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Ancient Egyptian Religion on the Silver Screen: Modern Anxieties about Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

Abstract

This essay examines the depiction of religion, race, and ethnicity in four films: *The Mummy*, *Stargate*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *Prince of Egypt*. Each film - explicitly or implicitly, deliberately or not - uses ancient Egyptian religion as a foil to dramatize American concerns about race and ethnicity. The foil is the mysterious, and often false, religiosity of an often Orientalized religious and ethnic "other."

In the 1932 classic *The Mummy*, we first meet the heroine Helen Grosvenor twenty minutes into the movie as she sits on the balcony of the famous Sheppard's hotel in Cairo. Gazing out at the great pyramids, she sighs, "The real Egypt." Then the camera cuts to an urban skyline dominated by the domes and minarets of mosques, and she mutters, "Are we really in this dreadful modern Cairo?"¹ In this brief yet revealing scene, Helen's character, her dialogue, and the film's cinematography work together to present a contentious theme that reverberates throughout this film and others about ancient Egypt: the intersection of religion, race, and ethnicity in the "Western" view of the "Orient." In this scene, dirty, modern, Islamic Egypt is contrasted to the classical civilization of old. But as the story progresses, the boundaries between primitive modernity and classical antiquity become blurred; the frightening superstitions of the ancient polytheists literally come to life and walk the streets of modern Cairo, enchanting anyone whose veins course with Egyptian blood. As the story is told, the ancient Egypt for which Helen longs is seductive yet dangerous. While it leads Helen and her British associates to great archaeological discoveries, it also draws them into the primitive and vengeful desires of the ancients and their superstitions. As differences between Islamic urban Cairo and superstitious ancient Egypt collapse, the film draws increasingly firm boundaries between East and West, science and religion, whiteness and non-whiteness. Helen's personal struggle with her own British and Egyptian ethnicities is the medium through which *The Mummy* presents the

political, cultural, and religious struggles of the soon-to-be "post"-colonial age of the Orient.

Hollywood's love affair with ancient Egypt did not end with *The Mummy*, and neither did its use of ancient Egypt as a vehicle for cultural commentary about religion and race. This paper will examine the relationship between religion, race, and Western culture through the lens of two classic Hollywood films and their contemporary successors: *The Mummy* and *Stargate*, and *The Ten Commandments* and *Prince of Egypt*. Each film uses religion and race or ethnicity to naturalize Western ideals - e.g., democracy, science, "Judeo-Christian" monotheism - at the expense of an ethnic "other." The foundations on which the Western self and the "other" are built are religion and ethnicity (or race).

The first pair of films explicitly participates in what Edward Said has called a discourse of the Orient which constructs the archetypal Western society in opposition to a superstitious and authoritarian East. *The Mummy* and *Stargate* use ancient Egyptian religion as the vehicle for constructing modern narratives about the conflicts between the "authentic" discourses of Western science and Judeo-Christian monotheism on the one hand and "false" discourses of Eastern spirituality and polytheism on the other. Race is the visual codifier of these dualisms, in which the educated and cultured white Westerners fight against or seek to liberate the superstitious "Egyptians." In the second pair of films, monotheism functions as an

important cultural imperative over and against a socially dangerous false polytheism. Religion is mapped onto ethnicity in the construction of the figure of Moses.

One might argue that these films concern dead religions - the myths and cultic practices of the ancient Egyptians - and thus can offend no one. Yet these films are quite openly about the present - the disjuncture between religion and science, the triumph of democracy over tyranny, or the continuing struggles of Jews to maintain their religion and culture in the face of an often-hostile dominant culture. Though many viewers (including myself) might find some of these modern lessons extremely valuable, in three of these films (*Prince of Egypt* being the exception), they are nonetheless made at the expense of a reiterative "othering" of an equally real, modern, and present East. As Said argued in his book, *Orientalism*, the intellectual, political, economical, and artistic cultures of the West have all produced a discourse of "hegemony of European ideas about the Orient" which then reiterated "European superiority over Oriental backwardness."² The "Orient" tells more about the "West" than the "real" East: Orientalism is a system of political doctrines, economic policies, literary and artistic images, and historical narratives that create an "East" that is the opposite of "Western" virtues, and an East produced in the context of Western colonization and imperialism over the East. The Orientalism that has emerged from the political and academic landscape of the

