

Dark Fantasy

RELIGION



Eric Diaz

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
What is this book about?	3
How many tables to use?	3
Shades of grey	3
Credits	3
Where are your gods now?	4
Religious characters	5
Religious clothing	5
Religious powers	5
Taboos, oaths and vows	6
Small prohibitions	7
Religious orders	8
Law, Chaos, and deities	9
The Ethereal Lords (Lawful)	10
The Earthbound Gods (Neutral)	11
The Rulers of the Abyss (Chaotic)	12
Addendum: Magic and Religion	13

What is this book about?

This book is a collection of tables about religion. Taboos, deities, churches, authorities, religious orders, and so on. It deals with clerics, druids, priests, paladins... whatever you want to call them. It is mostly a collection of ideas about magic to be used with your game of choice. You can also use this book to generate ideas for stories, comic books, etc.

The focus is on dark fantasy tropes: flawed heroes, terrible villains, corrupting magic, ominous ruins and damned wastelands.

Although this is mostly a system-less book, it is especially suited for medieval dark fantasy games, such as my own ([Dark Fantasy Basic](#)). It contains a few concepts that are present in “classic” or “traditional” role-playing games, etc. However, these tables are a minority and can be easily “translated” to different systems.

How many tables to use?

When creating your religion or religious characters, it is better to avoid using all tables at once. Start with two or three tables, and try to combine them into something more or less coherent. If the results seem to contradict one another, try to use them anyway. Remember that all religions are full of discrepancies and idiosyncrasies, and while some deities are deemed to be perfect, mortals and their beliefs are not.

Shades of grey

When creating religious cults, sets, etc., it is always worth remembering that few religions will be entirely good or bad in a dark fantasy setting, and that goes double for characters. Every belief will have their share of altruists, idealists, hypocrites, philanthropists, fanatics, opportunists, lapsed believers, heretics, abusers, etc., just to name a few possibilities. With the exception of a few completely maltheist religions that want to bring about the end of the world, there will always be a few shades of grey.

Credits

Written by Eric Diaz. Book cover by Rick Troula.

You can find more of my work in my blog: methodsetmadness.blogspot.com.

©2019 Eric Diaz

Where are your gods now?

Like every other aspect of existence, religion in dark fantasy is seen through a grim perspective. Maybe it is just a ruse to gain some wealth from the unwary, or a big web of mistakes and superstitions. Maybe there are no obvious gods, just random theories about the origin of monsters and magic.

A benevolent, omnipotent deity does not fit a dark fantasy setting. A world that is so filled with monsters, devils and despair indicates that the forces of light are absent, weak or defeated... or at least uncaring. Maybe there is a benevolent God, but he left with all the righteous a long time ago. Maybe the characters are facing hell itself, having forgotten the choices they made in a former incarnation. Maybe the gods made the world and then left it to its inhabitants. Maybe humanity chose suffering out of its own free will.

Another possibility is that gods are all too human, acting out of lust, arrogance or wrath. They can be as shallow and vain as human, seeking praise because it pleases or nourishes them.

Roll one or more times in the table below to find where are your gods now. In any case, the absence of benevolent deities does not mean that they are unimportant. Even fallen deities can still have followers, cults, and even angels and avatars (heroic, desperate or crazy). Remember that the faithful do not necessarily know the truth about their preferred deities, although worshipping a missing or deceased deity is an interesting thing in itself.

d20	State
1	Slain by its foes (demons or even mortals).
2	Abandoned humankind (or only the wicked) to its own fate for its sins.
3	Dead from old age, or turned to ash, stone, etc.
4	Imprisoned by dark forces in the depths of existence.
5	Evil or inimical to humankind. They have our guts.
6	Non-existent , just wishful thinking from puny mortals.
7	Uninterested in this world, is building a better one.
8	Unknown , the whole concept is alien to this setting.
9	Walking the earth as mortals after falling from godhood.
10	Terrorizing the world as gigantic monsters.
11	Gathering followers in order to regain power.
12	Forgotten to all but a select, half-crazy few.
13	False , just powerful immortals or normal humans behind the curtains.
14	Insane , playing dice games with the universe.
15	A projection of our hopes and fears made manifest.
16	Gaolers keeping us from seeing the truth and becoming gods ourselves.
17	Sleeping in the depths until the day of judgment comes.
18	Incomprehensible to mortals, cannot be please, placated or reasoned with.
19	Unborn . One day they will come to save us... hopefully.
20	Disappeared mysteriously.

