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SP Disney Worlds at War

Walt Disney's theme parks, television productions, and motion pictures evoke strong feelings among those who attend and avoid them. These feelings are an indication that the narrative experiences conveyed in them are plural and contested. These reactions represent a canvas ripe for scholarly analysis – one that reveals not only a battle among devotees and critics of Disney, but also internal ambiguities and contradictions over what is a contested ideological and spiritual terrain. Put simply, there is a war over Disney Worlds, and Disney Worlds are at war. And as is usually the case when humans go to war, religion has a lot to do with it.

Disneyland (California)

Growing up in southern California, in the late 1960s I regularly visited the original “Disneyland” (which opened in 1955), taking advantage of a paperboy's perk. I learned the place with an intimacy made possible by regular access and the energy of youth. Now, several decades later, perhaps I can be an un-Disney-like tour guide.

Upon entering Disneyland, one's first encounter is with “Main Street USA,” and the initial glimpses it offers the park visitor is something I now consider (with my retro-active religious studies lenses) to be a model of utopian sacred space. Here one finds symbolized what Martin Luther King, Jr. hoped for, “the beloved community”; in other words, a utopian and sacred space reinforcing what Robert Bellah dubbed Civil Religion, and what others have labeled more negatively as “religious nationalism.” (American civil religion conceives of the United States as representative of sacred ideals and includes a divine mandate to protect – if not extend globally – such ideals, including religious liberty and democracy.) An Opera House where visitors learn about Saint (Walt) Disney and from his childhood hero, President Abraham Lincoln, is featured prominently at the Mainstreet USA locale. (At Florida's Disney World, Lincoln was moved to the Hall of the Presidents at Liberty Square, but his message remained the same.)

Lincoln is perhaps the central idol of American Civil Religion. He features prominently in Bellah's *The Broken Covenant*, for his speeches express a conviction in the divine calling of the nation, as well as God's displeasure and judgment when it does not live up to its ideals. The Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. provides a classic example of such civil religion adorned with key quotations

from Lincoln's speeches, it provides visitors with an opportunity to sense the weight of Lincoln's vision of the nation. Similarly, visitors at Disneyland attend “Great moments with Mr. Lincoln,” a presentation adapted from the 1964–1965 New York World's Fair exhibit, where a robotic Lincoln extols upon the ideals of the Republic and the sacred trust of liberty, and recapitulates for thousands daily a key script from the nation's sacred narratives. The message coheres well with early Puritan understandings in which the Atlantic Ocean was understood to be the Red Sea-like challenge to be crossed on the way to the promised land, a land whose sacredness depends not only on divine creative fiat, but on human labor establishing religious liberty and social justice. Lincoln acknowledged American imperfections (such as slavery), but his central message was that America had a God-given duty to build, from nature, a utopian sacred space. Of course, this space was to be carved out from that which was considered a “wilderness,” a notion increasingly contested, in part, because the continent was already well populated by indigenous peoples.

These peoples provide part of the backdrop at Disneyland's Frontierland, where the American continent is presented as an exciting and dangerous place, full of Indians as well as pirates and other bandits, all of whom must give way to the advancing, implicitly Christian, Euro-American civilization.

My suggestion that this narrative has to do with the advance of an implicitly Christian civilization could be challenged. But Walt Disney himself, who died in 1966, implied that Christianity contributed to his vision for the Park. He insisted on strict moral codes for employees and even visitors, for years banning same-sex dancing while opening the park after normal hours for Christian special events. Moreover, he attributed his success in part to his “Congregational upbringing and lifelong habit of prayer,” according to “Crosswalk,” a website hosted by conservative Christians dismayed at what they considered to be the moral decline of the Disney Worlds after Walt Disney's death. Indeed, an internet search with key words like “Walt Disney” and “Christianity” reveals that many Christians now believe Disney World propagates anti-Christian beliefs and practices, including sorcery, witchcraft, paganism and homosexuality; concerns that played a role in a 1997 Southern Baptist boycott of everything Disney. A smaller number of fundamentalist Christians believe Walt Disney himself promoted occult religion, in a secret conspiracy with Freemasons, Jews, Catholics, the Illuminati, and Satan himself, seeking to create a repressive One World Order.