nineteenth-century is "the distillation of essential ideas about the Orient - its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness - into a separate and unchallenged coherence."³ To Said's list of "essential ideas" I would add the Orient's perceived superstitions. Said was originally most concerned with the European production of a Near Eastern "Orient," but today the United States has an equally large political, economic, and cultural investment in the Orient Said deconstructs.

These films reflect this American investment in the Orient. Although the geography may be Egyptian, the characters battle for particularly American values. It is, I am sure, no surprise to hear me argue that these films tell us more about American sensibilities than about ancient Egyptian religion.⁴ What I also argue, however, is that the ways in which ancient Egyptian religiosity is presented reflect not only American values, but American values about race and ethnicity in which the foil is the mysterious, and often false, religiosity of an often Orientalized "other." Some of these films explicitly draw on the colonial and Orientalizing discourses Said has identified to produce an East that serves only to support Western, and in this case American, imperialism over it. On the potentially explosive subject of religion, race, and cultural difference, all of the films produce celluloid dragons for Americans to slay.

I will begin with *The Mummy* and its ideological sequel, *Stargate*. *The Mummy* opens at a 1921 British Museum field expedition in the Valley of the Kings, where archaeologists Sir Joseph Whemple and Dr. Muller have discovered a mysterious mummy named Imhotep and an accompanying box. A young assistant secretly opens the box and reads the enclosed "Scroll of Thoth" which contains the spell by which the goddess Isis brought the dead Osiris back to life. Imhotep magically awakes, scares the young man witless, and disappears with the scroll. Fast-forward to 1932, when an Egyptian man named Ardeth Bey, who bears a striking resemblance to the lost mummy, points the British archaeological team - now led by Whemple's son Frank - to the tomb of Princess Anksenamen, Imhotep's former love. Once the artifacts are ensconced in the Cairo Museum, Ardeth Bey attempts to revive Anksenamen's mummy with the Scroll of Thoth. Instead, he bewitches the young Helen, who physically resembles Anksenamen. Across town, Helen feels compelled to leave the Shepherd's hotel and join Ardeth Bey/Imhotep at the museum. Imhotep decides to revive Helen's ancestral Egyptian blood so that she becomes a reincarnation of the Princess. He plans to kill Helen and then resuscitate her as a mummy with the scroll. Young Frank Whemple, in love with Helen, interrupts, distracting Imhotep long enough for the heroine - who thinks she is Anksenamen - to appeal to a nearby statue of the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis. Isis comes to life and destroys Imhotep, saving Anksenamen and restoring Helen to "herself," Helen.

Throughout the film, East and West are compared through the elements of religion and race. Egypt is a place of dark mystery and superstition, contrasted to the West's allegiance to the clarity of science and logic. Dr. Muller, called a "master of the occult," plays the believing foil to the skeptical and scientific Joseph Whemple. Upon the discovery of the mummy and the scroll, Muller warns Joseph to investigate no further, "The Gods of Egypt still live in these hills....The ancient spells are weaker but still potent....Put it back. Bury it where you found it. You have read the curse - you dare defy it?" Joseph replies simply, "In the interest of science, even if I believed in the curse, I'd go on in my work for the museum." Muller leaves the site, refusing to condone an "act of sacrilege" with his presence. Despite the subsequent mysterious disappearance of the mummy and the scroll, Whemple maintains his faith in the logic of science and ultimately dies because of his failure to acknowledge the Egyptian "ancient spells."

