

Thoughts about Religion

To Start...

It may seem strange to start off the inaugural column by grumbling about a single box on the character sheet. Fear not, the next column will have the bulk of my argument regarding the need for an overhaul of the system and background and future columns will elaborate upon them as well as respond to any comments offered by readers. A more auspicious start would be to look impartially at one small thing about the current edition of WFRP, look at its relevance and dismiss it out of hand, and then look for solutions.



That Which Irks Me So...

So what is this small box that offends me so? Those of you owning only the 1st edition War-hammer Fantasy Role Play hardback don't have to worry about it, because the box is missing from the original WFRP character sheet. However, the rest of you can go ahead and turn your rulebooks to the character sheet's back page, for there rests the offending box. Its there on all the other character sheets, the one in the WFRP softback, the old GW character sheet pack, and in the new character sheet in Apocrypha 2: Chart of Darkness. It's in the background box, and its labeled "Religion".

The Problem Considered: Real and Old World Perspectives...

At first glance, it should seem perfectly normal for there to be a box for religion. I suppose I'll take the controversial stance of saying that entire box should be removed from the character sheet - that its existence doesn't convey any of the feel of the WFRP world.

First: The existence of a box labeled religion is more of a reflection of our own understanding. Western religions are primarily monotheistic, each making a claim for its own legitimacy as the sole vehicle for divine truth. After all, how many of us consider ourselves practicing Sunni Roman Catholics, or Jewish Southern Baptists? Now I am in danger of letting this element of my argument detract from my main argument, so I should note exceptions do exist and re-ligions aren't as monolithic and dogmatic as they may seem. Nonetheless, religions for Westerners seem to be more of an either/or proposition rather than polysynthetic, meaning that we tend to think "Which religion" are you rather than "Which religions do you practice?".

Old Worlders think differently - I doubt most of them would claim to be of one religious faith unless they were directly members of the clergy. Now, I don't doubt that most people would favor one or two deities, but Old Worlders wouldn't fail to pay the other deities a fair share of attention. For the Old Worlders, all deities are real and to be revered; although a handful may be closer to their hearts than others, it is wise to appease most of them.



In our world, religion is a matter of faith, in the Old World it is a matter of fact. The will of the deities is manifested in the wonders their clerics wield, magically healing wounds, powerful artifacts, and acts impossible for mortal humans, such as flight or teleporting over great distances. The will of the deities is evident in the omens deities send, dreams that their servants receive, the raven perched on a grave, a white stag in a forest clearing. And the will of the deities is enforced by not only their mortal servants, but by their divine servants as well, angels and numina, beastmen and daemons.

In the Old World only fools and madmen doubt the existence of the gods. Whether or not the gods exist is not a question that concerns Old Worlders; the question that the Old Worlders ask is: "How can I avoid or appease the gods?" Some gods offer improvement in their devotees' lives, such as Shallya whose tender mercies heal the suffering of her petitioners, and it is these deities that Old Worlders constantly revere. Other deities are turned to when they can offer mortals something in return. While a sailor may offer a prayer to Mana'an and toss in a brass penny or a few drops of ale into the sea, a merchant probably will only offer a prayer and offering to Mana'an when a ship of carrying his goods sets sail. These deities that touch people's lives in a more casual manner are only paid due respect when mortals want the divine to intercede on their behalf, such as their blessing for an endeavor or as a means of escaping misfortune. There are those deities who people fear, never speaking their names and pretending they don't exist.



These deities never mentioned but always present, and when evil befalls the world the desperate and the deranged turn to them for salvation. Those seeking wealth in hard times may turn to murder and the worship of Khaine, while those seeking to avoid the plague may feverishly offer grim gifts to Nurgle, or those seeking opportunity in times of change may appease Tzeentch.

