Disney Family Tree" at <http://www.ERLC.COM/Culture/Disney/1997/famtree.htm>.) Michael Budde notes that, according to Disney, "on an August weekend in 1990, 30 percent of all movie theaters in the United States and Canada were screening a feature produced by one of Disney's production companies" (1997, 30).

2. For quasi-religious analyses of Disney, see Brockway 1989; King 1981; Knight 1999; Moore 1980. We are thankful to the "Religion and Popular Culture" panel and audience at the Popular Culture Association meeting (Orlando, March 1998) who heard an earlier version of this chapter. We are particularly grateful to one participant who exclaimed that, though she lived near the park and visited often, she did not consider it religious. We are reminded that many residents of Jerusalem—the focus of major religious traditions for centuries—consider it simply another city, but we are grateful for the reminder that sometimes the sacred becomes mundane and needs re-clarification.
3. Likewise at Disneyland, where entering guests are reminded that "Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow, and fantasy" (Real 1977, 50).
4. In order of release: *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), and *Tarzan* (1999). Because of the timing of its release, *Tarzan* has not been included in this analysis.
5. Representatives from Native American organizations voiced their displeasure at the depiction of traditional customs in *Pocahontas*, while representatives from African-American organizations have regularly objected to the depiction of African and African-American characters in animated and live action films and at the parks. Margaret Miles notes that African-American employees refer to Walt Disney World as "the plantation" (1999, 18, n. 2).
6. Even McDonald's mythic world (including Ronald McDonald, Mayor McCheese, etc.) has been overshadowed by characters designed as tie-ins to Disney productions.
7. Margaret Miles reports that Walt Disney World is "presently the #1 honeymoon destination in the country and may soon become the #1 wedding site" (1999, 13).

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