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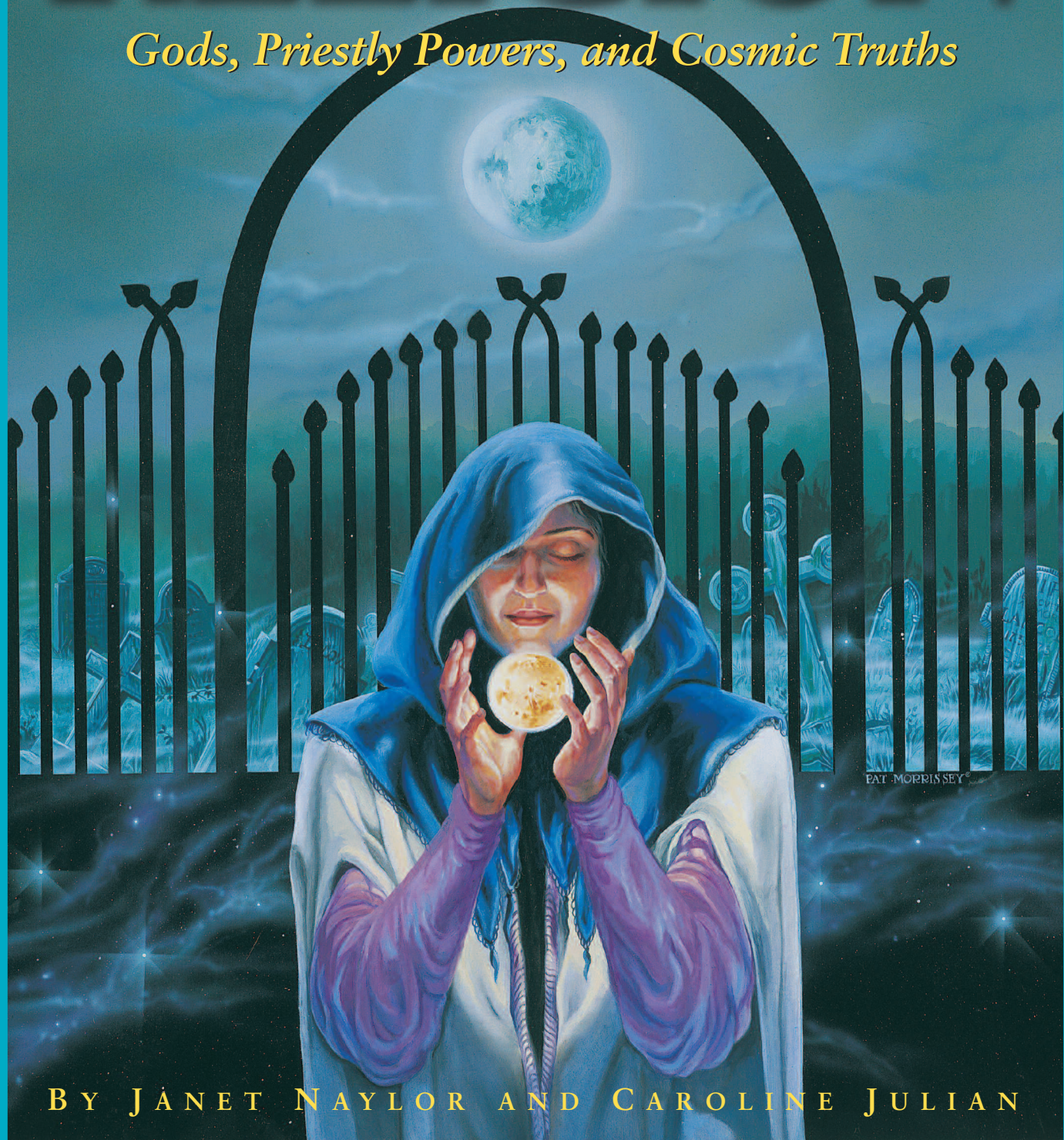
RELIGION

Gods, Priestly Powers, and Cosmic Truths

BY JANET NAYLOR AND CAROLINE JULIAN

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

THE UNIVERSE.
SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.

So you want to dance with the gods. You want a priest who can call down bolts of power from the skies. You want to cure the diseased and dying, and you want hordes of fanatic followers to bow to your every command.

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There are also sections on designing clerical characters, and rules for the magical powers granted to the faithful.

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GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition Revised is *required* to use this supplement in a *GURPS* campaign. The material in *GURPS Religion* can be used with *any* roleplaying system.

