

## Magic and Religion in World Building, Part 1



World builders from a western cultural heritage tend to think of magic and religion in a particular way. What they have in common is that religion fundamentally deals with things of the mind and spirit, or the heart and soul[1], and magic also deals with “unseen” things, especially with supernatural forces.

But where they depart, they are radically different. Whereas religion is, at its heart, spiritual in nature, the main concern of magic is to effect change in the world around us. If a curse is cast, even if it works through supernatural agency, the result is a person becoming physically ill or dying. If there is a drought, a weather spell will make it rain, and so on. Regardless of how the metaphysics of these things work, the end point is almost always some change or effect in the material world.[2]

From this perspective, then, westerners frame religion and magic from a dualistic, Cartesian point of view. Religion addresses one set of needs and works in one particular sphere; magic addresses a different set of needs and functions in a different sphere.

### **The Hybrid Combination of Religion and Magic**

World builders often mingle these two, or try to create a bridge between them. A work of fiction might feature a priest-king who is both religious leader and mighty caster of spells bestowed by his powerful deity. Role-playing game designers are no strangers to tracking magic powers given to mortals by various gods, developing a body of “clerical magic” that stands apart from

“regular” magic use both in scope of powers and their religious origin.

However, this blending of religion plus magic often results in a hybridized form of religious magic which merely spackles over the basic dualism lurking in the background. This is especially evident in rpg design work, where the function of clerical magic is typically a mirror of regular (wizardly) magic, simply pasted on to a religious structure as justification for the cleric knowing spells.

Clergy gained magical powers in gaming not only because this fit in well with fantasy tropes, but because it enabled clerics to aid their adventuring parties (for instance, with healing spells), and to have some special powers granted by their gods. The basic structure of spellcasting developed for magic-users was simply extended to the clerical class and justified with the rubric “divinely bestowed powers.” Even in fiction, religious magic is often envisioned as a set of specific spells and spell-like powers, thus taking the traditional magical framework of spell-casting and grafting it onto the tree of religion.

### **Consequences of This Paradigm**

And here is where we get into trickle-down consequences for today's generation of fantasy world builders and fiction writers, so many of whom have had their creative imaginations shaped by rpgs in the last many decades.

**1. God-granted Powers.** One consequence is that many writers think of clerics or priest-type characters as *necessarily* having some kind of specific powers or abilities granted by their gods—something magical or supernatural in nature, beyond the ordinary trappings of a priestly class.

This is not the best starting point for designing either religion or magic or a priestly profession, because it is founded on too many borrowed assumptions about the nature of these things. Even the phrase “clerical magic” is bundled up tight with unquestioned cultural bias.

**2. How Magic Functions.** Another consequence is that clerical magical abilities typically function in a way that is very similar to that of wizardly magic, in terms of the nuts and bolts of the process. To take the classic D&D example, there will be a casting time required, a duration of spell effect, a range, certain ingredients or somatic or verbal actions required, and so on.

In part this is a result of the gamification of the process, distilling “spell use” into a game mechanic that can be played at the tabletop. But by the same token, this particular game mechanic has so steeped into collective imaginations that many writers have an unquestioned, underlying assumption that their spell-casters must go through these or similar steps, and that clerical magic will have at least that much in common with wizardly magic.

Taking that as a starting point for designing magical systems, the world builder ends up asking things like “what kind of divine spells does this priest have?” instead of better framing questions like, “how does divine magic work in this priest's culture?”

These consequences incline world builders to create derivative and copy-cat-ish styles of magic for their fictional worlds. This goes beyond the needs of designing for rpg game mechanics, and trickles into works of pure story fiction and even what bunny trails the world builder chooses to follow (or not follow) when trying to invent new magic systems or create a new religion plus associated spells.

In short, this way of thinking about magic and religion has become both entrenched (in some portion of the design community, anyway), and it continues to echo the underlying dualistic view of magic and religion that is a western cultural perspective. This has resulted in a hybridized magic style in our fantasy works that somewhat awkwardly grafts spell-casting onto the religious function.

**3. The Need to Integrate Magic and Religion.** A third consequence is that even if a fiction writer approaches religious magic without any rpg influences to color the picture, our dualistic western thinking still subconsciously frames the issue. We think about how to develop magical abilities in a religious context so the end result makes sense. While that is at root a sensible design concern, it also tacitly treats “magic” and “religion” as separate constructs that must be integrated in some manner.

That is not a bad thing as far as it goes, but I believe it does not go far enough, because the starting point of that thought process is the dualism mentioned earlier. Instead, there is another way to think of magic and religion which avoids the innate separateness of Cartesian duality, and also skips merrily past the default design assumptions of the rpg tradition. This alternative viewpoint enables one to create a magical religion that is far less likely to feel derivative, and which is much easier to grow into a unique take on magic and faith in a setting.

And what, exactly, is this different conceptual framework? I am speaking here of a "magico-religious system" of belief melded very closely with magic. Anthropologists have written about this concept and the role it plays in real-world cultures. In part 2 of this post, I'll talk about that alternative magic/religion model and some implications it has for world building.

I'll update this with a link to the post when it is published. (If you are on the WBA mailing list, you'll get an announcement when the post is up.)

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1. Even though one can point to religious strictures that affect life in the material and social world, those mandates stem from religion's concern for the spiritual life.
  2. There is also an “informational” class of magic—divination, clairvoyance, and so on—that I would argue still takes as its meat and drink images or information drawn from the material world, either in present time or some other time frame future or past. Hence, this class of magic also works via interaction with physical reality, although the effect is not as obvious as in, say, the casting of a fireball.