

Dungeons, Dragons, Deity

A paper for

Folk Religions and New Spiritualities

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Exposition

Dungeons & Dragons¹ is a complex role-playing game based on a fantastical world populated by dwarves, elves, goblins, demons, trolls, orcs, centaurs and other heroes and monsters. It is not like other dice games, board games, video games, card games, or athletic games which are defined by an established objective. D&D is more free-flowing than these, limited only by the players' imaginations and interaction. Because it is such an open-ended game, D&D has a dynamic concept of good and evil.

At the beginning of their D&D career players design a complex character with which to function in the D&D world by going on adventures, subduing adversaries, growing in power, and amassing wealth. Some players will create and use multiple characters in different games. A character will be part of a particular race and class.² Part of the creation process also involves selecting a character's *alignment* and a *deity*.

Alignment – A character's alignment has to do with their worldview and moral presuppositions. The primary distinctions are between Good/Evil and Law/Chaos, with a neutral option for both sets. Thus, the nine potential alignments are: Lawful Good, Neutral Good, Chaotic Good, Lawful Neutral, Neutral, Chaotic Neutral, Lawful Evil, Neutral Evil, and Chaotic Evil. Players are encouraged to select from the first six alignments, leaving the Evil alignments for “villains and monsters.”³ A Good character tend towards selflessness while an Evil character seeks to hurt others. A neutrally Good/Evil character cares about others in principle but lacks the

¹ Henceforth, D&D.

² The primary races are: Human, Halfling, Gnome, Half-Orc, Dwarf, Half-Elf, and Elf. The primary classes are: Barbarian, Bard, Cleric, Druid, Fighter, Monk, Paladin, Ranger, Rogue, Sorcerer, and Wizard. Advanced characters may belong to two or more classes.

³ Cook, Monte, Player's Handbook, 104.

philosophical resolve to inconvenience himself for their sake, unless they are related to him.

Lawful characters prefer established standards of goodness and have a great respect for tradition and authority. Chaotic characters are free-wheeling and do not like rules. A neutrally Lawful/Chaotic character has an appreciation for rules and traditions but does not feel obligated to live her life solely within societal boundaries.⁴

Deity – The deities are as varied as the population of the D&D world(s). They are fundamentally different from any of the races or even from other supernatural beings (angels, demons, and devils) in that they do not directly interact with the world. “While the gods most strongly make their presence felt through their clerics, they also have lay followers who more or less attempt to live up to their deities’ standards.”⁵ The primary gods are: Boccob (god of magic), Corellon Larethian (god of elves), Ehlonna (goddess of the woodlands), Erythnul (god of slaughter), Fharlanghn (god of roads), Garl Glittergold (god of gnomes), Gruumsh (god of the orcs), Heironeous (god of valor), Hextor (god of tyranny), Kord (god of strength), Kurtulmak (god of kobolds), Moradin (god of dwarves), Nerull (god of death), Obad-Hai (god of nature), Olidammara (god of rogues), Pelor (god of the sun), St. Cuthbert (god of retribution), Vecna (god of secrets), Wee Jas (goddess of death and magic), and Yondalla (goddess of the Halflings). The gods have strong personalities and will habitually grant special powers to their clerics and worshippers.⁶ The gods also have rivalries and alliances among themselves. For example, the gods of the elves and dwarves do not like the god of the orcs, the gnome-god and kobold-god are enemies, the god of valor and the god of tyranny hate each other,⁷ and the god of the sun is

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 106.

⁶ Ibid, 106-108.

⁷ They are actually half-brothers; perhaps sibling rivalry is a universal.

antagonistic to all evil gods and their followers.⁸ Although the gods are essentially immortal, they are neither omnipotent nor invulnerable. In fact, Vecna (god of secrets) lost his left hand and eye in a fight with Kas, his former servant.⁹ Deities, like characters, have alignments.