The mortals of the Old World are constantly interacting with their gods on a regular basis, revering some, bargaining, appeasing, or shunning others. In a week a mortal could praise and curse two dozen gods. Some of these gods may be given attention daily, even hourly, while others are given no more than a mere utterance once a week on a day important to that deity - and that chant being more routine or afterthought than any real symbol of devotion. The world's deities know they have no monopoly on the devotion of their followers and thus must constantly interact with the pool of potential worshippers to ensure they have a congregation. Reminding the public of the primacy of their deity and what their deity can do for the public if worshipped, or in some cases, do to them if they should fail to show the proper respect. Some may rely on fear to keep their temples filled with worshippers and funds, while others seek to be the center of social life and dominating the lives of their followers and making their faith indispensable.

An Institutional Perspective...

A church of Sigmar in the heart of Altdorf will seek to impress its worshippers and offer them some of the grandiose air attached to the church. Worshippers, many of them of noble blood will view the experience as a social affair and an opportunity to interact with their peers. Various families may compete to have family shrines and pews in the church, and the congregation may very well be separated between the wealthy and the poor, with the wealthy upfront and the poor on the fringes of the seating. Sermons may be inspirational or bordering on the entertaining, possibly even flattering and retelling of historical events that many of the families in attendance played a role in. This temple would be concerned with maintaining an air of dignity and ceremony about it and ensure that it plays a central role in the social life of the wealthy, as well as those who aspire to the wealth and view it from afar.

On the other hand, a Sigmar temple in a small town on the fringe of the Empire, has an entirely different agenda. Competing with the Old Faith, Ulric, and Taal, this temple would have to assert its unique role to maintain worshippers. This temple could focus on the importance of unity and devotion to the cult. All worshippers are deemed equal, poor and rich alike sit side by side as a symbol of the strength that the Empire has through its unification. Failure to defend the Empire and the cult would bring back disorder and chaos into the lives here on the border - greenskins would sweep in from the forests and manifestations of chaos abound. The pomp and circumstance of an Altdorf Sigmar temple is a far cry from the necessity of a rural Sigmar temple.



The point is that the cults not only shape and change their devotees, but that the society and its conditions shape the church. The fact that it reads "Sigmar" on a character sheet box doesn't say whether the Sigmar worshipped is a military manifestation, or a scholarly one closer to Verena such as the Order of the Torch, or a mercantile manner such as the Cult of Bogenauer which is tended for by Clerics of Sigmar. The box also fails to really suggest how devout one is in regard to their primary faith.

An Individual Perspective...

To look at it from a personal perspective rather than an institutional perspective, let's look at the religious practices of a merchant living in Bogenhafen. A prominent member of the guild, Marius Feldengraber awakes from his dream and the first thing he sees is a small raven figurine placed prominently near the nightstand. Thousands of such relics lie next to beds throughout the Old World, handcrafted by monks of the Cult of Morr and they are believed to ensure that the bearer sleeps well and that no ill befalls the sleeper that night. Although the raven is the first thing he sees, his first thoughts are of his business, and by association, Handrich the patron of merchants and trade. Every morning begins the same, with a small prayer asking for Handrich's blessing.

After a brief breakfast and a wash, Marius heads off to work. Along the way, he passes a small brick pillar along the way and as per his daily routine he drops a brass penny into the slot on top. A nearby robed figure to whom he pays no attention rings a brass bell and thanks him. The pillar is known as the "poor box" and its placement was quite calculated, between the wealthy residential district and the merchant district, and it was erected by the Cult of Shallya. The act of leaving a penny in the slot is a long tradition, and the ringing of the bell by the acolyte is reputed to scare away any malign spirits and dispel curses and the like.