Religious characters

Religious clothing

Followers of most religions usually identify themselves by wielding holy symbols or wearing it in their clothes, necklaces, banners, etc. Some also use specific clothing. Using full regalia is almost always mandatory for the clergy, especially when performing holy duties, but even laypeople can a few distinct pieces of clothing to display their faith (as a choice or commandment). Tattoos, items and hairstyle can also identify the faithful of any given religion.

There is a very similar table in Dark Fantasy Magic; magic and religion are often intertwined (see below).

d20	Clothes	d20	Clothes
1	Hood or headcloth	11	Revealing clothes
2	Cloak, cape	12	Monastic scapular
3	Large necklace (beads, chains, etc.)	13	Patterns (skulls, stars, etc.)
4	Exposed tattoos, body paint	14	Scarf, cincture or mozzetta
5	Monochromatic	15	Iron cilice or spikes
6	Very colorful	16	Animal skins, horns, feathers, etc.
7	Hat	17	Ceremonial staff or weapon
8	Mask	18	Leaves, thorns or wood
9	Unique hairstyle	19	Holy book hanging form clothes
10	Bare feet	20	Long hair or beard

Religious powers

While many priests have actual superpowers in some fantasy settings, they may also have smaller powers that come with their functions rather than directly from deities. These are mostly legal powers, but not always; and they may have consequences that transcend the material plane. For example, a baptism, wedding or pardon from a priest might have significant effects in the afterlife. Of course, these powers might have mundane effects as well. Some of these powers might be bestowed to all members of the clergy or even all the faithful, while others are reserved for high authorities.

d20	Powers	d20	Powers
1	Officiate weddings and other rituals	11	Lay the dead to rest
2	Access to forbidden knowledge	12	Demand trial by ordeal
3	Demand trial by the church	13	Receive prophecy
4	Denounce sinners with impunity	14	Crown legitimate rulers
5	Baptize and convert	15	Make sacrifices to deities
6	Forgive sins (after confession, simony, etc.)	16	Exemption from mundane duties
7	Send sinners on quests	17	Excommunicate
8	Consecrate buildings, items, water	18	Demand food and lodging
9	Lift curses	19	Attacking you is sacrilege
10	Perform exorcism	20	Ordain other priests

Taboos, oaths and vows

Each religion (or sect, etc.) has its own taboos and commandments. Oaths and vows might be specific to certain small groups or characters. In short, the character can be personally bound to a certain rule, or accept it as a member of any given group. While the distinction might be important for flavor, it is not as important for gaming purposes, as long as the rule is followed.

The severity of these rules may vary immensely. However, some rules (for example, live in confinement for years) are so extreme that they make an adventuring life (which is expected of player characters) near impossible. Other rules are so trivial (do not eat crab) that they rarely affect the game at all (see the next table for that). Because of that, this table focused on rules that make the adventuring life a bit more difficult, but not impossible. In any case, taboos should be hindering - a taboo against witches or potions is meaningless if those things are rare or nonexistent in your campaign!

Religious commandments should not be willingly circumvented. You must follow both the letter and the spirit of the Law. If you cannot kill a sentient creature on purpose, you should not ask your allies to do this. Their sin is not your sin, but if they repeatedly commit sinful actions, you should rethink your allegiances – unless you are fighting for a greater purpose. For this reason, if you're taking a taboo that can affect the party, discuss it with everyone beforehand.