Most characters' deity is a reflection of their race, class, and alignment. Many races tend toward a particular alignment as a whole. Dwarves are usually lawful and often good, but Half-Orcs have a great propensity for chaos and a moderate tendency towards evil. Humans are the most wide-ranging of the races, both regarding Law/Chaos and Good/Evil.¹⁰

Angels – Angels come in three varieties and are always good. Although they are not power hungry, angels are always ready to battle evil in whatever form it appears. The Astral Deva angel is the smallest type of angel, at a mere 7'6" and 250 lbs. Astral Devas do everything they can to aid Good characters traveling in the angels' realms. The Planetar and Solar angels are each a towering 9' and weigh 500 lbs; the Solar angels are stronger in battle. Planetar angels are the generals of angelic armies, and Solar angels are attendants to the deities. Like characters and monsters in D&D, angels have statistics reflecting their health, magical abilities, attacking powers, defending powers, and so on. Angels are particularly opposed to demons and devils.¹¹

Demons and Devils – There are two chief differences between demons and devils in D&D. Demons are chaotic and devils are lawful; demons are from the Abyss, “a plane of endless evil,”¹² and devils are from the Nine Hells of Baator, “a lawful evil realm.”¹³ Both demons and devils use fear against their opponents, but demons view everyone (even other

⁸ Cook, Monte, Player's Handbook, 106-108.

⁹ Ibid, 108.

¹⁰ Ibid, 12-18.

¹¹ Cook, Monte, Monster Manual, 10-13.

¹² Ibid, 40.

¹³ Ibid, 50.

demons) as opposition and will attack immediately and for pleasure.¹⁴ Devils are more big picture-oriented, seeking to advance themselves within their own caste system and demolish the infrastructures of good entities.

Of the eleven classes of character, there are five that most directly encounter the spiritual realms: Cleric, Monk, Paladin, Sorcerer, and Wizard.

Clerics – A cleric is a character whose life is devoted to the service of something beyond himself, usually a patron god. Clerics go on adventures with the purpose of benefiting their gods by converting followers or bringing money to the god’s temple. They accomplish these goals by doing good deeds (healing the sick, raising the dead, correcting injustices, etc.) in the god’s name. Occasionally a cleric will be devoted to a cause rather than a particular god. This person will function in much the same way as a deity-bound cleric, but outside of church structures and politics, and without the particular benefits of allegiance to a specific god.¹⁵

Monk – A monk is a fighter dedicated to her personal perfection. In her monastery she dedicates herself to contemplation and training in the martial arts. A monk does not cast spells like other characters (who draw on magical energy specific to their deity) but instead “channels a subtle energy, called *ki*...A monk’s training is her spiritual path. She is inner-directed and capable of a private, mystic connection to the spiritual world, so she needs neither clerics nor gods.”¹⁶ A monk sees adventures as a means to her ultimate goal of personal perfection.

Paladin – A paladin is always lawful and good. Paladins travel around doing good and righting wrongs because they themselves are so strongly aligned with purity and righteousness.

¹⁴ Ibid, 40.

¹⁵ Cook, Monte, Player’s Handbook, 30-33.

¹⁶ Ibid, 39.

They are not very complex characters, but much strength comes from their simple devotion to their causes.¹⁷

Sorcerer and Wizard – Sorcerers and Wizards are similar in their abilities and motivations. Both heavily rely on magical incantations vis-à-vis swords and armor, and both go on adventures primarily to further develop their magical abilities. The principal difference between a sorcerer and a wizard is that the former is born with a natural affinity for wielding magic and the latter develops this ability through rigorous study and practice. Because of this a wizard must dedicate time before combat to preparing his spells, but he is unlimited in the variety and number of spells available to him. A sorcerer is able to perform magic more frequently and on much shorter notice, but he is severely limited in his selection of available spells.¹⁸

Reflection

There are several aspects of “D&D spirituality” that I agree with and a few more with which I disagree. Like all other aspects of the D&D world, the divine is first and foremost portrayed as complex and diverse. On the whole I agree with this. After all, the God we know and worship is beyond complexity and even appears contradictory at times.¹⁹ I am glad that D&D allows room in its pantheon for gods both angry and merry; this is found in the Bible.

¹⁷ Ibid, 42-46.

¹⁸ Ibid, 51-58.

