

Defenders of the Faith: Religious Dictatorships in *Traveller*

Part V in a Series by Matt Stevens

This article will help you describe Theocracies and Religious Dictatorships (government type D in *Classic Traveller*). Many fantasy and science fiction theocracies are cartoonishly crude, run by ignorant, superstitious fanatics, prone to torturing heretics on the rack, burning witches at the stake or sacrificing nubile virgins on blood-soaked altars. No one would deny that horrible atrocities have been committed -- the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem Witch Trials and Aztec sacrifices being obvious examples -- but there's more to religion than bigotry and foolishness. This article will try to help GMs come up with fairly *realistic* religions and theocratic states that might appeal to people with double or even triple-digit IQs.

Defining "Religion"

Religion, like science, explains *why* things happen. Specifically, it explains why people suffer, although it might explain other things too. Unlike science, however, religions go beyond pure description; they also tell people *how* they ought to behave if they want to alleviate suffering. While certain sciences also try to explain and treat human problems - for example, medicine might identify both the cause of a disease and a possible cure - religions promise justification and treatment for just about *any* tragedy. Unlike mainstream medicine or psychiatry, there are few meaningful questions which religions don't think they can answer.

Note that belief in a god or gods is *not* necessarily part of a religion. Certain sects, such as the Jains of India, are either atheistic or refuse to speculate on the existence of deities. Nor is a belief in the afterlife essential to religion; modern day Judaism, for instance, either denies life after death or has no firm opinion on it. Religions are defined not by gods, souls and spirits, but by their universalistic worldview, a Guide to Everything one needs to know or do.

Some "religions," therefore, can look modern and pseudo-scientific. Their treatments may be based on "regulation of personal-Q force" or release of "trapped orgasmic energy"; they may have "doctors" or "therapists" rather than priests; and they may blame difficulties on one's "high concentration of omega particles" rather than the ire of the evil god Ugablatch. They might even develop technology based on their wild, pseudo-scientific principles. When designing a religion for *Traveller*, you may want to pattern it after bizarre modern psychoanalytic and pseudo-scientific cults as well as "traditional" religions like Christianity, Zoroastrianism or Egyptian mortuary cults.

Religious Dictatorships and Technology

Religious dictatorships tend to have fairly low Tech Levels compared to other worlds with the same population. There are a number of reasons why this might be so.

It's often said that religion and science are incompatible, and that religious institutions are inherently hostile to advanced technology. It's true that some religious groups (such as the Amish) are hostile to technology in general, while others are hostile to certain kinds of technology (the Catholic Church condemns the Pill, Christian Scientists avoid medical treatment, Afghanistan's Taliban outlaws TV sets and cameras). Yet there's no *inherent* opposition between the two.

For example, Hasidic Jews run many computer stores in New York, and American religious fundamentalists have enthusiastically used radio, cable TV and the Internet to spread their views. While the relationship between pure science and religion is a bit more strained, it isn't always hostile. Religious schools are often great centers of learning, and a number of clergymen have been great philosophers, mathematicians or scientists (think of Gregory Mendel, for example, the father of modern gene theory).

Nevertheless, while religion may not be hostile to technology, religious *dictatorships* almost certainly are. These regimes tend to be autarkic and isolationist; they follow rigid world-views and can be intolerant of

dissent. The problem is not that they *know* nothing of science, but that they *learn* nothing, because they're hostile to many new ideas. Even if their worldview is compatible with modern science, they don't allow free inquiry to flourish, and because of this offworld scientists avoid these worlds as much as possible.

Religious dictatorships may contribute to scientific stagnation, but at the same time, low-tech worlds may be more partial to religious fundamentalism; causality may run in the opposite direction. Poor, suffering masses may find more consolation in religious teachings. Tales of magic and miracles may sound more convincing to the scientifically ignorant than they would to sophisticated listeners. Finally, those who live in provincial, isolated societies may find a high-tech, cosmopolitan, interstellar culture particularly threatening, and this might make them more receptive to a self-proclaimed Messiah who promises to throw out the infidels and restore a Golden Age.