The Scratchers Upon Vellum:

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GURPS

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INTRODUCTION

Questions about who we are, where we come from, how the world works, and so on, are the source of myth. Stories about gods and heroes, monsters darker and more fearful than any that might crawl out of the night – myths fascinated, entertained and comforted our ancestors. These stories provided explanations for the workings of things, for each person's place in the world, and even for disasters and good fortune. Because myths offer explanations of the divine and the supernatural, they form the backbone of most religions. People gather to hear and retell myths, to pray in a set fashion, to act out mythical events in remembrance. Eventually traditions of worship develop. In time, the true meaning behind the ritual may be forgotten. New ways are often found to glorify and serve the divine and these are added to the growing repertoire of religious rites. Like people of the real world, people of game worlds will have their own beliefs, their own answers to the basic questions of life. And most likely they will have religion, be it based in mysticism and superstition, or rational science and fact.

Religion and its associated mythology can add depth to a campaign setting – a richer texture of potential conflicts and the source of fervently-held beliefs. Legends and myths can provide history, magical places and treasures and even hints to solving current problems. Churches can send their clerics and followers on particular quests and missions. And a strong basis of faith can strengthen any character concept, providing moral and ethical codes of behavior, and allowing for all sorts of interesting roleplaying potential.

This book is organized into three sections. The first section discusses the creation of religions – the formulation of the cosmos, myths, deities and religions themselves. The second deals directly with rules for clerical (or religious) characters, including three different systems for handling divinely-inspired magics. The last section presents a series of sample religions, drawing on the information in earlier chapters.

One need only consider history to see the importance of religion in this world. Detailed game worlds are no different. Whether the genre be fantasy, space, horror, historical or something else again, religion will play a part!

About the Authors

Caroline Julian

Caroline lives in Toronto, Ontario, where she works as the Games and Imports manager for the Silver Snail. She holds BSc honors from the University of Toronto in anthropology and archeology, and has worked for the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture on local salvage digs. She collects everything: fiction and reference books, alternative comics, games, ceramics, original art, miniature figures, mugs, Japanese animation, thimbles, tins, movies, art deco perfume bottles and housemates. She started GMing in 1980 and roleplays extensively.

Janet Naylor

Janet also lives in Toronto, Ontario, along with three dogs and a cat, in the very same house as Caroline, where she is presently engaged in a bitter battle for wall space. She is the co-author of **GURPS Fantasy**, and a frequent victim of Caroline's GMing. She works as a software developer, and moonlights as a sysop on Compuserve's RPGames Forum (type "GO RPGAMES"). She has been roleplaying and GMing since 1980. A recent immigrant to Canada, she has recently discovered the joys of herb gardening.

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GURPS Spirits

This book was first published in 1994. In 2001, SJ Games published **GURPS Spirits,** which approaches similar topics from a different direction. The fundamental distinction between the two is that this book discusses *gods,* and notes that mortals might classify some gods as "spirits," while **Spirits** discusses *spirits,* and notes that mortals might worship some spirits as "gods." Significantly, **Spirits** does not assume that every entity known as a "god" is ineffable – or even notably powerful.

A consequence of this is that **Spirits** does not attempt to hand-wave the abilities of gods. It assigns full game statistics to spirits – something that this book avoids. This contrast can be used to good effect in campaigns where the PCs are ascended spirits, demigods, and the like: use this book to handle either end of the "cosmic power spectrum" – cosmology at one end, the earthly belief systems of mortal worshippers at the other – and use **Spirits** for the power levels in between.

Another feature of **Spirits** is that magic-using priests are not assumed to be totally outclassed by and thus in awe of their gods. This opens up the possibility of bargaining or even coercion. The ritual magic system included in **Spirits** is built on this premise, and differs radically from the divine magic systems in Chapter 6. Again, the two can complement one another: the **Spirits** rules are ideal for shamans and priests of deities of limited potency (e.g., ancestor spirits or nature spirits), while the rules in this book work well for the traditional miracle-worker or fantasy cleric – and both can be used in the same campaign.

eities are beings of supernatural powers or attributes who are thought to control some part of nature or reality, or to personify some force or activity. In the male or general form, they are known as gods; in the female form, they are called goddesses.

The concept of gods or deities is universal. They are the center of most religions, the driving force behind belief and faith, the inspiration for the spiritual nature of a people.