¹⁹ I think it is unnecessary and futile to try and delineate the complex analyses of God’s apparent contradictions that have been discussed for centuries (one/three, just/merciful, transcendent/present, vindictive/compassionate, etc.). Suffice to say – it is rarely maintained that God is simple or homogenous.

However, the D&D concept of deity falls sadly short of the robust personality of the real God because it takes so many D&D gods to be as dynamic/complex as our One God.²⁰

When the gods act upon the D&D world it is only through their clerics; the gods themselves are transcendent. Although our God acts directly on the earth more frequently than the D&D gods do, He also remains transcendent. This is shown in Scripture. God descends on the mountain and the people are terrified; in Exodus 33 Moses is not allowed to see God's face because he would not be able to live; the apostle Paul writes, "now we see in part, then we will see clearly."²¹ As transcendent beings the D&D gods are fundamentally discontinuous with the rest of the D&D beings. They do not have attack points or health points or the ability/need to "level up."²² This discontinuity is good and instates a healthy respect for the divine. The notion of the divine being too much for this world to comprehend also appears in the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, two widely respected Christian authors of the 20th century. Lewis, in That Hideous Strength, describes a scene in which a holy druid becomes possessed by the great spirits ruling the planets.²³ These spirits do not, however, fully enter the person or even the earth. They are simply too big. The same is true in The Silmarillion, by Tolkien. Although mighty powers of God (the Valar) descend to earth and play a significant role in its creation and sustenance, they only enter earth in a fraction of their true glory, as the earth is not able to handle their full manifestation. *Divinity = transcendent* is an idea common to my theology and D&D theology.

²⁰ The D&D gods are only complex/diverse *because* of their sheer numbers; if they are not taken as a collective they become quite static and boring. Our concept of the divine (the real God) is much greater because He is so many things by Himself! "The LORD our God, the LORD is one." – Deuteronomy 6:4

²¹ 1st Corinthians 13:12

²² Angels, demons, and devils do possess these abilities, though. Perhaps they are a sort of half-god, half-creature being, a sort of stepping-stone for a character to relate to a god.

²³ The chapter is titled *The Descent of the Gods*.

However, although the gods of D&D are different in many ways from the rest of their world (including other spiritual beings,) in other ways they remain quite human-like. They are not omniscient in any sense of the word; they are not omnipotent, just more potent than the rest of the population; they have rivalries; they are petty and squabble with each other. In fact, the chief reason Garl Glittergold (god of gnomes) and Kurtulmak (god of kobolds) do not get along is because Garl, a renowned prankster, once collapsed Kurtulmak's cavern as a joke, but Kurtulmak did not take the joke kindly. They have been sworn enemies ever since.²⁴ Excepting the scope of the prank, this sounds like the experience of any number of college students living in residence halls! (This pettiness is not limited to the D&D pantheon; the Greek, Roman, and Norse gods all had similar interrelations.) As pettiness is frowned upon in humans, why would it be an acceptable characteristic for the divine? I think that it is so frequently accepted because people are then able to excuse their own shortcomings.

Although some gods created a specific race to reflect themselves,²⁵ more often than not the gods are actually reflections of the characters. *We do this too!* In America some people conceptualize God as anti-Muslim or anti-Semitic. Many people see Jesus as a social justice advocate. I have family that is convinced that God votes a straight Republican ballot. Everyone's response to the question "What would Jesus drive?" is the make and model of their own car.²⁶ God is a god of wealth. God is a god among the poor. Paintings of Jesus come in white, black, Asian, and Hispanic versions. If Jesus is like us and Jesus is always right, then we

²⁴ Cook, Monte, *The Player's Handbook*, 107.

²⁵ Moradin, god of dwarves, "forged the first dwarves out of metal and gems and breathed life into them." - Ibid.

²⁶ Actually, Jesus would drive a silver 1997 Saturn wagon. It has good gas mileage (good for the environment) can carry lots of people (to church) or luggage (to visit family and build community or to camp and enjoy nature), and looks nice (reflecting our God-given appreciation of aesthetics).

do not have to consider that we might need to change and become more like someone else. (For me, Jesus obviously challenges conventional institutions and presuppositions.) For the gods to be so much like us, just with more power, is to validate our own shortcomings. If the gods hate our enemies then we are allowed to be unashamedly self-centered.. Such a depiction of the gods is demeaning to them – they become nothing more than a bully on the playground or a mob boss in the ghetto – and this takes meaning away from our worship of them. Of course, D&D characters do not worship their gods because of the gods’ majesty in the first place...