Breaking a taboo or oath should bring the character serious consequences, at least until atonement. Of course, some sins are irredeemable or nearly so.

d20	Taboo
1	Cannot use sharp or pointy weapons (swords, arrows, etc.)
2	Cannot wear armor
3	Cannot carry too much metal (a sickle or short sword at most; cannot wear heavy armor)
4	Cannot deny mercy to a fallen enemy
5	Must donate 50% of everything gained to the church, the poor, etc.
6	Cannot own any property (except what your horse can carry) or titles
7	Cannot lie, deceive, cheat, allow deception, keep quiet to let others lie, etc.
8	Cannot drink alcohol or magic potions
9	Cannot benefit from spells directly
10	Cannot ignore a plea for help if help is possible
11	Cannot disobey orders from your religious superiors
12	Cannot suffer the witch to live
13	Cannot cease the war against the wicked
14	Cannot speak (you can use gestures, but this is slow and vague)
15	Cannot use magic or magic items
16	Cannot touch or carry unclean objects (e.g., something stolen from the living or dead)
17	Cannot have intimacy or secrets with anyone
18	Cannot show mercy, not even temporarily (to gain money or information)
19	Can only fight after being hit
20	Must obey local laws and authorities (unless they are completely crazy and malevolent)

Small prohibitions

Here is a list of taboos that will usually not affect the life of an adventurer. Breaking them carries no serious penalty, especially when the offense is necessary for some greater purpose. For example, one might eat meat to avoid starvation or work on a holy day to save someone that is in danger.

Use this table to add color to your cults, religious orders, etc. They might be commanded or self-imposed. To add variety, use them as obligations instead of prohibitions (i.e., a drunken monk might be forced to drink alcohol from time to time, and an evil cleric of the Golden Boar might be forced to perform usury and never charity).

The number and seriousness of prohibition depends partly on the character's relationship to his or her religion. A mere follower may adopt limitations to become better, while a cloistered monk will face various severe prohibitions (and probably be unfit for a life of adventure).

d20	Prohibition	d20	Prohibition
1	Alcohol	11	Cursing
2	Intimacy	12	Idolatry
3	Eating meat (or a particular animal)	13	Accepting gifts
4	Dancing	14	Gossip
5	Nakedness	15	Laziness
6	Usury (or gold, luxury, etc.)	16	Unkempt clothes
7	Sugar	17	White lies
8	Wearing forbidden colors	18	Contact with blood
9	Touching the dead	19	Working in specific days/hours
10	Killing animals	20	Neglecting prayer or meditation

Religious orders

Churches and priests often provide aid, guidance, and penitence to their faithful. However, not all faiths are created equal. For example, worshippers of a war deity might be focused on constant conquest, while the god of wine may prefer partying to preaching. The distinction is not always so obvious – the god of war might be a drunkard and the god of wine, a patron of thieves and assassins! In addition, some faiths are widespread enough to allow distinct sects and religious orders. Even a benevolent church might have a military arm – or members dedicated to espionage and vengeance.

The table below describes some functions any given religion, or smaller groups within the religion. These smaller groups may have clothing, beliefs and taboos that set them apart from others of the same or similar faith. In some cases, they can be considered heretical.

d20	Type and goal
1	Military. Protect the faithful.
2	Inquisitive. Investigate secret sins and find witches and heretics.
3	Monastic. Live only with the clergy in order to find personal grace.
4	Communal. Maintain a community (with clergy and lay people) separated from the wider world.
5	Terrorist. Instill fear in the hearts of the unfaithful.
6	Hospitaller. Take care of the wounded and sick.
7	Crusading. Destroy the enemies of the faith.
8	Merchant. Facilitate the transportation and exchange of goods.
9	Secret. Protect the secrets of the church.
10	Charitable. Help the poor, orphans, widows, etc.
11	Bacchant. Dance, fornicate, and get drunk to the point of madness.
12	Guardian. Protect a sacred site (shrine, church, forest, bonfire, etc.) or artifact.
13	Missionary. Spread the faith to faraway lands.
14	Scholastic. Keep records, guard books, etc.
15	Avenging. Hunt and kill those who offended the faith.
16	Mendicant. Live from charity, while teaching and guiding communities.
17	Eremitic. Live in solitude (in a desert, cave, forest, etc.) to achieve enlightenment.
18	Oracular. Perform divination, giving vague answers about the future.
19	Shamanistic. Communicate with spirits.
20	Punishing. Torment sinners until they repent, again and again.