Church-State Relations

As noted in a previous article (see *Empire of the Paper Pushers: Bureaucratic Governments*), *Traveller* government types tell you more about a world's *administrators* than they do about the government's formal leadership, and this is just as true for religious dictatorship as for any another regime. Under government type D, *administrative* power is in the hands of religious leaders, but the nominal head of state may be a secular rather than a religious official.

Any number of arrangements between religious and secular leaders may be possible in a religious dictatorship. Roll 2d+Law Level-7 and check the below table to determine these arrangements in more detail.

Roll	Church-state relationship
<8	Church guardianship. The Church has been given an explicit role in the world's Constitution. This gives the Church a veto on any policy it dislikes, along with any powers it might have.
9-11	Parallel state. The church has a broad independent power base, allowing it in practice to enforce its own laws, veto policies it dislikes, and/or dominate the bureaucracy.
12	Secret society. The government <i>appears</i> to be independent of the Church, at least on paper. In reality, the government is controlled by a religious secret society, like the Templars or the Bavarian Illuminati. This society may or may not be controlled by the Church. Roll 1d; the church controls it on a 1 or 2, otherwise the society works on its own.
13+	Theocracy. The church (or a charismatic cult) rules directly, without a clear distinction between church and state.

If the government is *not* a "theocracy," you can roll 2d-7+law level a second time, and check the below table to determine the "official" government type:

Roll	"Official" government	Description
<8	Representative Democracy	Government positions that are not reserved for religious leaders may be elected directly by the people. See <i>The People, Yes: Democratic Governments</i> for more details.
9	Unusual	Government positions may be filled by lot, they may be awarded to contest winners, they may be inherited by the "reincarnation" of the previous ruler... The GM can use his or her imagination.
10-13	Monarchy	A hereditary monarch serves as the nominal head of state. This monarch may legitimate his rule in explicitly religious terms. For example, he may claim to rule with the "mandate from heaven," or he may claim to be descended from a god.
14-15	Military Government	A right-wing military dictator, who came to power through a coup d'etat, serves as nominal head of state. See <i>Charismatic Governments</i> for more details.
16+	One-Party Autocracy	A right wing, authoritarian political party rules the world, at least on paper.

Church Organization

The church makes the major decisions in a theocracy, so the world's official Constitution is less important than the organization of the church. Roll 2d-7, add the world's Law Level (or its Control Rating * 2), and check the table below to determine how the church is organized.

Roll	Organization	Description
<6	Congregational	The church is decentralized, and priests (or "ministers") are elected by their congregations. These ministers, in turn, may elect a central church assembly.
7	Presbyterian	Like "congregational," above, except that ministers are responsible to lay "elders" in the church, rather than the congregation as a whole.
8	Mystery cult	A highly secretive and centralized cult, only open to a select group of "initiates."
9-10	Episcopal	The church is a hierarchical organization, under a Supreme Leader who is elected for life by a college of high priests
11	Monastic	Monastic organizations, with minimal contact with the laity, dominate the leadership of a highly decentralized church.
12	Hereditary caste	A highly decentralized religion, in which ritual duties are reserved for a revered, hereditary caste.
13	Religious dynasty	The church is a hierarchical organization, under the control of a hereditary leader (possibly a descendant of a god or a revered prophet).
14+	Charismatic	The church has no formal organization at all. There is simply a single messianic leader and his followers. This leader claims unique insights, powers, or a privileged relationship with God. (He or she may even claim to <i>be</i> a God, or the descendant of one. Roll 1d: if this result is equal to or higher than the world's Tech Level, this leader claims divine status.)

Religious Attributes

It would be foolish to talk about theocracies without referring to their religious beliefs. The next few sections will help you determine four attributes of any given religion: Their view of God, the rules they impose, the spiritual consequences of breaking these rules, and the religion's position on the afterlife.

Game masters who would like to skip these tables, and make up religions of their own, should feel free to do so. I would recommend they look through an encyclopedia of comparative religions for ideas, or turn to game supplements like *GURPS Religion* or the *Complete Priests' Handbook* for 2nd edition AD&D.