When the GM creates a world, he should consider its deities early on, when defining the cosmology. The deities create the cosmos; their powers and attributes shape the world. Alternatively, the GM may decide that there are no supernatural forces, that deities are simply a construct of society, and that their worship might also be a construct – a means to gain power over others. But this in itself is a decision with consequences that must be considered.

An example of a deity created using this chapter appears in the sidebar *The Duality of Dhala,* p. 153.

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Origins

Where deities come from is the stuff of creation myths and legends (see *Creation Myths,* beginning on p. 7). There are many different choices.

Finite

Deities were created by the same act which created the world. There will be no *new* gods. This scheme tends to foster powerful, unchanging deities of archetypal qualities. Since they are finite and determined, it is quite likely that they represent basic fundamental aspects of the world – the four elements, perhaps, or other abstract forces.

Sexual Reproduction

Deities are created by sexual reproduction among older gods. Usually this process begins with some sort of primal mother and father figure (Mother Earth and Father Sky, for instance) who produce offspring. These children then mate with other gods and goddesses (or even mortals) to produce new deities.

This scheme requires multiple divine forces, with strong anthropomorphic aspects so that they may reproduce in a "normal" fashion. (That may not restrict the manner in which the gods give birth however; offspring could be born through any part of the body, or even vomited out.) Often these deities are quite human, with temperaments, strengths and weaknesses to match. As they are "born," so, most likely, do they "die," and indeed it is possible for new deities to replace older ones. The cosmos of reproductive deities is a changing one of highs and lows, triumphs and defeats and mixed alliances. The Greek pantheon is perhaps the best-known example.

Accidental

Deities occur by accident, usually as a byproduct of some other action or force (often the creation of the world). There is an element of chance here, a randomness that will probably determine the nature of the deities. They were not necessary, or predestined, but accidental. Often these deities have limited powers, and are subject to higher powers of fate and chance.
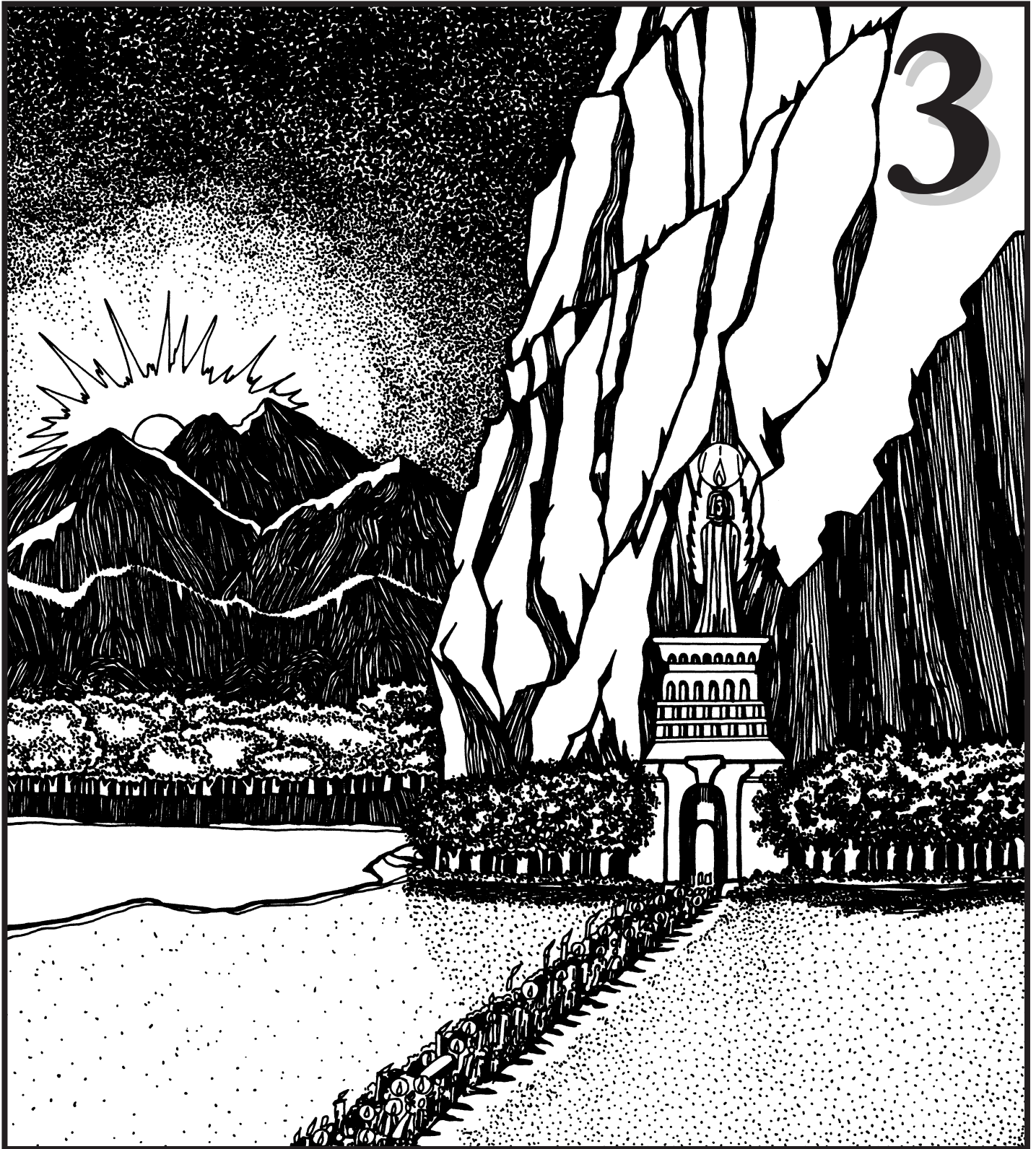
DEVELOPMENT