Muller's warnings draw our attention to one of the main narrative devices of the film: the collapsing of ancient and modern. *The Mummy* contrasts Western science and rationality with not only ancient Egyptian magical religion but also modern Egyptian mysticism and superstition. The ancient spells are still powerful. Ancient and modern are tied together by the bonds of race. Race is defined as a biologically essential category, through blood. With only one exception, the Egyptians of the film all have darker complexions than the Europeans and are easily

identifiable through their skin color and clothing. The exception is Helen, who appears of white European heritage but is in fact British and Egyptian. But, prosaically, Helen is the exception that proves the rule, for although she does not appear to be of Egyptian descent, her Egyptian ancestry ultimately betrays her identity. Helen's Egyptian "blood" is mentioned several times, most notably when Imhotep first sees her. She is mesmerized by his gaze, and he recognizes that she is of the same "blood" as he is. In fact, all of the film's characters of Egyptian "blood" are subject to Imhotep's hypnotic spell and fall under his magical power. For example, Joseph Whemple's Nubian servant falls prey to Imhotep's charms, as well, as soon as he lays eyes on Ardeth Bey. The Nubian immediately assumes a servile position, reenacting a status his ancestors at times held with respect to the ancient Egyptians; he bows before Imhotep, abandons his British master, and becomes Imhotep's dutiful slave.

Race here is biologically essentialized, and the vehicle through which it is essentialized is religion. As the prescient Muller foretells, the spells of ancient Egypt remain potent over those of Egyptian blood. Through the racial hybrid Helen, they threaten the rational world of the West. Upon his epiphany about Ardeth Bey's true identity, Joseph Whemple fears aloud that the curses of the ancients will destroy his family because of young Frank's love for Helen. Though the Egyptian archetype Imhotep dominates the seemingly powerless Brits, ultimately the

Egyptian race is proven to be the subject race.⁵ For inside Helen the Egyptian and the British do battle with each other. At one point, Helen begs Frank to prevent her from going to Imhotep at the Museum again when she next succumbs to Imhotep's spell. She cries, "There's death there for me. And life for something else inside me that isn't me, but it's alive, too, and fighting for life. Save me from it Frank, save me."

Here Helen exemplifies what Homi Bhabha has called the post-colonial phenomenon of "hybridity": the "shifting forces and fixities" of colonial and colonized identities, in which "the assumption of colonial identity" (here, British identity) is revalued, displaced, subverted.⁶ Helen's Egyptian blood, her colonized self, rising in the form of Princess Anksenamen, threatens to destroy Helen's more "true" British colonial self. In the end, it is not the dashing young Brit, Frank, who rescues Helen. Only by acknowledging the power and mystery of her Egyptian heritage by invoking the goddess Isis does Helen save herself from herself. Though some might read this as a subversive element to the otherwise dominant colonial message of the film, I see it as the opposite.⁷ Through Helen, the ancient Egyptian mysteries (and by association the Egyptian race) are finally subjected to British rationality and sensibility through their own complicity in the colonial project. Isis colludes with Helen's British self to obliterate her Egyptian self. Though the threat

of the Egyptian other - both Islamic and pharaonic - continues to hover in the colonial consciousness, its rebellion has been quelled, for now.

Stargate, released over 60 years after *The Mummy*, is nonetheless its ideological and political sequel⁸ - victorious out of the ashes of European colonialism. What *Stargate's* imperialism inherits from its black-and-white predecessor are the twin cornerstones of race and religion. In *Stargate*, as in *The Mummy*, Western culture and values battle with an irrational, superstitious, and racialized other. In this homage to the military build-up during the Reagan-Bush era, penniless Egyptologist Daniel Jackson is recruited by the armed forces to assist in deciphering a giant artifact found decades before at the pyramids of Giza.⁹ The artifact proves to be a portal, or "stargate," that propels the team to other side of the galaxy. There they encounter a primitive desert community descended from inhabitants of earth's ancient Near East who were brought to this planet as slaves.