The religion of D&D is highly pragmatic and power-oriented. A character worships the god to which they are most similar, or the one will bring them the greatest benefit.²⁷ Gods are not worshipped because they are awesome or in gratitude for blessings already given or because a god is essentially *to be worshipped*, but because worshipping = divine favor = personal success. This is wrong, but I wonder if it is very different from what we do in our own world. The “health and wealth gospel” is blatantly orchestrated to satisfy people’s felt needs, but other forms of Christianity cater to a person’s whims, if less obviously. For example, many people consider the divine from a distance and think, “There is something really Good about *that*, something higher, something worth worshipping.” And so the basic human psychological need for meaning is satisfied by any old notion of the transcendent and we worship in order to perpetuate that satisfaction. Some people have a need to be right, and so they form God in their own image to validate their already established beliefs. We worship and serve gods made in our image and find our worship to be ultimately *self*-gratifying, just like in D&D.

²⁷ Thus, an adventurer setting out on a journey will sacrifice to Fharlanghn, the god of roads, regardless of whether Fharlanghn is their primary god or not. The gods seem not to mind this arrangement, so long as their followers do not sacrifice to other gods that they do not like.

Another problem with D&D gods is that they interact with people only on an individual basis, not as a community. This is strongly at odds with the Christian message. We are called to be part of a community, like various parts and organs of a body working together.²⁸ A worshipper in the D&D world will make sacrifices and pray alongside other petitioners, but their religious life remains highly individualized. They are not called to any salvation because they are part of God's kingdom, but because they have personal, individual merit that is pleasing to the god. Members of an adventuring party need not worship the same god, so long as none of their gods have rivalries with other gods.

It is ironic that religion in D&D is so individualized, as the rest of the game is so strongly communal. When adventuring it is essential for a person to be part of a company if their quest is to succeed. A wizard may cast powerful spells against a group's foes, but they need a fighter or a barbarian to protect them while they do so. If group members are injured or poisoned and there is no cleric to heal them, they will likely die. If a group kills all the monsters and then is restored to full health – but does not have a rogue to pick the lock of the treasure chamber – their journey and battle were without cause. It is a sad irony that while most of a D&D inhabitant's life is strongly communal, his religion is compartmentalized and staunchly individualistic.²⁹

Although D&D theology conceives of the divine as primarily personal (and with strikingly anthropomorphic personalities), there is also a conception of the divine as non-personal. The monk-class represents a solitary contemplative spirituality, one that surpasses the servant-like piety of the cleric or even the demeaning notion that the gods are like us and have personality. The concept of *ki* sounds very like the notion of *mana* or *baraka* or the *yin* and

²⁸ See 1st Corinthians 12:12-31.

²⁹ Still – considering our cultural experience and understanding of religion – it is not surprising that “D&D society” is communal “D&D ideal religion” is an individual affair.

yang. These are notions strongly present in certain forms of Buddhism and the martial arts. A person accumulates this “aura of blessedness” through personal focus, good works, or some other merited achievement. Again, I think this concept of the divine is partly true. God is certainly un-nameable³⁰ and exists in a state beyond our human personalities and comprehension, but I do not think that equates to non-personality. After all, the God revealed in Scripture has quite a strong personality! He is jealous, He has favorites, He is open to persuasion, He likes incense, and He has a sense of humor. There must be a balance struck between humanity being similar to God and God being something fundamentally Other than us. D&D attempts to solve this problem in a overly simplified way by having a separate god for each characteristic and portraying *ki* as the overarching power.³¹

There are three significant dangers in D&D theology is that it is 1) almost exclusively pragmatic and 2) the gods are merely humans with bigger muscles 3) spiritual forces can be manipulated to one’s benefit and often in opposition to one’s adversaries. The first two ultimately elevate individuals and encourage a self-centered existence. In a game where gaining personal power and acquiring more treasure are already prominent goals, self-centered religion serves to perpetuate and reinforce the harmful attitude. Sounds familiar. The third danger appeals greatly to our human fascination with the occult and longing for power.