When he arrives at work, he lights some incense at the shrine in his office, and settles down to begin his day's work. Although he is surrounded by images of Handrich his behavior in the office is dominated by the training of the Cult of Verena. Like many of the other merchants, he was educated by Verenan clerics and he subconsciously carries out little rituals honoring Verena: a small chant when placing his seal on a paper, a litany intended to clear the mind before beginning a letter, and finishing off important correspondence with prayers to Verena that the readers provide the letter with due earnestness. One of the papers he handles provides funds for the River Pilot's fund. The money however actually goes to an out of town Temple of Manann. The Guild of Pilots has long traditionally given insurance money to the Temple of Manann out of the belief that by giving the money to Manann to hold ensures that less river accidents will happen. It is a condition of employment that the employer provide a small amount of money to a fund in the case that a pilot be killed or injured while in the employ of the merchant.

At midday he interrupts his work to attend a mid-day ceremony at the Temple of Sigmar. The visit is far from religious for him however. Dozens of other important merchants arrive to talk business and show respect to Sigmar. The priest presiding over the ceremony has a seat on the town council and appearing at the ceremony is a way to ensure that the priest is favorable towards your interests.

After lunch he heads down for a small ceremony where a ship that he has just purchased is being rechristened. The ship has been renamed after his wife and is a fine barge. As part of the christening a Sigmar acolyte acting on behalf of the local deity Bogenauer is there to preside over the ceremony for a nominal fee. Part of the ritual he uses is dedicated to Karog, the god of rivers, and at the culmination of the ceremony a bottle of filled with the holy water gathered by a Taal pilgrim from the headwaters of the Bogen River are broken over the bow of the ship. All present ask for Bogenauer's, Manann's, and Karog's blessing for the ship and later he offers a gold piece in the Temple of Handrich to ensure that business is good for the barge.

His day finished he returns home. As his halfling cook serves him another excellent meal, he compliments her by repeating a phrase he once heard her say: "Goodness from the oven..." His cook smiles and in her mind finishes the phrase "...warms heart and soul". Marius has no idea that he had said a simple prayer to Esmeralda, the halfling deity of food and family. His belly full, he says a few prayers to Handrich asking for brisk and profitable trade tomorrow, and as he falls asleep, his last sight is that of the raven figurine of Morr guarding him in his sleep.

Our merchant in one day had interacted with a number of faiths, Morr, Handrich, Shallya, Verena, Manann, Sigmar, Taal (in the form of Karog), and Esmeralda. Certainly he favors one god, but he is constantly compelled to interact with others and each in some way benefits from his attention. Certainly this is a more complex and sophisticated religious belief system than the concept of revering one god among many.

In Conclusion...

That box that reads religion offers a bit of character background, but provides the mere crudest allegiance to a single deity. This may work for some games, but in WFRP with its broad pantheons it seems like the question is not how our characters interact with one deity, but how the character feels about and interacts with all the relevant gods. That single box allows us to fill it in and endows us with a false sense of closure in the matter of our character's spiritual beliefs. GM's should be encouraged to imbue the world with rich interaction between mortals, whether it is the pleading of a beggar to the gods, the scattering of coppers by a rich merchant as a thanks to Shallya, or festive holidays honoring a local god. Homes and business should have shrines to multiple deities and the divine should always be present in games in one form or another. Players likewise should be encouraged to immerse themselves fully in the world and revere or fear all the gods.



Perhaps it shouldn't even be thought of as which religion you show devotion to, but which pantheon you hold in high regard, and to which degree you are committed in your daily devotions. The WFRP rulebook seems to suggest this sort of approach under the heading of "Popular Attitudes" in the "Religion & Belief" section yet it seems to be undermined in a very subtle manner by the character sheet.

When WFRP first came out it was notable for the degree of background the game had, especially in comparison to games that were mostly rules, such as Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (doesn't that name sound really odd now?). The background has always been one of the strengths of the system, and as other games moved in the direction of richly detailed worlds, it has come to the point where WFRP has fallen behind. A main rulebook that was once content rich seems to be slipping behind in that regard. And with a wealth of richly detailed backgrounds for other games, particularly the d20 system WFRP has to offer more depth and detail to compete.

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