This culture bears all the hallmarks of the Oriental other: they are illiterate and superstitious; they are a millennia-old, non-industrial society enthralled by technology as simple as a cigarette lighter; they are enslaved to their gods, who resemble in name and iconography the gods of ancient Egypt; and their complexions and clothing bear marked similarity to stereotypical Arab Bedouins. While Daniel works closely with a lovely "native" woman to decipher the Stargate on the desert planet, commanding officer Lt. O'Neill prepares to blow it up in case

they fail in their efforts to return home. Meanwhile, the alien tyrant, Ra, who has been masquerading as a god, is displeased with his people's friendship with the heavily armed and obviously threatening Americans. Ra has perpetuated the enslavement of the desert people by presenting himself and his entourage as gods with the power to destroy all who disobey. His key soldiers appear in high-tech costumes and resemble the gods Horus and Anubis. Though Ra's technology is superior to the American's, O'Neill and Daniel reveal to their new friends the scientific underpinnings of the objects of their previously blind faith and expose their religious system as a fake. The Americans prove these gods to be anything but invincible. They convince the indigenous people to revolt against their false gods, and America participates in the spread of democracy to the far reaches of the galaxy. Daniel is the "natives'" savior, having even been brought back from death in Ra's resurrection machine. Ultimately, Daniel decides not to return to earth, but "goes native" and falls in love with the beautiful tribal chief's daughter, who has already been (quite literally) given to him as his bride.

As in *The Mummy*, the ancient mysteries of Egypt represent a threat to the Western virtues of science and rationality. Western technology and scientific knowledge refute the Eastern (and seemingly Arab-like) superstitions, this time successfully. As in *The Mummy*, race and religion are inextricably linked - the Americans are the white liberators of an oppressed and backwards ethnic other.

Christianity also makes a not-so-subtle appearance, with the resurrected Daniel as the true savior who literally rids the temple of false gods and false beliefs of polytheism. Polytheism, tyranny, and false religion are constructed in opposition to truth, democracy, and an unspoken Christianity. To *The Mummy's* litany of Western values, *Stargate* adds freedom and democracy.

Stargate, of course, is not the first film to juxtapose the false polytheism and tyranny of ancient Egyptian culture with the true faith and liberty of the West. The film that most loudly heralded this moral lesson was, of course, *The Ten Commandments*, released in 1956.¹⁰ In this epic, religion is the vehicle for spreading the values of truth and democracy. The social backdrop to the film is the United States' war against communism and the burgeoning civil rights struggle.¹¹ The solution to both of these problems, for DeMille, is "Judeo-Christian" monotheism, the foundation for a free society. In his unusual "forward" to the film, DeMille describes the subject of the film as "the birth of freedom, the story of Moses." "The theme of this picture," says DeMille, "is whether men are to be ruled by God's law or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Rameses. Are men the property of the state? Or are they free souls under God? This same battle continues throughout the world today." Freedom against tyranny is the mantra of the film, and throughout Moses is the agent of liberation of his people. Even before Moses learns of his Hebrew background, he is an advocate for the

oppressed and a believer in the equality of peoples. His supposed brother Rameses serves as his fascist foil. This is evident less than twenty minutes into the film, when upon Moses' return from supposedly conquering Ethiopia, he brings an African man and woman to court. This scene marks the audience's first glimpse of the adult Moses. Rameses orders Moses, "Command them to kneel before Pharaoh." But Moses replies, "Command what you have conquered, my brother. I bring the Ethiopian king and his sister in friendship, as an ally to guard our southern gates."