Despite such perceptions, Disney's mainstreams more clearly promote Christian religious nationalism than a nefarious world system. But the Christian ethos is partially obscured by Disney's presentation of a “melting pot” theory of America. This pot coheres, of course, with the

assimilationist agenda of the predominantly Christian, Euro-American society, manifesting its “destiny” to control the land and its original human inhabitants. Many Disney Television shows and feature films, notably the Davy Crockett television shows of 1954 and 1955 (the first one was subtitled “Indian Fighter” and, combined with later shows, was released as a retitled feature film) reinforced this “progressive” narrative. At Disneyland, visitors could symbolically participate in the story by paddling “Davy Crockett’s Explorer Canoes,” shooting imagined Indians in the river below the frontier fort’s parapets, and by purchasing period guns and coonskin caps.

While Davy Crockett justified European-American domination of the American land it is worth underscoring that patriotism involves both “we feeling” and affection, if not reverence, for land. This can be seen, for example, in national hymns such as “America the Beautiful,” in the long history of American art, such as that of the Hudson School and in the photography of Ansel Adams, which finds the sublime in the continent’s outstanding landscape features. Such patriotism is also found in the nineteenth-century emergence and subsequent evolution of tourism, especially to National Parks and historic landscapes, which John Sears and Edward Linenthal have shown powerfully (and often in ironic if not contradictory ways) fuse religion and nationalism as they invest the certain places on the American landscape with sacredness.

The Crockett stories reflected a kind of patriotic nature spirituality that has erupted in America. They conveyed the idea that a strong connection to wild American land is the ground of good moral character and political legitimacy. Davy Crockett, after all, “Goes to Congress” (episode #2), ironically perhaps, in part to help ensure peace with and the just treatment of the Indians he earlier went to fight. And later he would die heroically “At the Alamo” (episode #3), defending an outpost at the southern border of the expanding Euro-American empire. (Crockett was not the only American whose charismatic authority was grounded literally in wild land; with more time we could run a similar analysis on Abraham Lincoln and others.)

Historians would label these Crockett narratives fanciful, but at Disneyland Frontierland is no fantasy. Neither is Fantasyland, which is an adjacent realm, placed at the very center of the park. This placing is unlikely to be accidental. Sleeping Beauty’s castle is there, modeled after Neuschwanstein Castle, which was built in the late nineteenth century by Bavaria’s King Ludwig, who was himself called “mad” by some in his day for creating a castle impractical for defense and fanciful of design. It was an excellent design to borrow for Fantasyland, however, which is populated by people and creatures drawn largely from European folk stories and Disney inventions drawing on such stories. Fantasyland is presented as both a fun and (playfully) dangerous place. There, European culture, and

even European land, is symbolically central: Switzerland’s Matterhorn Mountain is Fantasyland’s sacred mountain, rising majestically above the entire park. If Disneyland is exemplar of the nation’s civil religion, then here at its center is Europe, appearing as the new Fatherland’s mother. Perhaps it is not fanciful to suggest that, at Disneyland, Europe is the implied ground from which European civilization could strong-arm its way to power in Frontierland, mustering its troops to secure the American future.

That future, labeled Tomorrowland, appeared opposite Frontierland and adjacent Fantasyland. With exhibits like the “Carousel of Progress,” it painted an unambiguously positive picture of modern, industrial civilization. Its major venues were sponsored unself-consciously by multinational corporations, including those of the extractive, chemical, oil, and telecommunication industries.

The chemical corporation Monsanto, for example, took visitors on a journey inside of the atom, celebrating the science that was unlocking nature’s secrets. This and kindred venues promised “better living through chemistry” and the peaceful if not utopian benefits of nuclear power. The oil giant Chevron presented “Autopia,” giving youngsters a chance to drive pint-sized cars. This fusion of utopia with the automobile was more than linguistic innovation. For millions of children it was a performative rite of passage into car culture. Many of them went on to view America itself as an Autopia, finding great if not ultimate meaning in everything automotive.