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ow religions begin and develop, how other cultural influences affect them and how they change the culture around them are all issues (among many others) that the GM should consider when designing a game-world religion. Looking at the role religions play in our world can give a GM some ideas on where to start.

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Building a Religion

Once the GM has decided on the cosmology and gods of the game world, it is time to create the religions. Often it is easiest to work backward: figure out what the religion *is,* then decide how it got that way. The GM needs to consider not only the basic nature of the religion, but also how it fits into society. The most obvious expressions of a religion are its ceremonies and symbols (see *Symbols,* pp. 65-87). But how does it interact with society and other religions? Answering these questions will help add a sense of realism and depth to any campaign.

Beliefs

The first step in designing a religion is to decide what its central beliefs are – what view of the world it gives to its followers, how it answers the fundamental questions of life and how it treats those who question it.

All religions have tenets. These can be traditions, scholarly writings, oral histories, commandments and laws. These *doctrines* form a system of principles and laws which state the fundamental beliefs and policies of the religion.

A *dogma* is a doctrine accepted by the followers of a religion as a god-revealed truth. A dogma bolsters the present position of the religion and is supported by both tradition and scripture, as well as being compatible with other accepted doctrines.

Purpose of Life

Perhaps the first questions that anyone might ask concern why we are here, who created us, and whether it was for a specific purpose, on a whim, or by accident. In many cases, the answers tie directly into the mythology of the religion. The creation of life is just another step in the creation of the world, and life's purpose is probably told in myth and legend (see *Creation of Life,* pp. 16-21).

Some religions impose harsh servitude upon their believers, forcing discipline and great sacrifices from them. Others encourage only what people desire anyway – wealth, power, health, prosperity. Some, like Hinduism, define clear-cut paths that restrict each person to a particular position in society.

As important as what the religion teaches its people about the purpose of life is the effect of the answer on believers. Those who believe themselves to be the chosen of the gods are more likely to put their own interests and survival ahead of others. Those who are taught that they are superior to other life forms may abuse them, or may see themselves as shepherds or caretakers. Those who view all life as interrelated are more likely to be tolerant of others.

And not all answers need be steeped in mysticism or "faith." A future religion may use rational or scientific answers: The world was created according to various principles or "laws" of nature. It lives and breathes and continues according to these same laws, no event being independent of a cause or an

The Knights Templar

A classic example of the conflict between State and Church – and how both may change drastically over time – can be seen in the history of the Knights Templar.

The Knights Templar was a crusading order which took part in a religious war in the Holy Land. Originally called "The Order of Poor Knights of the Temple of Solomon," it was founded by a group of pious soldiers around the year 1120. They protected pilgrims and lived under religious rule, taking oaths of poverty, chastity and obedience. The organization grew rapidly at a time when trained knights were rare, its greatest strength being its feudal associations. They did not recruit from the upper nobility, but from the more obscure warrior families. In the beginning, distinctions of class were somewhat vague, but by the 13th century an aspirant to the order had to be the son of a knight and his lady.