DeMille's Moses does not enslave other peoples. Moses also grants the slave Joshua a reprieve from a death sentence. He orders more food and rest for the Hebrew slaves and remarks, "It is not treason to want freedom." Competing constructions of race and religion exist in this film. On the one hand, DeMille clearly wishes to present a fairly typically liberal view on race, that all people are equal regardless of race, and that therefore racial differences are less important than other differences - such as moral differences. DeMille seems to wish for racial and ethnic differences to be subordinate to differences of faith: the differences between believers and non-believers. Moses knows the truth of "Judeo-Christian" values even before he knows that he is a Hebrew. Moreover, as many others have noted, DeMille tries to universalize these values so that they do not seem strictly "Jewish" or "Hebrew," but more broadly "Judeo-Christian."¹² On the other hand, however, DeMille's depiction of difference is decidedly religious - monotheism versus

polytheism - and these religious differences inherently draw on essentialist constructions of race and ethnicity. Religion is tied to ethnicity, for Moses' continual respect for the Hebrews - as well as all others who are "different" - and his advocacy of fairness and equal treatment stand in stark contrast to the views of all other Egyptians portrayed in the film. The only explanation for Moses' views seems to be his ethnicity and his as-yet unknown identity as the deliverer of his people. It is as if Moses' true identity, his Hebrew identity, is bubbling just beneath the surface of his jewel-adorned Egyptian skin, waiting to break through. And when it does, Moses becomes who he always was meant to be. Upon learning of his identity, Moses expresses little shock or confusion, but embraces his Hebrew ethnicity and its accompanying religion.

Opposite the faithful, egalitarian Moses is the tyrannical Rameses. Rameses' religious beliefs rarely make an appearance, but when they do so, his gods are powerless before Moses' unnamed god. Rameses' libations of sacred water to purify the bloody Nile fail. When his prayers to Horus to revive his dead son go unanswered, his wife, Nefertiri, comments with disdain, "He cannot hear you. He is nothing but a piece of stone with the head of a bird." In contrast to *The Mummy* and *Stargate*, the "other" of this film is not the shady, superstitious Arab, but the godless communist to whom DeMille alluded in his introduction. The boundaries of East vs. West have shifted, but the Orientalizing discourse nonetheless aligns

race and religion by polarizing godlessness and tyranny on the one hand with monotheism and freedom on the other. Moses' ethnic identity as Hebrew explains the culturally inexplicable affection for liberty and freedom that Moses has always had, even before knowing his ethnic ancestry.

In *The Ten Commandments*, monotheism provides the foundation for a democratic and egalitarian society in opposition to the fascist regime held together by an insincere worship of pagan gods. *Prince of Egypt* draws on this epic's exegesis of the Exodus story in depicting Moses' liberation of the Hebrews as a battle between a true monotheism and a false polytheism but adds to it the complexities of late twentieth-century identity politics.¹³ Whereas in *The Ten Commandments*, Moses' true identity as Hebrew and - thus egalitarian and democratic - is manifest from the beginning of the tale. In *Prince of Egypt*, Moses struggles to come to terms with his authentic identity. His ultimate embrace of his people narrates religious identity in terms very similar to recent identity politics movements. Religion is a fixed and natural ethnic identity, and recognizing that identity is the springboard for liberation.

Thus, *Prince of Egypt* is as much *The Ten Commandments'* ideological sequel as *Stargate* is *The Mummy's*. For despite the filmmakers' attempts to celebrate racial, religious, and ethnic difference, the film nonetheless essentializes notions of ethnic identity and perpetuates religious stereotypes. Skin color is not

the codifier of race, since the characters' complexions exemplify a realistic Mediterranean and Near Eastern palette of many shades of brown. Nonetheless, the film's depiction of religion and culture constructs ethnic differences as biological and essentialized, and promotes the faith of the films' protagonists only by othering and by ridiculing the faith of the Egyptians.