Ministry

³⁰ This idea also appears in Scripture (Hebrews would not allow the name of God to even be pronounced) and in literature (in C.S. Lewis’ The Horse and His Boy the simple word “Myself” is used by God in answer to the question “Who are you?” and three distinct intonations of that word convey depth of meaning that the mere letters never could.

³¹ It is like saying, “When all the gods are added together the sum is zero.” Although this sounds very deep and spiritual it is ultimately a hollow concept of deity. Arguing with such a Zen-like belief is like boxing against a balloon – just because it refuses to lay down and die does not mean there is anything of substance in it.

There will be three main aspects of my ministry to people in the D&D community: Relationship, Community, and Intellect. The first step will be developing an understanding of what the D&D players' "real-life world" is like and how it intersects with their "D&D world." Because each person has a different story it will be important to be in relationship with him or her.³² I would spend time with them getting to know their stories and sharing my own. People are not interested in what I have to say or in how I live unless I have established some credibility with them, especially if what I have to say challenges their worldview. I would try to learn what the world of D&D means to these people. During this time I would be working toward a mutually trusting relationship.³³

Trust is a key element of the D&D world. Although it is necessary for characters to cooperate in their adventures, there is a constant risk that some characters will betray others in a ploy for their own gain. A character who has adventured with other characters many times prior will know who they can trust and will be willing to take greater risks in their company.

Trust is also a key element in the real-world life of the stereotypical D&D player. Many of them are socially marginalized at their school or workplace; they are not the varsity athletes or hotshot corporate climbers. Although D&D players may have friends outside the D&D circle, there remains a distinction between those who are in/out of the D&D world. Significantly, many who are "in" with the D&D group are "out" in the other social circles of their peers.³⁴ The D&D

³² In almost all situations not concerned with a person's immediate physical needs credibility and trust must be established before effective ministry can occur.

³³ Such a relationship takes time to develop. We are not talking about a six-hour conversion service here; I envision several months or perhaps years living with these people as my friends before they are ready to *really* trust me with genuine conversations about their spirituality.

³⁴ This observation is not the result of any academic or scientific data collection. Rather, I speak solely from my personal experience. I am friends with several people who are heavily into D&D; I like these friends and care for them greatly, but they *are* rather nerdy and have

crowd knows what it is to be socially ostracized. Such people have *strong* defense mechanisms against “being taken in again” and made the butt of yet another joke. To earn the trust of a person who has built up walls against being teased – especially for something like D&D, a world in which they have power – takes time and honesty. I will not play these people falsely by merely pretending to like them so that I can “win them for Christ;” I will be honest in my friendship with them.³⁵

While relationships must be developed with the individual persons in the D&D world, the notion of community must not be abandoned. In their gaming adventures D&D players function in a world where rewards and consequences are frequently communal,³⁶ and their real world experience is sometimes highly communal (when they are with their D&D friends) and sometimes painfully lonely. Not only is community an idea that resounds strongly with the D&D player, it is one of the fundamental characteristics of Christ’s body on earth.³⁷ There is comfort, strength, and safety in community, and we most clearly see God in each other.

In the D&D world, the cleric class understands this best. If a cleric serves a specific god, he is *always* part of a church and is devoted to bettering the god’s church.³⁸ The cleric is part of that group and draws the majority of his power from his church and his god.³⁹ A cleric does not

frequently been made fun of for their interests and social skills, sometimes behind their back and sometimes to their faces.

³⁵ This is not really hard for me, as I think the “nerdy” people are some of the most fun to be around. I am interested in much of the same stuff they are and think in many of the same ways they do. Also, the social plight of the nerd is familiar to me on a firsthand basis.

³⁶ “As you step on the land mine, a cloud of poisonous gas fills the room, taking three health points from all members of your party...”

³⁷ Again, 1st Corinthians 12:12-31. Also, chapter six of Van Rheezen’s Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts deals with the community aspects of Kingdom Theology vis-à-vis both individualistic conversion and demonic powers.