Cumulatively, Tomorrowland expressed unbridled, utopian optimism in technology and America’s leading role as its developer. And the American mission was otherworldly as well, with venues expressing awe at rocketry, Apollo moon explorations, and an envisioned “Mission to Mars.” Placed adjacent to Main Street USA, Tomorrowland has provided ever since the 1950s a physical connection between American sacred space and outer space, grounding civil religion and the future of religion both in the here and now in America, and above and beyond this world.

Disney World (Florida)

But the narrative could not end there, though it did require additional habitat. Disney had run out of room in Orange County, California. So, Disney World was created in Orlando, Florida, where Walt Disney secretly purchased seventy square miles of biologically diverse, wild land to secure control of the developments to come. Denounced as a desecration by radical environmentalists who positioned themselves in opposition to the Disney myth, Disney World repeated and elaborated the plot begun in California. But as this new Disney World was built, the story line became even more expansive, complicated, ironic, and contested. The “religion and nature” dimensions of this appear most clearly at two new developments there: Epcot Center and Disney’s Animal Kingdom.

Epcot globalizes the mythic vision of a technological utopia presented more provincially at Disneyland. Its “world showcase” celebrates the cultures of eleven nations on Earth, which stand in for the world’s cultural diversity. Meanwhile, “Future World” continues Tomorrowland’s utopian technological optimism. There, a “Geosphere” labeled “Spaceship Earth” is Epcot’s axis mundi, towering 165 feet over visitors ever since the park opened in 1982. Located within the dome itself is “Spaceship Earth,” a ride that tells a story reminiscent of the Epic of Evolution; it is a newly invented narrative, inspiring diverse forms of nature-oriented ritualizing that consecrates cosmological and evolutionary narratives. Sponsored by American Telephone and Telegraph, the ride focuses on 60,000 years of human communicative evolution and signals wondrous new ways humans will communicate in the near future.

Keeping the original Disneyland’s fusion of corporate America and technical utopianism, the “Universe of Energy” venue was sponsored by ExxonMobil. “Mission Space” (which opened in 2002) superseded Disneyland’s “Mission to Mars” with a grander cosmovision. Other venues celebrated agricultural innovations, such as hydroponic plant cultivation – touted as a way beyond pesticides – and bioengineering, promising freedom from hunger. Meanwhile, “Living Seas” programs provided an opportunity to commune with sea life, including what many in the New Age movement today consider morally if not spiritually superior beings, the dolphins. These last two examples show that competing if not warring world-views are emerging, even at Epcot itself. The possibility of a pesticide-free agriculture implicitly acknowledged a shadow side to chemical-intensive agriculture, and the living seas programs reflected a growing concern for and valuing of the oceans and sea creatures, something not strongly represented in earlier Disney World incarnations.

This subtle counternarrative, present even at Epcot, broke out in a more full-scale counterrevolution at the nearby Animal Kingdom, which opened in 1998. Here a strong message in favor of environmental conservation was expressed, often wrapped in and reflecting a kind of nature-as-sacred religion that seemingly contradicted civil religion-baptized narratives of progress and beneficent territorial expansion.

At the “Kilimanjaro Safari,” where visitors ride a simulated Land Rover to view authentic African plant and animal life, poachers are identified as the villains responsible for endangering species. This is, of course, a simplistic explanation for the near-extinction of much African fauna; one chosen, little doubt, for its snug fit into Disney melodrama. But elsewhere in the park, admittedly in more museum-like exhibit panels that engage fewer visitors than the adventure rides, visitors can view social-scientifically credible exhibits on the diverse interplay of social and ecological factors precipitating Africa’s biodiversity crisis. When I first viewed these areas the month

the park was opened, I found myself wondering if there was any place in America where greater numbers of ordinary people could be exposed to such an analysis of the challenges facing African conservation. It was a presentation standing in direct opposition to the corporation-friendly optimism that reigns almost everywhere else in Disney’s Worlds.

The first business of the Animal Kingdom, of course, was not environmental education. Disney Chief Michael Eisner, who took a tour of the “Kilimanjaro Safari” before the park opened, decided unilaterally that the lions could not be allowed to feed in front of the visitors, as the park’s planners had planned. This decision was to the annoyance of the Kingdom ecologist who told me that people should not be shielded from the predatory nature of the Animal Kingdom. On the other hand, another venue, the “Affection Section,” provides a place where children can, presumably, emotionally connect to (non-predatory) animals.