This young Moses is not the benevolent prince of DeMille's film. As Rameses' brother, he participates equally in Rameses' youthful pranks and in an elitist ignorance of the plight of the slaves. This Moses' ethnic identity, however, is nonetheless just as fixed as the first, and it also trumps his pharaonic heritage. This Moses must come to grips with his true identity in a kind of coming-out story. He stumbles across the truth of his birth when he runs into Miriam and Aaron, whom he does not recognize. When they tell him of their shared heritage, he is unwilling to admit his real ethnicity. Once he does, he is shocked, and confused. He must confront his own internalized racism and anti-Semitism before he can become an advocate for his people.

Like Helen in *The Mummy*, Moses embodies the conflict between two peoples. Like Helen, he struggles throughout most of the film to decide which is his true identity. Upon learning of his birth from his newfound sister, Miriam, Moses runs back to the palace and sings a song about how he is a great prince of Egypt, and that is all he ever wanted. He then dreams of a giant wall inscription in

the palace that comes to life and narrates the tale of his escape from death as an infant. When he confronts his father about the slaughter of the Hebrew children, Moses recognizes and is disgusted by his own father's hatred for the Hebrews. As he walks through the construction site of a new temple, he sees for the first time the oppression of the slaves, an oppression that has always surrounded him but that he never before acknowledged. Moses must then decide who he truly is - Hebrew or Egyptian.

Like Helen's choice, Moses' choice represents the morality tale of the film. Moses' true identity is the same as the film's true religion. For the film's most prominent exegesis on the Exodus narrative is its juxtaposition of the Israelite religion with the "false" polytheism of the Egyptians. The ancient text of Exodus emphasizes the power of the Hebrew God but does not claim the falsity of the Egyptian gods and religions. In *The Ten Commandments*, the conclusion reached by Rameses and Nefertiri that the Egyptian religion is false and powerless comes only at the end of the film. In *Prince of Egypt*, however, Egyptian polytheistic religion is consistently ridiculed and undermined, even by its practitioners. Only Rameses' father, the pharaoh, has any real respect for the Egyptian traditions. Huy and Hotep, the priests in the movie, are the stock buffoons of all cartoon movies, with voices provided by Steve Martin and Martin Short. When Moses returns to Egypt to demand the release of his people, the "miracles" and "wonders" of the

Egyptian priests literally amount to no more than smoke and mirrors and resemble a Vegas floor show more than a miracle. After he turns his staff into a serpent, Rameses (now the pharaoh) instructs his priests to respond to Moses' "game." They commence with a song and dance routine complete with jets of colored smoke and mirrors reflecting the light from outdoors. They, too, turn staffs into serpents, but only behind a thick veil of smoke. In another scene, they attempt to turn water into blood, just as Moses does, but in fact, their "magic" is just a sleight of hand. Behind Pharaoh's back, the priests use a special powder to turn the water red. Though Pharaoh thinks they have answered Moses' challenge, it is obvious to the priests and to the viewing audience that unlike Moses, they have performed no miracle.

Like Helen Grosvenor, Moses must choose between two conflicting identities, and like Helen, he chooses to reject the Egyptian one, the identity that stands in opposition to enlightenment and true religiosity. Yet, unlike Helen, in choosing to reject his Egyptian heritage, Moses chooses to stand not on the side of the colonizer but to stand with the colonized, the Hebrew slaves. In this sense, the film presents a welcome political reversal when compared to *The Mummy* or *Stargate*; the hero validates the religious beliefs of the oppressed peoples. Yet, when Moses' choice is read in the larger context of American religion and politics - in which the shadow of the conflicts in the Middle East loom large and in which Christian (and to a lesser extent Jewish) monotheism dominates - we see that the

film participates in some of the same kinds of discourses American films about ancient Egypt have presented for decades. Egyptian religiosity is a foil for idealized Western beliefs - idealized Western beliefs that have much more to do with modern political concerns than ancient ones. Moreover, the film conveniently ignores the problems posed by Moses' people worshipping a golden calf at Sinai. And by ending at Sinai, it sidesteps the delicate question of whether Moses' people went on to become colonizers themselves.