Law, Chaos, and deities

The idea of Law versus Chaos came to role-playing games through the works of Poul Anderson and Michael Moorcock. In Anderson's books, Law is basically good, while Chaos is basically evil (including both the wild forces of the fairy and goose-stepping Nazi troops). Moorcock adds some nuance to the mix. Both Law and Chaos are dangerous to humankind, and some kind of balance must be found lest the whole existence be destroyed (or made sterile). At the same time, both can be helpful at times.

In the original role-playing game, Law and Chaos were opposing factions (the fairy are mostly neutral). As the game developed to make the individual characters more important than the "troops", alignment begins looking more like an individual behavior than a collective trait.

After a while, Good and Evil enter the picture as an additional axis of alignment, eventually creating nine possible combinations (Lawful Evil, Chaotic Neutral, etc.). The meaning of alignment is dubious; sometimes it is a choice, sometimes is part of the nature of certain creatures. Thus, some species are inherently evil, etc.

In dark fantasy works, the distinction between Good and Evil is seldom black and white. At best, you have some lighter shades of gray. At worst, they are indistinguishable. Inherently evil creatures can exist or even be common, but entire species of evil creatures are rare – and if they exist, it is often because of the sins of humankind. Judging a dragon's character by the color of its scales is nearly impossible.

This means you can still use the separation of Law and Chaos, provided both are dangerous and awe-inspiring. Neutrality (or "Balance") could be a viable alternative, but in this case Neutral deities are hard to come by (for example, in the works of Moorcock these are rarely mentioned).

Another option for dark fantasy is accepting that there is, indeed, a struggle of Good versus Evil... but Evil is obviously stronger, while the powers of Good are lost or forgotten. Fortunately, the powers of Evil battle constantly against one another, which allows humankind to exist (for now).

My favorite take is allowing Law and Chaos to exist in perpetual struggle, leaving neutrality to the long-lived beings that existed before (or parallel to) the war (faeries, elves, etc.). Law is somewhat more positive in most of my settings, but not necessarily good – it often becomes fanatical or bound by senseless rules. Neutrality is not a viable alternative either – neutral beings are more preoccupied with their own survival than with the good of humankind. Most characters (except for clerics) remain unaligned to any of these forces, since the struggle is well above their paygrade, at least until they reach the higher levels.

The deities below are from my own setting, and are based on these ideas. Each table contains forty entries. You can roll a single d10 and use all the information in the same line, or roll two, three or four dice and combine the results. You can even combine different tables to create strange gods of mysterious alignments.

The Ethereal Lords (Lawful)

The Ethereal Lords dwell in a place of peace and plenty, which humankind calls the Ethereal. They were the first gods to realize human worship could give them great power. However, when they descended to the natural world to gain more followers, they soon realized that this proximity made them subject to natural laws. For the duration of the stay, they became vulnerable... and mortal! Therefore, the Ethereal Lords forbade other gods to come to the natural world undisguised, and built their halls in the heavens, sending prophecies, emissaries, miracles and paladins to the world in order to keep the beliefs alive, but never palpable.

Well, at least that is what they say. The Ethereal Lords are the rarest of them all. Most spend their whole lives without seeing or hearing a proof of their existence. Plenty of people think they have perished or abandoned the world altogether.