These exhibits and this experience, perhaps especially when compared to Disneyland and Epcot Center, suggest there are fault lines in Disney’s Worlds: they are not an entirely monolithic, hegemonic, and unchanging enterprise.

Disney Movies in the Animal Kingdom

Recent Disney movies, for example, have been adopted by the Animal Kingdom where they are given even more pointed conservation messages. This adoption further illustrates that some of the architects laboring under the Disney umbrella resonate with, and promote, a nature-as-sacred spirituality. Or at least, they have affinity with what I have elsewhere called “spiritualities of connection” to the Earth’s creatures and living systems.

Of course, even Disney’s classic animated film *Bambi* (1942) may be read as an early environmental film, one that expressed a kind of animistic nature spirituality that emotionally connected the viewer to the film’s non-human forest inhabitants. Few who saw it were unmoved by Bambi’s wrenching loss at the hands of a hunter, or could easily forget the fear of the forest creatures facing the anthropogenic forest fire. In this picture, nature untrammelled by humans is depicted as miraculous and sublime, but it is also revered as the very life cycle itself that envelopes all creatures. In this way, all creatures are kin and have reciprocal obligations.

Much of this formula was repeated in the *Lion King* (1994), where nature was again portrayed as sublime but threatened. The “Circle of Life” theme song celebrated a natural metaphysics of interrelatedness, and the moral of the fable was the need for the reharmonization of life on Earth by fitting into one’s proper niche in the natural order. At the Animal Kingdom’s “Festival of the Lion King,” these themes are re-presented daily before huge crowds of spectators.

The film *Pocahontas* (1995) is even more obviously an expression of contemporary nature spirituality if not eco-religion. Its transformation from the inherited story of the American Indian Princess who saved a European explorer and later died in Europe – which critics like Christian Feest argue provided a symbolic justification for European invasion – is remarkable indeed. In Disney's version, the princess and her people hear nature's spirits. At their receptive best, they learn from them (especially, in this movie, through Grandmother Willow), particularly of their sacred interconnections within the web of life. Meanwhile, though Europeans are largely portrayed as agents of desecration, the good-hearted among them learn to respect the indigenous peoples and their land. Like the best-known versions of the inherited story, Disney's *Pocahontas* saves a European explorer. But in Disney's version she does not die alienated from her sacred place in a foreign land. She stays with her people to help them to protect nature and learn to coexist peacefully with the newcomers.

According to many scholars and at least one band of contemporary Powhatan Indians "The film distorts history beyond recognition" (Powhatan Renape Nation, from their website, accessed June 2003). But it pleased many Native Americans, who found the portrayal of the Powhatan people respectful and authentic. Some of them were, apparently, consulted about the film, as was the (non-Powhatan) American Indian Movement activist Russell Means, who provided the voice for the animated Chief Powhatan character in the movie. He said afterward,

I find it astounding that Americans and the Disney Studios are willing to tell the truth. It's never been done before . . . and I love it. The cooperation I got with every suggestion I made, even the smallest little things about our culture, have been incorporated into the script (Anonymous, movie review at .movieweb.com/movie/pocahontas/pocprod1.txt, May 2003).

Not only were the film's directors and Native American participants moved by the film's depiction of Native American nature spirituality. So was Stephen Schwartz, the lyricist for the film's signature song, "Colors of the Wind," which challenged Euro-American understandings of land ownership, countering these with the claim that one ought not to "own" the creatures and spirit-filled entities that make up animate nature. In words sung by the *Pocahontas* character:

You think you own whatever land you land on
The earth is just a dead thing you can claim
But I know ev'ry rock and tree and creature
Has a life, has a spirit, has a name . . .

The rainstorm and the river are my brothers
The heron and the otter are my friends
In a circle, in a hoop that never ends

Toward the end, to the question, "How high does the sycamore grow?" the song answers, "If you cut it down, then you'll never know." Here the environmental message is inescapable. Commenting about the process of writing these lyrics, Stephen Schwartz would later comment,

It was just one of those magical things . . . We knew what we wanted to say and we knew who the person was. We were able to find the parts of ourselves that beat in synchronicity with *Pocahontas* on those particular thoughts. The image of a sycamore echoes Chief Seattle's speech to Congress, in which he says, "No one can own the sky" and "What will you do when the rivers are gone?" (Quoted from the previously cited movie review).