As the need for trained troops grew, the ethical considerations of the order were laid aside. Different rankings – similar in tone to feudal ones – grew. Beneath the rank of Knight there came to be *sergeants,* also know as serving brothers; esquires; *freres casaliers,* rural brothers; and *freres de metier,* servant brothers. The knights came to live a life even more privileged than the secular nobles. By this time the Templars had become the companions and servants of royalty, their humble origins virtually forgotten.

By the end of the 13th century the Templars had drawn a great deal of criticism, most notably by William, Archbishop of Tyre. They had gained a reputation for pride and greed. In addition, they had made the serious political mistake of remaining loyal to the Church during conflicts between the Papacy and Emperor Frederick II.

DIVINE MAGIC

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Ceremony: A gathering of clerics and worshipers for religious purpose, often including the casting of a clerical spell.

Clerical Ranking: The cleric's rank in the hierarchy of the church. The cleric's level of Clerical Investment.

Clerical Investment: The social/political advantage of being a cleric within a religion. Represents status and influence within the church and is measured in levels, or ranks, depending on the religion.

Consecrate: To dedicate an object or area to the divine. To focus the power of the deity within an object or area. The clerical equivalent of enchantment.

Consecrated Objects: Sacred Objects (see below) which have been cleansed or blessed by the deity's power for use in various clerical magics.

Divine Intervention: Direct intervention of the deity or its associated powers within the world.

Holy Object: Sacred Object (see below) with the ability to cast one or more spells common to the deity. Clerical magic item.

Investiture: see Power Investiture, below.

Investiture Link: Spiritual link with the divine created during the Power Investiture.

Object of Power: Holy Object (see above) which creates an area of High or Very High Sanctity (see p. 102) around it.

Power Investiture or *Investiture:* Rite which imparts the power of the divine to the cleric, allowing magical spells and abilities. Clerical equivalent to Magical Aptitude.

Ritual: Formal symbolic act associated with the casting of a spell or the petitioning of the deity. Sometimes used interchangeably with the word "spell."

Sacred Object: Any object consecrated to a deity.

Sacred Vessel: Personal Sacred Object used to store the combined power of the deity and the cleric.

Sanctity: The measure of the deity's power in a given locale.

D o deities shake the world with their powers? Bestow miracles upon the worthy? Grant their faithful servants smaller aspects of their powers to call upon at will? Answer calls from their followers?

In certain game worlds, the power of the gods manifests in very concrete forms, easily perceived by all. In these worlds, clerics will be powerful figures, respected by all, able to draw upon the supernatural power or force personified by their particular deity or faith.

How true divine magic works is closely tied to the design of the cosmos, and the interaction of the divine forces within it. Prior to play, the GM must fully design this magic for each religion in the game world which manifests it.

To this end, a series of different approaches to divine magic is presented in this chapter. GMs should use whichever one best suits their campaign, modifying or expanding upon the basic guidelines as needed.

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Clerical Magic

Clerics draw upon the supernatural power or force personified by their particular deity in order to create predictable, reoccurring effects known as spells. Unlike "pure" magic, clerical magic is not at all affected by the mana rating of an area. It may, however, be affected by the strength of the deity in a given location, the time of the year, the number of faithful present, the strength of the cleric's devotion to the deity, and so forth.

Power Investiture

Before a cleric can cast a spell, he must undergo a special rite known as a Power Investiture in which he is imbued with the deity's power (see *Advantages,* pp. 93-94). This ceremony is designed to attune the cleric to the power of the deity, allowing him to draw upon that power in specialized rituals, and focus it into spells. Thus while the cleric initiates the spell, it is, in truth, the deity which powers it. Therefore it is *always* the prerogative of the deity to deny this power, or to manipulate it in unexpected ways. Clerical magic is highly prone (much more so than "pure" magic) to variant effects due to circumstances. Clerics who break faith with their deity (as opposed to the church – it is possible to do one without the other) may find that all their spells fail until they make atonement in one way or another.

The investiture is a two-way link: as the cleric may draw upon the deity, the deity may also draw upon the life-energies of the cleric (in terms of Fatigue, or in dire cases, directly upon HT), or may use the cleric as a channel through which to draw in the willingly-given energies of the faithful. This is the mechanism through which some deities gain power from their followers. Some deities might never do this, while others may consider this sort of "sacrifice" commonplace.

Spells

Clerics use the same spell list as mages. However, clerical spells draw their power from a different source, and vary from their magical equivalents in a number of other ways.

The Nature of the Spell

Clerical magics are an appeal to the divine, an expression of faith and belief. In this, though the end effect may be the same, they differ greatly from their pure magical counterparts.