D10	Adjective	Noun	Virtue	Belief
1	Aureate	Patriarch	Honor	Wealth is the only mark of righteousness. Helping the poor encourages the weak and lazy.
2	Symmetric	Lady	Beauty	Both halves of a person, a couple, a building, and so on must be reflections of each other. Mirrors are sacred.
3	Radiant	Knight	Courage	All false faiths must be destroyed. Chaotic cults, in particular, deserve no respite.
4	Faithful	Maiden	Loyalty	Your body is sacred while clean. Intimacy is forbidden specially with a loved one, for love must remain pure.
5	Celestial	Spirit	Charity	Do no follow earthly kings and leaders. The church should be the sole authority.
6	Hidden	Scribe	Wisdom	All are bound to the secret laws that only a few can study, interpret and understand.
7	Unblemished	Sovereign	Power	Holy people are immune from sin, even when innocents are harmed by them.
8	Iron	Thorn	Discipline	Pain is the path for purity and growth. Comfort and pleasure corrupt the soul.
9	Silent	Inquisitor	Justice	The guilty must be punished. The innocent must be tormented until they confess their guilt.
10	Blind	Scholar	Faith	Reason is an obstacle to the true knowledge. Only through faith can revelation be achieved.

The Earthbound Gods (Neutral)

The Earthbound Gods live in the natural world. They are physically real, but immensely powerful. They cannot ignore space like the Ethereal Lords, but in their limited domains – that might include mountains, forests and rivers – they have a great control over reality and rule undisputed. Some are rivers and mountains themselves!

The Earthbound Gods avoid cities and shy away from human eyes (except for faithful followers). Showing themselves too much might make them mundane, and therefore less powerful, so they hide in deep caves and thick woods most of the time. Some say that the Earthbound gods can gather strength from the earth itself, holding a spark of divinity even without many worshipers, as long as they protect their own pieces of land. For the god of a forest, for example, seeing the forest destroyed could mean death. The opposite could also be true – killing such a deity would kill the entire forest.

D10	Adjective	Noun	Virtue	Belief
1	World	Eater	Sacrifice	The best part of every crop, and the purest of every crowd, shall be sacrificed every year in a sign of gratitude.
2	Mad	Dreamer	Creativity	Reason is an obstacle to the understanding of hidden truths. Only through insanity can revelation be achieved.
3	Green	Hunter	Fertility	The wild hunt shall not be stopped. A land that is not covered in blood in the proper season will become barren.
4	Fey	Queen	Tradition	A community that doesn't expel those who have offended the fairy will be cursed forever.
5	Wild	Reveler	Freedom	Restraint makes you weak and sterile. Make your own rules, no matter who you hurt in the process.
6	Devouring	Worm	Strength	The strong feed upon the weak. If you feed on the strong, you will become stronger.
7	Gleaming	Bird	Beauty	Honor, benevolence and honesty are abstractions. Beauty is real. The cost is irrelevant.
8	Growing	Tree	Health	Disease begets disease. Abandon the weak and sickly before it spreads to everyone.
9	Earth	Mother	Tolerance	The sins of the past mean nothing. There is only right here, right now. Never judge anyone.
10	Everlasting	Child	Youth	Always help the weak and young to live and grow until they can procreate.

The Rulers of the Abyss (Chaotic)

The Rulers of the Abyss are undoubtedly evil. They like to gain power and cause pain. However, many believe that they exist for a reason – maybe tempt the weak, punish sinners, or give a small measure of free will so people can choose between Law and Chaos. Some believe they are needed to bring some balance to the gods of Law, who would become unavoidable tyrants and kings if the Abyss did not exist. Finally, there are also those who believe fiends to be the true deities – the ones that will grant you wealth, pleasure, knowledge, and power, instead of vague promises of hope and salvation.