It is certainly ironic that these words served as inspiration for the movie's Indian nature spirituality, since the words attributed by Schwartz to Chief Seattle (more accurately Chief Sealth) are now suspected of being history-inspired fiction. Nevertheless, many would consider this speech, and these lyrics, to have captured well the nature spirituality of many Native Americans. Whether accurate or not, the speech and its resonance certainly reflect a nature-as-sacred spirituality that is increasingly common among a diverse spectrum of the American public. And lest anyone think I am reading too much into all this, it was not only the lyricist Schwartz who resonated with what he took to be the nature spirituality of *Pocahontas* and her people. The film's directors Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg reported that in the film they also "tried to tap into her spirituality and the spirituality of the Native Americans, especially in the way they relate to nature" (Quoted from the same anonymous movie review).

The animistic nature spirituality and environmental kinship ethic of the recast story is not only clear in the movie, it is also clearly reiterated at an Animal Kingdom's show entitled "Pocahontas and Her Forest Friends," which reiterates the Disney version of the story, thus the moral quest for kinship among all creatures. The literature promoting the performance ends with the question, "Will you be a protector of the forest?"

Indeed, if we look at Animal Kingdom overall, commerce and conservation intertwine in complicated and contradictory ways. Certainly there are profound ethical questions surrounding the borrowing (some would say stealing) of stories and spirituality from Native Americans or other indigenous people for commercial purposes, even if there is also a motive to promote reconciliation between

different groups of people and between these groups and their wider relations. Such questions are properly debated in a wide variety of contexts. To acknowledge this part of the controversial nature of Disney's nature spirituality should not distract us, however, from recognizing that in this part of the Disney orbit, the conservation theme seems in some sense at war with its commercial logic. It also stands in direct opposition to the techno-utopian civil religion that is its dominant narrative, for in the Animal Kingdom, the sacred center is not a European point of divine origin, nor a technological utopia, but the Earth and her denizens interconnected in the circle of life.

Indeed, at the center of Animal Kingdom is a giant Tree of Life, standing nearly 150 feet tall, containing the sculpted images of more than 300 animals. In this sculpture the animals flow one into another, hybridized, in a way reminiscent of art sometimes created by indigenous peoples with shamanic traditions. The message could not be clearer: life is an interconnected web, worthy of reverence, and we must all eventually recognize that it is within this circle that we belong.

Disney Wars

Disney Worlds provide an excellent contemporary case study of how the salutary and shadow in contemporary nature religion become engaged and change over time. As Joseph Champ and Rebecca Self Hill suggest in their overview entry on *THEME PARKS* in this encyclopedia, further study is needed into the experiences people have in such places. What do they bring to and take from such experiences in the area of religion, nature, and ethics? To my knowledge, there has been no in-depth scholarly study of the way Disney Worlds influence the millions exposed to them.

One thing is certain. Disney's Worlds are at war. Or at least, they are hotly contested. And these battles have much to do with religion and nature.

This, of course, is a complex claim that depends on which enclaves within and beyond the Disney Universe we are focusing upon. While the dominant narratives place a sacred canopy of legitimation over a globalizing empire and a techno-utopian Tomorrowland, they are not immune from incursions. Some Disney World partisans subvert the dominant plot lines offering a nature-oriented spirituality that may provide a significant counterweight. These guerillas are themselves under attack, charged with eroding the moral fiber of the nation, which depends, according to the worldviews of the attackers, on the nation's putatively Christian underpinnings. In short, Disney Worlds and the vehement nature of the reaction to them, provide one significant example that, in American culture and our globalizing world, religion and nature are contested, in play, and very much up for grabs.

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- See also: Adams, Ansel; Disney; Dolphins and New Age Religion; Indigenous Religions and Cultural Borrowing; Manifest Destiny; Mother Earth; Motion Pictures; Nature Religion in the United States; Seattle (Sealth), Chief; Theme Parks.

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