The film thus sends an odd message about religious difference to an American film audience already inundated with media accounts of the violence and strife caused by intolerance to religious difference around the world. The truth and power of Moses' monotheism is always constructed in opposition to a false religious "other." The religious "other" is a now dead religion, but some aspects of it resonate with ritual beliefs and practices of very live religions today. When I screened this film in a class, a Hindu student was appalled at the way the film ridiculed religiosity that involved the worship of gods that took animal form. While this student was fully aware that Hinduism was not the subject of mockery in the film, she nonetheless believed a fundamental element of her faith was being caricatured. From her perspective, the film perpetuates stereotypes of religious "others" in the eyes of American Jewish and Christian viewers who are asked to identify with the film's Moses. Unlike the makers of *Stargate* and *The Mummy*, the filmmakers

scrupulously avoid making the "other" resemble Arabs or Muslims. The film nonetheless draws on discourses in American film in which superstition or false religion are opposed to an enlightened Western monotheism, and accompanying that enlightened Western monotheism (as in *The Ten Commandments* and *Stargate*) is freedom. In fact, the truth of Western monotheism is constructed through the very process of falsifying and ridiculing the religious "other." At the same time that Moses learns that his life as an Egyptian prince has been nothing but a lie, the audience learns that the religiosity of its "other" is also a lie.

I acknowledge the difficulties and dangers in invoking post-colonial theory in the same space as a discussion of Exodus and the Ten Commandments. Edward Said's public arguments with Michael Walzer over his book, *Exodus and Revolution*, have been well-documented, and critiques of Said's criticisms of Israel and Zionism are well-founded.¹⁴ I also would strongly resist any attempts to compare my analyses of these films to the well-documented and long history of anti-Semitic sentiments directed at the American film industry.¹⁵ Instead, I argue that one reason some films like *Prince of Egypt* or *The Ten Commandments* can be discomfoting to watch is precisely their promotion of a politics that might otherwise be applauded - for example, *Prince of Egypt's* celebration of freedom from bondage and of the history of Jewish heritage. But these core values are presented simultaneously within the context of discourses that are all too prominent

in other Orientalizing American films, discourses that associate ancient Egyptian religiosity solely with superstition and tyranny and in doing so, implicitly question, if not outright denigrate, the religiosity and culture of contemporary non-Western "others."

To varying degrees, through the depiction of religion and race or ethnicity, each of these films promote decidedly Western values at the expense of an ideologically subordinated other, primarily the East. The ancient world becomes a cipher for the modern problems of defining and negotiating religion, ethnicity, and cultural difference.

¹ *The Mummy*, directed by Karl Freund (Universal Pictures, 1932).

² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978; repr. with a new afterword, 1994) 6-7.

³ Said, *Orientalism*, 205.

⁴ It would in fact be easy to debunk the misrepresentations of ancient Egyptian religion in some of the films. For example, my students often point out that although Horus and Anubis are two of Ra's evil henchmen in *Stargate*, the ancient Egyptians did not believe these two gods to be malevolent, and they probably did not even think of these deities as incredibly frightening, or as vindictive against the Egyptian people (as they are portrayed in the film). However, examining the ideological implications of cinematic representations of ancient Egyptian religion (rather than exposing and correcting misrepresentations) is the focus of this essay.

⁵ As Said notes, the construction of a race as an inherently subject race is an essential aspect of Orientalism: "...[T]he Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment....Since the Oriental was a member of a subject race, he had to be subjected: it was that simple." Said, *Orientalism*, 207. Homi K. Bhabha frames this point in the following way: "The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction." Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype,

discrimination and the discourse of colonialism" in *Bhabha, The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994) 70.

⁶ Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817," in *Bhabha, The Location of Culture*, 112, 114.

