

Religion Today
June 3-9, 2001
If it Looks Like a Duck
Paul V.M. Flesher

Hinduism reveres the cow as sacred, a symbol of the blessings of the divine towards humanity. So when McDonalds says that its french fries will no longer be cooked in beef fat but in pure vegetable oil, they are safe for good Hindus to eat, right? Wrong. Instead, the appropriate principle should be: let the buyer beware. It turns out that McDonalds seasons its fries (made from potatoes) with beef extract, which it labels "natural flavor" in the ingredients information.

Now that McDonalds has been "caught out," and given our litigious society a suit is pending, it is an appropriate moment to ask, is there a real problem here, and what should be done to address it?

Before answering the question directly, let me make it clear that this is not another moment to bash corporate America. McDonalds has taken reasonable steps to address concerns of religious and non-religious food habits. Nationally, McDonalds has never claimed its fries were vegetarian. Although "natural flavor" does not suggest meat products, the company never claimed its fries contained only vegetable products. Internationally, McDonalds is "local" in 120 different national markets, and their products are designed and sold in accordance with local expectations. In Muslim countries, for instance, all meat is slaughtered and prepared according to Islamic Halal standards. In India, no beef is served by McDonalds, only chicken, but the hot sellers are McVeggie Burgers and McAloo Tikki Burgers (a spicy potato dish). Burger King markets a tasty Spicy BeanBurger. In none of these countries, by the way, does McDonalds use beef extract to flavor the fries.

So is there a real problem here? Yes, and although at the moment it is a small one, it has been growing for years. Simply put, McDonalds has been caught in the shrinking global world. When McDonalds began moving internationally more than 30 years ago, a country-by-country approach was a good strategy. Countries, or at least regions within them, were more religiously and ethnically homogenous and people traveled much less than

today. And those who did travel were generally less strict about what they ate.

Today, this is no longer the case. There are increased numbers of international travelers from all countries. And it is not just the "jetsetters" who are on the move, but everyone, including people who faithfully believe and practice one of the world's many religions. Furthermore, people do not just travel for a short time, they reside in foreign countries for periods of months or even years. For instance, native speakers of more than sixty languages reside in Wyoming. That linguistic diversity represents a people of a broad range of ethnic groups, nationalities and religions -- not to say dietary practices.

So how should large companies such as McDonalds deal with this wide range of diversity within a single country? I think the key principle should be: if it looks like a duck, talks like a duck and walks like a duck, then it should be a duck. In other words, a product should be accurately represented. Thus, vegetable foods such as garden salads, french fries, fruit pies or jalopeno poppers should be all vegetable -- no hidden meat products. Similarly, beef or chicken dishes should be made from meat, not byproducts. If these are not possible, then give customers enough information to make an informed choice.

How should a corporation determine what food practices to follow? The same way it decided to prepare meat by Halal standards in Muslim countries, by consulting religious authorities and drawing upon their expertise and knowledge. While it will not be possible to satisfy all dietary regulations of every religion, if food can be made accessible to the largest number of people, then the company will avoid accidental problems like the one McDonalds is facing, and broaden its customer base -- always a good thing.