"God View"

The following table is a simplified version of the table in the *World Builder's Handbook* (sadly long out of print). Roll 2d - 2, and add the world's TL *unless* church-state relations indicate a "charismatic theocracy." Then check the table below.

Roll	Conception of God
0-2	Animism. Every object (or at least living object) or natural phenomena has a spirit that needs to be honored, or at least placated.
3-4	Polytheism. There are multiple gods, either arranged in a hierarchy or of more-or-less equal importance.
5-6	Dualism. There are two mutually antagonistic gods, each representing mutually exclusive "universal" qualities, such as good and evil, light and darkness, life and death, male and female.
7-11	Monotheism. There is a single, all-powerful (or nearly all-powerful) divinity.

- 12 Deism. God created the universe, but takes no part in the daily affairs of His creation.
- 13 Pantheism. God and the universe are one. "All is God, and God is All."
- 14-15 Agnosticism. It is impossible to know whether or not there is a God. In any event, it doesn't matter; deliverance from suffering can be achieved with or without His help.
- 16+ Atheism. There is no God or gods, but humans can save themselves through their own efforts.

Religious Rules

Roll 2d a number of times equal to the world's Control Rating; if you're using rules other than GURPS, roll a number of times equal to half the Law Level minus 1 (rounding fractions up). Each time you roll, add your result to the previous die total, and check the Religious Rule table below. This procedure is summarized in this table:

Law Level	Control Rating	Rolls
8 or less	3	2d, then add 2d, then add 2d again
9-10	4	2d, then add 2d, then add 2d again, then add 2d a third time
11-12	5	2d, then add 2d, then add 2d again, then add 2d a third time and a fourth
13+	6+	2d, then add 2d, then add 2d again, then add 2d a third time, a fourth time and a fifth time

Then, take any rule that seems to contradict the others, and drop it. (For example, if you're told that "physical violence is prohibited," while "regular animal sacrifices" are performed you should drop one of these two rules, unless you can justify the contradiction.) Then come up with a *theological framework* that can justify all of these rules.

Roll	Rule
02	Photographs, paintings and other "representational" artworks are prohibited
03	Prostration before religious icons, symbols or statues is required
04	Photographs, paintings and other "representational" artworks are prohibited
05	Regular ritual bathing is required
06-07	Adultery and/or premarital sex is criminalized
08	Mandatory fasting periods
09	It is illegal to charge interest
10	Mandatory fasting periods
11-12	Mandatory daily prayer times
13	Taboos against touching "dirty" things (such as dead bodies or animals)
14	All forms of birth control and abortion are outlawed
15	The giving of alms is required
16	Mandatory fasting periods
17	The giving of alms is required
18	Contact with "unbelievers" is restricted
19-20	There are mandatory "days of rest," in which citizens must stay indoors
21-22	Dancing, singing and/or theater going are prohibited
23-24	Meat-eating is prohibited
25-26	Strict (non-vegetarian) dietary rules
27-28	Divorce is not available
29	Prohibitions against mentioning dead relatives
30	Periodic animal sacrifices are required
31-32	Killing of animals prohibited
33-34	No liquor allowed
35-36	Cutting hair and/or clipping fingernails is prohibited
37-38	Physical violence is prohibited in all circumstances
39	Regular human sacrifices are performed, using criminals, POWs or randomly selected victims
40	Physical violence is prohibited in all circumstances

- 41 Ritual weapons must be carried at all times
- 42-43 Citizens must regularly go to confession and repent for their sins (whether they sinned or not!)
- 44 Certain colors are prohibited (or prescribed) for clothing
- 45-46 Cutting hair and/or clipping fingernails is prohibited
- 47 The brains of the dead are eaten for their knowledge
- 48 Certain forms of genital mutilation required
- 49 Children are regarded as more "pure" and given special ritual duties
- 50-51 Men and women are prohibited from looking at each other, or seeing each other privately
- 52 There are taboos against contact with "high mana" figures
- 53-54 Makeup, "ostentatious" clothes or other ornamentation is prohibited
- 55-56 Advanced technology restricted (reroll if TL 7+)
- 57-59 Women (or men) must be completely covered whenever they venture outdoors
- 60-61 It's a crime to look directly at religious leaders
- 62-63 Citizens are prohibited from seeking non-religious medical services
- 64-66 Sex is completely outlawed
- 67-68 Women (or men) must join in sexual congress with religious leaders
- 69-70 Contact with "unbelievers" is completely outlawed
- 71-72 Mass suicide will soon be demanded of all world residents