D10	Adjective	Noun	Virtue	Belief
1	Burning	Tyrant	Power	There is no order, there is only strength. No power is legitimate unless conquered by force.
2	Mocking	Jester	Freedom	Laws and taboos are made to be broken. Commit the foulest acts, and only then you'll find wisdom.
3	Foul	Vagrant	Independence	No home, just houses. No morals, just excuses. No friends, just tools.
4	Golden	Goat	Wealth	Gold rules all. Nothing is wrong as long as you can profit from it.
5	Sweet	Apologist	Influence	Let the fools talk of war, virtue, honor. Lies are the only tools of the wise to rule the ignorant.
6	Faceless	Whisperer	Secrecy	Knowledge is power, as long as it only yours. Common knowledge is useless and debased.
7	Undying	Elder	Immortality	The goal of life is to defeat death. Sorcery, sin... If we can live forever the cost is irrelevant.
8	Displacing	Demon	Change	Change your name and your face to stay true to your present. Betray your friends to stay loyal to yourself.
9	Grinning	Flayer	Intimidation	Spread fear and you will sow power. Spread pain and see your enemies despair.
10	Raving	Titan	Fatalism	Only Death conquers all. Spread her gift through the world before she calls you.

Addendum: Magic and Religion

Traditionally, clerics and wizards are two different kinds of spellcasters. Both have spells, but different ones: wizards throw arcane missiles or big balls of fire, while clerics heal and bring people back to life. Sometimes, you have evil clerics to complicate things further. Wizards usually have a Chaotic bent, while clerics tend to be Lawful. This is a classic dichotomy, but there are many different possibilities to choose for your own games.

First, there is no need for “divine spells” at all. You could have religions that forbid magic altogether, preferring inquisitions and witch burning to learning spells. Of course, even if there are divine spells, you could have inquisitions against other types of magic. The punishment to those who use divine spells without authorization from the church might be even greater!

Conversely, you can choose that all spells come from deities – wizard just worship different deities, or choose spirits they can bind instead of gods they must serve. Maybe wizards choose to deal in blood sacrifice (or regular sacrifice – gold, favors, potions, etc.) instead of dedicating their souls to righteous gods that would require virtue and obedience. Maybe there are no different religions “per se”, just different deities with different requirements.

The whole idea of religion could be interpreted differently, specially in a polytheistic society. In ancient religions, the relationship between human and deity could be a lot more transactional – more quid pro quo than what we call worship. Perhaps all clerics (and wizards) are just people who know deities and their needs. They might favor one deity over another occasionally, but they would certainly call upon the gods of the sea to protect their ships in a storm, no matter whom they worship on land. These kind of clerics (and their followers) can be very accepting of foreign gods, especially if they can be helpful when travelling in foreign lands.

In addition, the healing cleric does not need to be opposed to the destroying wizard. A benevolent god of fire could grant both healing and flame bolts, while an evil one could raise its fallen cultists from the fires of hell itself. A religious order focuses on destroying demons could focus on aggressive spells and leave healing to witches and physicians. They might even eschew magical healing altogether, accepting their wounds and scars as part of a burden they choose to carry.

If divine and arcane spells are, indeed, two separate things, they could work in completely unrelated ways. Maybe wizards roll dice and improvise when casting spells, and clerics have a few fixed blessings they can call upon a few times a day – or just permanent boons, such as protection from demons and disease, faster healing, etc. You could also have monks and mystic that follow no particular god but gain their power through virtue and discipline all the same!

It is also worth considering what does the whole thing mean. If divine spells are given directly by the gods, do they always agree when clerics use them? Can these spells ever be misused or abused? Could a spell that is granted by a deity (and cast by a faithful follower with the best intentions) ever go wrong or misfire? What about spells that aren't divine – are they necessarily evil, or maybe just neutral? If gods give divine spells, wouldn't other spells be given by demons? Can deities just smite the unfaithful from the skies – and if so, why don't they? Why allow their followers to lose a fight at all? Conversely, if both wizards and clerics can cast spells, could that mean that clerics are just misguided wizards, full of faith but lacking in reason? And so on.

Ultimately, it comes down to a matter of taste. In my own games, I like to make things a little dubious. Clerics get plenty of benefits from their virtue, faith and discipline... However, no one except the clerics themselves is sure that the powers they get are given by real deities. Wizards, on the other hand, are curious about these powerful spirits that the faithful call “gods” – but not entirely convinced that they are essentially from demons and fairies. In addition, they often consider what would happen if they could summon and bind these gods, like they do with lesser spirits...

Maybe they could become gods themselves.