³⁸ Some clerics will serve a general principle of “goodness” rather than a specific god. In these rare cases the pseudo-cleric is a fusion of a monk’s philosophy and a cleric’s fighting style.

³⁹ Cook, Monte, Player’s Handbook, 30.

fight as an individual, but as a representative of his church. Again, Tolkien portrays the character of a “servant warrior” exceptionally well. In The Lord of the Rings a powerful demon attacks the group of heroes on their quest to rid their world of evil. The leader of the group, a powerful wizard named Gandalf, faces the demon and says, “You cannot pass. I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass!”⁴⁰ And the demon does not pass. Although Gandalf is a potent wizard in his own right, for this climactic battle against a terrible foe he calls on a power beyond himself. It is only through that power that Gandalf is triumphant. It is because Gandalf is a servant of Iluvatar (Tolkien’s name for Creator God) that he has power to wield the Secret Fire of Iluvatar and defeat evil. It is because of his place in the Kingdom of Light that Gandalf is able to vanquish the dark.

Being part of the Kingdom of God gives Christians power beyond ourselves; taking on Jesus and being filled with Him makes us into something entirely different. The name of Jesus is powerful not as a talisman or incantation but as an indicator of the fundamental change that has come over us. For such a change to take place, though, relationship is paramount. This kind of relationship with a deity is strikingly different from that experienced by a D&D character. No more can deity be treated like a vending machine or a lottery ticket. Because He is a Real Person, relationship with Jesus 1) can be trusted and 2) takes a lot more work. Part of that work involves being part of the church.

D&D players are intellectual people. The game itself is mentally demanding and spurs its players to grow in areas of imagination and logic. They are interested in philosophical conversation. I would adapt Paul’s speech in Acts 17:22-31. “D&D players! I see that you are deeply spiritual in many ways. You care about Higher Powers and your monks even dedicate

⁴⁰ Tolkien, The Lord of The Rings, 344.

themselves to accessing the unnamable realms of the spiritual world through contemplative prayer. You know there is something beyond the gods of your temples, but even these monks cannot describe *ki* or tell you how to find it. I tell you that this Spiritual Presence is an actual being wants to find you and has in fact already come to earth in the person of Jesus the Jew!" I would probably not actually stand up at a D&D party and utter that speech in a booming voice, but I can imagine that conversations with D&D players about spirituality might travel down that road.

I would also encourage D&D players to embrace the mystery of the God Who Is Real. These players see the problems with supposedly divine beings that are really just like people with an over-abundance of power. The simplification and vindictive nature of the divine in D&D is readily answered by a God who is both mysterious and caring.

I have a different theology to present in opposition to the individualistic materialism of D&D.⁴¹ Kingdom Theology is an excellent way of understanding the world and God's interaction with it for several reasons. Kingdom Theology is Biblically based; this is a strong benefit because the Bible gives players a way to view their world vis-à-vis the relativity that pervades the D&D world. Kingdom Theology also does not separate the natural and supernatural world; D&D players realize that the supernatural world has powerful effect on the natural world and will be frustrated by an overly-rationalistic Christianity in which God does not engage the physical world. The nature of God and His power in this world acts against the demonic and self-centered forces of D&D. They are shown to be weak and hollow compared with the true power of God. Finally, Kingdom Theology is very community oriented, an already-established point of contact with the D&D community.

⁴¹ Here I rely heavily and unabashedly on Van Rheezen's Communicating Christ, pgs. 139-141.

Conclusion

There is danger in the world of D&D. It appeals to people who are often marginalized and offers them mystical power through spiritual practices. It promotes an attitude of fear by portraying the divine as a group of petty, vindictive beings that must be appeased. It diminishes the worship of divine beings into favor-grabbing pragmatism. However, these dangers are not exclusive to players of D&D. They appear all throughout our materialist, power-oriented, individualistic, American society. The world of Dungeons and Dragons does at least include a concept of ultimate good and evil and a hint that there may be something more to our world than we perceive. People involved in that world are hungry to encounter the “something more” that they have not yet encountered.

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