⁷ Carol Siri Johnson makes a parallel argument about the film's portrayal of gender and sexuality. Johnson reads the majority of the film as "ostensibly a reification of the colonial British hegemony" viewed through the lens of sexuality, in which the film depicts the dangers of female sexuality that must be suppressed by male authority. Johnson argues, however, that the film in the end subverts its own message "by taking the power from those in whom it is usually invested and giving it to a female goddess figure instead." Johnson, "The Limbs of Osiris: Reed's Mumbo Jumbo and Hollywood's *The Mummy*," *Melus*, 17:4 (1991/92) 105-15. While I find this reading of *The Mummy* provocative, I ultimately disagree, and would argue instead that Isis represents the triumph of a submissive construction of femininity, in that Isis' actions serve to position Helen back into her "traditional," submissive position as beloved and wife.

⁸ *Stargate*, directed by Roland Emmerich (MGM, 1994).

⁹ Floyd D. Cheung, "Imagining Danger, Imagining Nation: Postcolonial Discourse in *Rising Sun* and *Stargate*," *Jouvert 2* (1998); electronic publication: <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert>, accessed Dec 28 2000. Cheung's article provides a thoughtful examination of the historical and cultural context of the production of *Stargate* as well as an analysis of the discourses of race, colonialism, and primitivism in the film.

¹⁰ *The Ten Commandments*, directed by Cecil B. DeMille (Paramount Pictures, 1956)

¹¹ Only two years before the release of the film, Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist crusade had ended with his censure by the U.S. Senate. Meanwhile, in 1954, the Supreme Court issued the monumental *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, and in 1955 Rosa Parks refused to sit in the Negro section of a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama. This social and historical context is well-documented by film reviewers and film theorists. See Ilana Pardes, "Moses Goes Down to Hollywood: Miracles and Special Effects," *Semeia* 74 (1996) 19; Peter T. Chattaway, "Lights, Camera, Plagues!: Moses in the Movies," *Bible Review* 15 (1999) 34-41; Steven R. Weisman, "Splendid, Stubborn, Adorable Moses Returns," *New York Times*, 7 April 1998, A 26.

¹² On the universalization of the Hebrew Bible in epic film, particularly DeMille's *Ten Commandments*, see B. Babington and P. W. Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema*. (Manchester: Manchester University 14. The framing of *Prince of Egypt* as, at least in part, a story of Moses' identity crisis is noted in Dan Goldblatt, Michael Lerner, and Laura Geller, "Prince of Egypt - Three Perspectives," *Tikkun*.

¹³ (1999) 8-10.

¹⁴ Jonathon Boyarin outlines and critiques both "sides" of the "Said-Walzer" debate in "Reading Exodus into History," *New Literary History*, 23 (1992) 528-33. See also William D. Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 1-16. While Hart is more sympathetic with Said than with Walzer, he points to some of the

shortcomings in Said's insistence on secularity as a way of resolving religious difference. Said, a Columbia University professor, also inspired controversy at Columbia when he was caught throwing rocks at Israeli military officers. See Erik Lords, "Columbia U. Says Academic Freedom Protects Professor's Rock-Throwing," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3 November 2000, A16. In dominant contemporary American discourse, the "other" to the "Judeo-Christian" self is often Islam. As Jonathon Boyarin has argued, interpretations of the Exodus narrative formed important ideological elements to American and European colonial projects in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See Boyarin, "Reading Exodus," 534-38. Although the Exodus narrative was not usually invoked in the early twentieth-century formation of Zionism, it has been used since the 1940's as a narrative that ultimately polarizes Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians. (Boyarin, "Exodus," 528, 538-43.)

¹⁵ Recent examples of this disturbing anti-semitism are easily found. With respect to *Prince of Egypt*, see William E. H. Meyer, Jr., "An American 'Precedent'? Propaganda in American Movies: The Case of the Hollywood Jews," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 27:4 (1999) 271-81. For another perspective, see Philip Yancey, "What the *Prince of Egypt* Won't Tell You," *Christianity Today* 42:14 (1998) 88.