For example, our world _____ has a law level of 12. My first roll is a 9, "it is illegal to charge interest." I add 2d to this result and get 14, "all forms of abortion and birth control are outlawed." I add 2d again and get 16, "mandatory fasting periods." A fourth roll brings the total to 23; "meat eating is prohibited." Finally, the fifth roll of 2d is added to 23 to get 28, "divorce is not available."

I decide that the religion of _____ is patriarchal, ascetic and pacifist, like a cross between the Catholicism and Jainism. It teaches that men are the "guardians of life," which is truly sacred. Killing is prohibited except under the most extreme circumstances. Not only are hunting and meat eating prohibited, but plant life is considered semi-sacred. Gluttony is considered a sin because even vegetarian consumption is considered no more than a necessary evil, and eating too much is considered a wasteful sacrifice of living things. Mandatory fasting periods are imposed to combat this sin.

Now, we have to explain two anomalous rules: The prohibitions against divorce and against interest. Here's the explanation I came up for the rules against divorce: The only justification for divorce, they would argue, is emotional or physical cruelty. Yet they would also argue that all forms of cruelty are prohibited under their religion. Therefore they would claim that divorce would never be justified in a good _____ family. (We may not find this reasoning convincing, but it sounds good to the religious hierarchy, which is all that matters.)

As I noted, the religion declares that life is sacred and killing is prohibited. Yet surely killing someone by neglect, by denying them food, water or shelter, is just as sinful as killing them a weapon? The _____ believe that all men are obligated to look out for each other, and no one has the right to "exploit" another human being. Interest, they declare, is one of the most despicable forms of "exploitation," but other forms of "exploitation" (such as "unfairly" low wages) are also prohibited.

Note that even if you disagree with these rules (as I do), you would admit that they are not completely senseless. Every rule has a justification, even if it isn't a very convincing one. When designing your religions for *Traveller*, you should resist the temptation to create something completely preposterous. Most doctrines follow their own peculiar logic, even if their rules don't make much sense to outsiders.

Rules and Divine Sanction

Most visitors to a religious dictatorship will follow these rules out of fear of punishment. What about believers? They too may fear the religious vigilantes and the secret police, but they might also follow these rules for more spiritual reasons. Not only would they fear the state, they would fear the wrath of their gods as well.

If you want to fully understand the local theology, you may want to answer these questions: What are the *spiritual* consequences of rule breaking? How does it affect one's relationship to the Divine? You can reach tentative answers by rolling 2d, subtracting 8 if the religion is atheistic or agnostic, or subtracting 4 if it's animistic, polytheistic, deist or pantheistic. Then check the table below.

Roll	Effect of rule breaking
<4	No specific figure is enforcing these rules. It's simply a Law of Nature that bad things will happen to you if you break these rules. If you step in a puddle your feet will get wet; if you eat meat on Friday's you'll explode into flames (or whatever); it's simple physics.
5-6	A god (or gods) imposed these rules, and those who break them are defying God's (or the Gods') authority. No excuses are accepted; those who defy the god(s) are punished, regardless of their intentions.
8-9	As above (5-6), but God (or the gods) will forgive rule-breakers if they broke their commandments unwittingly, or were coerced into doing so.
7	As above (5-6), but God (or the gods) never laid down any specific "rules"; their instructions were either very general ("be kind to animals") or very obscure ("those who sow bitter fruit will reap a cruel harvest"). Religious philosophers interpreted these rules as best they could to establish the specific guidelines used today.
10	God or the gods demand devotion and worship, which is far more important than slavish observation of the rules. Rule breaking is frowned upon largely because it shows a lack of devotion.
11-12	You cannot get on God's (or the gods') good side simply by following the rules. God has already decided who He likes and who He doesn't. Rule-breaking is seen as a <i>sign</i> that one has "fallen from grace," but it isn't a <i>cause</i> of that fall.

