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Disney and the Cultural Translation of Religions
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As the father of a child under five, I have seen lots of Disney films. In fact, the video age has enabled me to see, over my child's shoulder, lots of Disney films. One point I have noticed is that Disney does not shy away from depicting religion, especially in movies set in cultures other than our European-based Christian heritage. The film *Pocahontas*, for example, features a tree spirit as Pocahontas' spiritual source of guidance and approval. The movie *Hercules* focuses on conflict among the Olympian gods of ancient Greece. And the film *Mulan*, set in China, not only features ancestor worship, but makes a minor god, the dragon Mushu, into Mulan's main helper.

Whenever I see Disney films depict religion, the religion professor in me cringes. Indeed, every religion professor I know shudders when the topic of Disney's portrayal of religion comes up. Although Disney's depictions of human stories often bring in positive portrayals of religious beliefs and practice, rather than ignore religion altogether as often happens, these portrayals are so distorted by silly jokes, modern music, and false information that they often become insulting to those who actually practice the religion.

So should we just condemn Disney films as sacrilegious and argue that films should eschew religion altogether? That's certainly no better.

How about the purist solution, namely, that religions should be depicted in their own social and cultural context? On the face of it, it's a good idea. But it is completely impractical in implementation, for each culture has its own ways and conventions about how to tell a story. Even in movie-making, which is a worldwide activity, stories made for a specific culture must fit that culture's shared expectations. For example, in a Muslim society where strict physical separation of the sexes is practiced, a depiction of a mere touch between a man and a woman expresses far more erotic overtones than it does in American society.

To give another example, after teaching Buddhism for two weeks, I once showed a famous Buddhist film called, "Why has Bodhi Dharma come to the East?" This is not just any film, but one movie critics consider to be among the best films ever made. In my class, however, I had to stop the film in the middle and take an hour to explain what was going on. Trapped in their Western, Christian cultural perspective, the students struggled to follow the film's story line. In the end, few understood the movie well enough to answer the exam questions on it correctly.

So what Disney has done in its depiction of non-Christian religions is the only thing it could do, namely, to present one or two elements of an unfamiliar religion surrounded by our own familiar cultural forms. A purist approach would leave American viewers unable to grasp what the unfamiliar religion brings to the film. Although this produces odd disjunctions and even false pictures, they are more understandable and fit American sensibilities better than a more accurate depiction. After all, the films *Mulan* and *Pocahontas* are about the stories of their central characters, not about religious difference in and of itself.

As a teacher of religions and despite my cringing at the inaccuracies, I hope that films such as these provide viewers an intriguing taste of a religion other than their own, a taste which might lead them to pursue further information and become better informed. After all, in this information age, we meet people of different religions every day, whether in person, by phone, or on-line.