Life after Death

"Traditional" religions can be characterized by one of two beliefs: A belief in God, or a belief in life after death. Neither belief is universal, but most religions believe in one or the other, if not both. To determine a religion's beliefs about the afterlife, roll 2d-7, add the world's God View and check the table below.

Roll	Belief
<4	There is life after death. Most souls go to the same (fairly unpleasant) underworld, regardless of how their hosts behaved. If someone was denied a proper burial, however, his spirit might stay behind and haunt the living.
5-6	Roll again to determine views on the afterlife (rerolling fives or sixes). In addition, religious rituals offer the possibility of <i>genuine</i> immortality.
7	There is no life after death -- except for the devout. God or the gods will resurrect the righteous after the coming Apocalypse.
8-9	There is a Heaven and a Hell. Those who behave piously will be accepted into Heaven, while the wicked will go to Hell for an eternity of torment.
10	As above (8-9), but Hell is only a temporary abode. Eventually even the wicked will be accepted into Heaven (for a just God would not let souls suffer for an eternity).
11-12	Reincarnation: After death, a person's soul is reborn in another body. The just are reborn as powerful humans, spirits or even gods, while the wicked are reborn as "lower" forms (animals, monsters, demons or what have you).
13	As above (11-12), but the truly wise or devout can escape the cycle of life and rebirth, and enjoy a true eternal rest.
14+	There is no afterlife, no "soul" or spirit, and no way to cheat death.

If a religion's God View is "agnostic" or "atheistic," and it denies the possibility of life after death, then its followers probably don't consider it a "religion" at all. Instead, they may call it a "science" or even a "philosophy."

Adventure Seeds

Weird religions have been a staple of fantasy and science fiction for over a century. It's easy to see why, since they can offer a lot to a story: Colorful detail, fanatical passions and an aura of magic and mystery. Here are a few scenario seeds you can use on a religious dictatorship, or on any world with a devout population:

- An increasingly unpopular, and deeply depressed, religious dictator wants to end his own life, so he hires the PCs to make a "martyr" out of him. (He claims that suicide would demoralize his followers and discredit his Church.) Unfortunately for the PCs, the dictator has no intention of ending his life. He's decided that an *unsuccessful* assassination attempt would serve to discredit his critics. So the PCs will find that security at the dictator's palace is a lot better than they were told; the guards are ready for them and will shoot first, ask for identification later...
- A megacorporation is about to close an extremely lucrative deal with a religious dictatorship. But before the negotiations can close, a revered icon starts to *weep*. The public says it's a sign from God, and demands that the government break off negotiations. The dictator agrees to suspend them until the supposed "miracle" is investigated. Since both the government and the megacorp want to close the deal, they hire the PCs to study the icon and provide a "scientific" explanation for what happened.
- A revered book of prophesy claims that the Apocalypse will come after six "signs," including a solar eclipse, a virulent plague, an attack against "men from the sky" and the birth of a red goat. It's common knowledge that a group of religious fanatics are breeding goats with increasingly reddish coats, hoping to instigate the Apocalypse so they can go to Paradise while the unbelievers go to Hades. It's also known that a solar eclipse will occur in one week. Local and Imperial authorities are worried that religious zealots will try to release plagues from local biomedical facilities, and attack Imperial personnel at the world's starport. The PCs have been hired to help prevent any more mischief.
- A theocratic oligarchy claims to know the secret to eternal life, a secret they share only with their most loyal followers. All of which could be written off as standard religious flimflam, except that there's increasing evidence that some oligarchs really are immortal, or at least extremely long-lived. Off-worlders suspect that the oligarchs have stumbled upon extremely effective natural anagathics, and a megacorporation hires the PCs to go planetside and investigate.

Also feel free to read Classic Traveller Double Adventure 6, *Divine Intervention*, which takes place on a low-tech religious dictatorship.